A Series of Working Papers

The Battle against Extremism and Terrorism

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The ideas and opinions reflected in this report do not necessarily represent those of CSS or the University of Jordan.
Preface

Extremism and Terrorism have become exceedingly a major challenge both at the international and national levels particularly after the breakout of civil war in Syria and the rise of Daesh. Jordan has confronted extremist and terrorist organizations at an earlier stage but intensified its efforts in the last years. Thanks to the efforts and professionalism of its armed and security forces and the awareness of its citizens to shield itself from the threat and danger of terrorism but the last attacks in the country clearly indicate that the danger of extremism is increasing and no country is completely immune from it.

As part of CSS role to provide policy makers with ideas and recommendations to deal with challenges including this issue, we present this report for policy makers and concerned institutions. The report was prepared by Hussein Al Majali who possess vast practical experience through the positions that he previously held as Minister of Interior and Director of Public Security Department and Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman who is a researcher at CSS and expert on Salafi Jihadist movements. They both represent a joint position on how it developed and ways to combat it. I take this opportunity to thank Mr. Al Majali and Dr. Abu Rumman and hope that the report will contribute to a better understanding of this complex issue and ways to confront it.

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Introduction

In the last three months, Jordan witnessed three critical terrorist attacks:

- In March, 2016, the first attack took place in Irbid, with unprecedented clashes between counter-terrorism units and a group of terrorists in the streets and in a building, where they were hiding. All members of the group (affiliated with ISIS) were killed, and Major Rashed Zyoud also fell martyr during the clashes.

- In June, 2016, an attack targeting the office of the General Intelligence Department (GID) in Ain Al Basha District, near Baqa’a Palestinian refugee camp, left five intelligence officers dead. The suspect assailant was later arrested.

- Later in June, a car bomb targeted a military post near an earthen berm by the Rakban refugee camp, killing seven soldiers and wounding 14 others in the deadliest attack that Jordan witnessed after the 2005 Amman bombings.

In light of these three attacks, the following critical questions arise: Are we facing new types of security threats from terrorist groups affiliated with ISIS? If so, what are our options to confront these changes? Most importantly, will there be new attacks that may be even more dangerous? Are these attacks within the expected average activity of these groups both, at home and abroad?

In this paper, we argue that the latest events, coupled with other indicators, urge us to: Firstly, reevaluate the level of terrorist threat currently facing Jordan, at home and abroad, as well as the qualitative shifts, implemented by these terrorist groups vis-à-vis their “theories of action” (specifically those affiliated with ISIS); Secondly: evaluating domestic counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policies, with the aim of further improving them to respond to new developments.
**Part I: Five Indicators**

As we revisit these three attacks, it becomes clear that we are facing the following critical indicators and signs:

1. Although we are witnessing three different patterns of action, they all serve ISIS and its political agenda and media propaganda.

   In Baq’a’s incident, the assailant is most probably an individual, who had been loyal to al Qaeda before pledging allegiance to ISIS (In 2012, he was tried after trying to cross borders to join Al-Islam Army in Gaza, which is loyal to al Qaeda, and was sentenced to two years and a half in a correctional institution. Released in 2014, the assailant had disappeared for a while before carrying out his attack). The findings of the investigation and the trial should reveal additional facts. However, Irbid’s clashes were different, as they involved an ISIS-affiliated “sleeper cell” following a series of arrests, in which the security forces arrested others from the same area.

   On the other hand, the primary suspect in Rakban attack is ISIS in Syria, meaning it was an external threat from the central armed group. The attack marked the first ISIS operation against Jordan, or at least the first in which the group succeeded in reaching Jordanian targets.

**So, what do these indicators mean?**

We are facing different patterns of terrorist threats, at home and abroad, including individuals, sleeper cells and an armed group abroad. While we lack evidence that attacks in Baq’a and Irbid were planned by ISIS leaders to date (unless investigations indicate otherwise), they were, most probably, carried out by local agents, loyal to the group. They could be in response to the speech that Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani made before Ramadan, urging ISIS members and supporters to carry out attacks in the holy month, which may apply to Baq’a’s case.
2. Targets of these attacks were not “soft” (civilian) spots, meaning that the group did not target markets, stadiums, airports or even non-Muslim citizens. This further proves that the group does not have a decision to target civilians to date, fearing a backlash from the Jordanian public. In addition, there are no legitimate targets in the Jordanian society that are in line with the group’s priorities and concerns, such as Shiites (perceived as “Infidels”) or civilians in the west, where the group treats armed targets and civilians on an equal footing based on their fatwas.

In line with the group’s agenda, theology, political priorities and media propaganda, the targets of three attacks were primarily the security forces and the army, perceived by the group as infidel institutions. But are there any other potential targets? What are the expected priorities?

In addition to institutions in charge of national sovereignty, western and foreign interests, western tourists (who may all be killed from the group’s theological perspective) and non-Muslim citizens (if the group decides – later- to incite sectarian and religious hatred) are all potential targets. The latter is unlikely to happen in Jordan, where previous experiences have proven that Muslims and Christians are unlikely to engage in such clashes. However, it remains a possibility should individuals, loyal to the group, take unilateral decisions to attack civilian targets, who may be violating the Sharia law in their opinion.

In short, based on the aforementioned, military and security targets in addition to western interests are the primary target of the group, followed by western tourist and their locations as secondary targets. However, this strategy will not remain unchanged with Jordan, as the group may change priorities and operations at a later stage in light of developments, but it is unlikely to change, at least, in the short term.

3. The primary suspect is ISIS and its affiliate local cells, while Nusra Front and its supporters are ruled out for a number of reasons. Firstly, Abu Mohammad Julani, the emir of Nusra Front, clearly announced that the group’s targets are restricted to Syria, and that orders from Al Qaeda’s leader, Ayman Thawahiri, instructed the group to carry out attacks only in Syria.
Furthermore, top leaders of Jihadist Salafism, who support Nusra in Jordan, such as Abu Mohammad Al-Maqdisi, Abu Qutada al-Filistini and others, are currently respecting a de facto truce in Jordan. There is a secret fatwa, issued by Al-Maqdisi, which prohibits armed activity in Jordan. Moreover, Jordanian security forces have cooperated with these leaders, using their roles and fatwas to counter ISIS supporters. Al-Maqdisi explicitly stated that he had been a mediator with ISIS to release Jordanian late pilot Moath al-Kasasbeh, but he failed in his mission. Abu Qutada is also engaged in a fierce theological, intellectual and political battle against ISIS.

Although these are the authentic views of these global jihadists, the Jordanian security apparatus invested in them to counter ISIS religious discourse and political propaganda. However, this cannot guarantee that on the long term- Nusra’s threat will always be restricted to Syria, particularly in the southern regions, or that supporters of the group may not carry out attacks in Jordan. Some members of this group, indeed, tried to cross the borders in the past, where they clashed with the Jordanian army.

More importantly, while Jordan may not face a direct terrorist threat from Nusra Front and its supporters -unlike ISIS- at the moment, the group still poses the threat of religious and political extremism, an equally dangerous concern on the long term. Furthermore, Jordan faces a serious problem, as it deals with returnees from Nusra to Jordan, especially after serving a prison sentence for joining terrorist groups.

4. All previous attacks came from expected threats, and might have even been watched by the state. In Irbid, the cell had long been affiliated with the Jihadist Salafis, who were well-known in Jordan. They were either previously arrested or watched by the security forces. In Baqa’a’s case, the suspect, Mahmoud Masharfeh, was known and also watched. The same applies to the attack on Rakban camp, where the armed forces had clear information on ISIS activity in the area around the camp and among our brethren Syrian refugees.

Why did these attacks happen then? Were they a security failure? Were there security loopholes in these operations? These institutions must take charge of evaluating the direct response to the events (in Irbid, Baqa’a and Rak
ban), based on their internal information. However, based on the experience of other states, it is generally speaking extremely difficult to prevent these operations in their entirety, even if the assailants are under the state’s watch. No state can completely prevent these threats, no matter how competent its security and military apparatuses may be.

We have already established that the type of threats and the “theory of action” have seen qualitative shifts among these groups. Attacks are no longer associated with a decision from their leaders, well-trained cells or advanced funding and weaponry. Any individual can carry out an attack by purchasing cheap weaponry or using a basic explosive belt, or even a knife should all else fail. Therefore, once the intention is there, these attacks cannot be completely prevented.

In the US and Europe, people who were watched, previously jailed or even stopped from traveling to join ISIS have repeatedly carried out attacks, using handguns or explosive belts.

Jordanian security apparatus has successfully foiled tens of destructive operations and arrested armed cells. Had it not been for these capacities, which are still effective, we would have witnessed other deadly attacks.

However, ISIS today relies on individuals to a larger extent, and the groups or cells are unlikely to turn themselves in upon their arrest. On the contrary, they will try to implement the fatwa, which is currently disseminated among their ranks, calling on them to resist and fight till the end. The confrontation, therefore, becomes much more complicated and dangerous.

5. In a statement to ISIS AMAQ news agency, the group claimed responsibility for Rakban attack, which was carried out by one of its fighters. The statement was later backed by publishing a news item in the group’s Naba’a magazine. The group also published a video in which it confirmed its responsibility.

An unprecedented announcement from the group regarding an attack against Jordan, the news marked a significant development in the battle
against ISIS. Obviously, this shift results from ISIS’ belief that Jordan is participating in international efforts against the group, including training moderate Syrian forces to fight against it in addition to the military action, according to sources from the group.

ISIS members and supporters in Jordan and abroad will be encouraged to carry out attacks against Jordanian targets, both at home and abroad. Consequently, this will lead Jordan to have a bigger role in the international and regional military and security battles against ISIS.

**Part II: Magnitude and Levels of Threats**

Leaving the previous attacks’ indicators and implications aside, we have other alarming messages to look into:

1. A large number of Jordanians are fighting with Nusra Front and ISIS. Numbers are neither confirmed nor accurate, as Jihadist Salafis claim there are between 2500-3000 fighters, while the official estimates range between 1200-1500 fighters. Many of these initially joined Nusra, but the latest waves, who either crossed the borders or tried to cross, joined ISIS. This means that joining ISIS, and not Nusra front, is the rising trend among the ranks of Jihadist Salafis.

2. A large number of fighters came from the Jihadist Salafi movement’s traditional spectrum, as they were mostly from the lower middle class or poor, and many of them did not complete their university education. However, there is a new segment with characteristics and backgrounds that stand in stark contrast to the common “stereotype”. These are generally from the middle class, university students or post-graduate students and some have already attained their post-graduate degrees. Not only do they lack a previous “Jihadist” experience, but some of them do not even have previous security records.
This new segment indicates that ISIS has successfully infiltrated these social groups. In addition, recruiting and brainwashing these targets were quite easy, as many of their own families could barely take note of the rapid changes.

3. Although Jordan has been engaged in an ongoing confrontation with the Jihadist Salafi movement for two decades and a half, it has – ironically - maintained a significant level of security and stability at home despite the fact that the movement’s historical and key leaders are from Jordan (such as Maqdisi, Abu Qutada Al-Filistini, Abu Mosab Zarqawi, Osama Ureidi and others). However, the new ISIS generation is different in many ways. With more extremist views, the new generation of fighters are more willing to carry out terrorist attacks, and show greater loyalty to their groups and Emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In addition, they have become more experienced in dealing with security restrictions, and are far more ready to clash with the state unlike previous generations of local Jihadist Salafis, who avoided taking the confrontation with the state too far.

4. In addition to the aforementioned numbers of fighters, involved with ISIS and Nusra, the State Security Court has been trying scores of people, who either tried to cross borders, returned from the battle field or promoted the group’s ideology online or in mosques and different locations.

5. We are no longer facing individuals, affiliated with Jihadist Salafism, but rather a microcosm of a growing “jihadist Salafi community”, embedded within the Jordanian society. Today, there are wide social networks, bringing together members of this movement, who may be followers of ISIS or Nusra. Families have urged their children and women to join this movement, either due to the dynamics of their families or because they have actually embraced this ideology. Some have moved with their families to ISIS state in Syria and Iraq, while others got married and started a family there, where they raise their children to embrace this ideology. As such, we are now confronting a microcosm of a society, and we need to use appropriate legal, security and societal tools.
In theory, the state is, indeed, concerned with the rule of law, and can try those who have been involved in criminal acts. However, in practical terms, the challenge is much more complicated, as we are concerned about the rise of this ideology. We need to ensure that young children are not exposed to this disastrous social upbringing. How we do achieve this goal using acceptable legal and community-based tools?

6. The latest attacks and the cases that have been referred to the State Security Court present alarming new indicators. People, who have been exposed to this ideology, are on the rise. It has either expanded in the same areas or accessed new ones. This ideology may be widely spread in Palestinian refugee camps in Irbid, Baqa’a, Wehdat, East Amman, Zarqa, Russeifeh, Maan and Salt.

7. Over the span of eight months, Jordanian public opinion saw a significant change in the stance towards ISIS, and to a lesser degree Nusra Front. Sixty two per cent of respondents believed ISIS was a terrorist group in August, 2014, while 10 % believed it was not terrorist, which is still relatively high. Twenty eight per cent said they did not know, but this percentage later dropped to 3 % in April, 2015.

These numbers may be reassuring and alarming at the same time. Although the percentage dropped significantly over the span of eight months, what we call the “grey zone” seems more important than ever. The number of people who said they “did not know” has decreased significantly, but they remain vulnerable and willing to respond positively to ISIS ideology and political and media propaganda. Therefore, the fact that it has greatly declined is, indeed, a reassuring indicator.

However, 5 % of respondents (according to April’s poll) believe ISIS is not a terrorist group, which is still a high percentage. Similarly, 13 % believe Nusra Front is not a terrorist group. If we add them up, we have 18 % of respondents, equivalent to one fifth of the population, whose views on these groups stand in stark contrast to the state’s views. In addition, 3 % and 25 % of respondents are in the grey zone, as they did not know whether ISIS or Nusra were terrorist groups respectively (The percentage with regards
to Nusra reached up to 52% in August, 2014). If we add the percentage of people in this grey zone to those who actually believe these groups are not terrorist, we will have an alarmingly large percentage.

Part III: Evaluating Counter-extremism and Counter-terrorism Policies

Historically, Jordan, as we have previously mentioned, has successfully curbed the threat of this movement. Jordanian intelligence apparatus has foiled scores of operations, some of which could have been deadly attacks, and arrested hundreds of outlaws and sleeper cells. Thanks to its efforts against Al-Qaeda and ISIS and its affiliate cells, the apparatus has gained international and regional recognition.

- Not only is Jordan involved in the war against terrorism, but it has also become an active player in the battle to track and curb this threat. Terrorism has become an integral part of Jordan’s foreign policy.
- From a military standpoint, Jordan has maintained security along the borders to a relatively large extent, preventing fighters from crossing to and from Syria. Many critical infiltration attempts have been thwarted, where the Air Force has intervened at times. With the exception of the latest Rakban attack, the Jordanian armed forces have had a remarkable success in their battle against external threats.
- In its battle against external threats, Jordan has relied on a network of solid social, security and military ties in southern Syria and western Iraq and formed critical coalitions. In this light, Jordan supported the role of the Free Syrian Army, somehow controlled the outcomes of the military operation in Houran and curbed the influence of ISIS and Nusra in those areas.

In Iraq, Jordan had good ties with Iraqi tribes in Anbar and Sunni leaders. The state is currently trying to expand this network into rural Deir Ez-zor and the eastern region in Syria, bordering Rakban camp where ISIS is active. Therefore, Jordan supported the New Syrian Army, comprised of numerous factions that are hostile to ISIS, including Salafi Authenticity and Development front. In Houran, Jordan supported the Southern Front factions.
• These networks have proven highly effective, as they have maintained Jordan’s interests and national security and enhanced its capacity to confront external threats.
• As for the legislative framework, Jordan amended its counter-terrorism law, criminalizing joining Nusra, ISIS and terrorist groups as well as promoting these groups in any form, including online activities. It has also more robustly watched mosques and the religious discourse.
• In cultural, scientific and media spheres, consecutive governments conducted conferences and seminars and formed committees to counter terrorism and extremism. However, with very limited impact, these have not yet led to any tangible results. On the other hand, in-depth scientific studies on this phenomenon, covering its shift, root causes and counter-strategies, have not been given enough attention.
• The previous government formed a counter-extremism committee that submitted a plan, engaging different ministries in the battle against extremism. However, the plan was ill-informed on the root causes of this ideology and it failed to create solid linkages between different ministries and government agencies.
• Although a specialized counter-extremism department was established, its potential role in the civic sphere was not clear. The department moved from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Culture, and it remains under-resourced and without access to relevant institutions and ministries.
• There is an ongoing dialogue program with ISIS members or Jihadist Salafis in correctional institutions. However, the outcomes of this dialogue are still too little, as it adopts a flawed approach with inmates. The program lacks a vision on how to deal with people, who have renounced ISIS’ ideology, and how to rehabilitate them after being released. Numerous examples on more successful approaches may be found in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and some European states, as mentioned later in this paper.
• Governments and media outlets have failed to create a profound media narrative, capable of countering ISIS’ discourse. Media outlets are still largely focusing on condemnation, while they fail to present a critical analysis from Sharia scholars, media figures and researchers in different social sciences.
• The role of the Ministry of Culture and the Higher Council of Youth remained limited in this regard. Having a new ministry of youth may actually help consolidate these efforts and coordinate between relevant
entities. However, adequate resources need to be secured to ensure effective achievements on the ground, bringing together all entities working with the youth. In light of the current economic hardships, including unemployment, poverty and rising prices, as well as the growing sectarian rift in Iraq and Syria, youth are the primary targets of ISIS.

Young people must be further engaged in the decision-making process, as the high unemployment rate of 14% reaches a staggering 30% among the youth. Unemployed youth must be seen as a critical social and cultural indicator, as this generation waits for decent job opportunities after completing a university education. People who fail to find an opportunity are likely to be frustrated and disappointed. With additional political and economic crises, the situation will, indeed, affect their views, ideas, and psychological tendencies.

“Jihadi” groups may be defined as “social protest movements with a religious ideology”, meaning they originally resulted from social circumstances, but later took a religious form due to certain conditions and the active presence of this movement in the society. One of the alarming social and political observations is that people who wished to protest against state policies in the past voted for the Muslim Brotherhood, but these people resort to ISIS today. In other words, the pattern, method and culture of protest have become far more violent.

**Part IV: Towards a National Holistic Approach against Extremism and Terrorism**

We are essentially facing the following facts:

Rather than declining, the Jihadist Salafi ideology is spreading; there is a new generation of youth who are following this ideology; the terrorist threat exists at home and abroad and takes different forms, including individuals, sleeper cells and armed groups (external); Youth are the most vulnerable to this ideology; The middle class has been infiltrated in addition to universities and new geographic locations; armed attacks cannot be entirely prevented no matter how competent the intelligence or military apparatuses may be;
Governments, civil society and other entities are falling short of their political and cultural roles, as counter-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts are rather sporadic.

Based on the aforementioned, any counter-extremism and counter-terrorism strategy or national vision must be based on “complementarity” between state agencies on one hand and state agencies and civil society organizations on the other. With political, social, cultural, domestic and external inputs, the threat is complex and cannot be confronted by a single entity.

On the contrary, focusing on one aspect may lead to numerous side effects, such as the correctional institutions’ issue, which will be discussed later in this paper. Complementarity also means coordination, as no conferences should be held or great amounts of money spent without a tangible outcome. It is imperative to avoid repetition of ideas, information and outcomes. A clear road map, delineating the role of each entity in the battle against extremism, is necessary.

The following guidelines need to be taken into consideration in the next phase:

1. Making the Distinction between ISIS and the group’s supporters at home

Undoubtedly, Jordan faces a threat from ISIS abroad and the group’s supporters at home. While ISIS supporters in Jordan may be far more loyal to the group and its ideology, agenda and political objectives than the Jordanian state, treating local supporters and foreign ISIS members on an equal footing is a fatal mistake for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the conditions, root causes and nature of these threat are different. Therefore, tools and means of confrontation need to correspond to these differences.

Foreign ISIS may be confronted through military action, carried out by border guards, and policies that we talked about earlier. However, ISIS supporters at home needs domestic policies, as its emergence was primarily associated with domestic conditions, while external conditions only served as secondary input.
In light of Rakban attack, the social networks’ policy that Jordan followed must be further enhanced along the borders with Iraq and Syria, with the aim of countering ISIS’ external threat. In addition, social, security and military networks in border areas must be enhanced: Southern Syrian (Dara and Houran); Western Iraq (Anbar); Northeastern areas where Rakban and Hadalat camps are located as they are administratively part of Homs, adjacent to Deir Ez-zor. Jordan currently cooperates with the New Syrian Army, but it is important to enhance this cooperation in the near future.

ISIS’ military force may have declined recently, and the group may also lose control over the majority of cities and territories, previously held under its rule. However, these indicators do not, by any means, signal the end of ISIS’ threat, both at home and abroad.

A flawed understanding of these developments would suggest that the domestic threat may soon diminish, as a result of the group’s military decline in the external battle fields. On the contrary, the group may still return to these fields, as long a fertile environment still exists. Furthermore, ISIS may resort to guerrilla wars and sleeper cells on a regional scale, significantly jeopardizing regional security.

While addressing homegrown ISIS, we need to be aware of the conditions that led to its emergence at home. Therefore, the group’s military decline, again, does not mean it is no longer appealing to a young generation of radical youth.

Another key question arises: Does the group have a decision not to carry out a major attack in Jordan similar to 2005 bombings? Is this assumption correct?

This assumption seems correct to date for a number of reasons. Firstly, ISIS greatly relies on sectarian clashes in its agenda, an issue that simply does not exist in Jordan. In addition, military and security difficulties in the group’s main sphere of influence in Iraq and Syria are shifting its focus to what its supporters call “the Iranian Safawi influence”.

However, there are no guarantees or agreements in this regard. Should the group decide to carry out a major attack, it will probably rely on foreign fighters rather than the traditional members of Jihadist Salafism, as was the case
in Amman and Aqaba bombings. ISIS leaders believe the Jordanian intelligence can infiltrate these local groups, foiling any attempts by local members. Therefore, it is important to enhance security efforts to watch suspects among people entering Jordan, especially in conflict-stricken areas where the group is active.

2. Making the Distinction Between Extremism and Terrorism

Terrorism usually stems from extremism. The typical transition usually starts with a person becoming religious, then a hardliner, then an extremist and lastly a terrorist. However, there is no specific or clear timeline for this transition, as someone may quickly move from one stage to another.

It is common to find that a non-religious and indifferent person, who may also have previous criminal records, has become an ISIS member, either at home or abroad. We may also find a pacifist introvert changing into a violent ISIS member. Examples of people who moved from one end of the spectrum to the other are in abundance.

This applies to inputs as well, as the family is not necessarily a cause of extremism, even if the family is strict, religious or even broken. Moderate and healthy families, from religious and non-religious backgrounds, were shocked when their children joined ISIS. ISIS includes educated and un-educated members, students of Sharia, engineering and medicine, lawyers, greengrocers and blacksmiths. We have a wide spectrum of social backgrounds, with varying classes and geographic locations. However, the concentration in some areas remains higher than others.

Extremism is only restricted to adopting ideas, concepts and behaviors, but it does not involve the use of violence. Primarily associated with the cultural and intellectual aspect, extremism leads to supporting these groups in cultural terms, or adopting their religious and political values.

Expectedly, extremism is more widely-spread and common, while terrorism is the “violence extremism” that actually uses violence. Terrorists may choose to join these groups, help them recruit members, promote their ideology or even carry out attacks in their favor.
Any counter-terrorism strategy primarily deals with legal and security considerations, addressing outputs rather than inputs. In other words, this strategy is designed to deal with “treatment” rather than prevention. Therefore, the battle against terrorism, which we will discuss again later in this paper, seems clear.

On the contrary, countering extremism is much more complicated and needs, as we have mentioned, a complementary approach between all stakeholders.

From this standpoint, it is extremely important to make this distinction between extremism and terrorism. We will have enough space to work on the prevention before the treatment, and confront inputs before outputs. By addressing the root causes and conditions of this phenomenon, we can intervene, if possible, before an extremist becomes a terrorist.

In addition, an extremist takes numerous steps before becoming a terrorist. As each one of these levels requires a different treatment approach, addressing all of these levels with a uniform approach may have counterproductive effects. For example, when a person who has been recently exposed to ISIS is charged with promoting the group’s agenda, he/she is jailed with ISIS members in the same cell. Aren’t we offering this free delivery service to ISIS?

3. Counter-Terrorism Strategy

In response to the threat of “a culture of extremism”, which may be conducive to terrorism, Jordanian decision-makers have formed the counter-extremism committee. Bringing together relevant ministries, the committee developed a national plan to combat terrorism.

With the aim of coordinating between different ministries and institutions, a special counter-extremism department was established, tasked with the implementation of the plan. However, the department remains under-resourced and lacks adequate authorities. Furthermore, cooperation with the newly-established department remained limited, making its mission nearly impossible.
Consequently, the plan lost the momentum as different entities failed to understand the critical role of this new department, which was initially under the Ministry of Interior but was later moved to the Ministry of Culture.

In light of this confusion, it is important to consolidate efforts in a manner that avoids duplication and confusion, so that we can achieve the “accumulative experience”. The counter-extremism department needs adequate authorities, human and financial resources, autonomy (similar to other independent national entities) and a board of directors, comprised of experts, civil society organizations and officials from this field.

Counteracting terrorism, indeed, leads us to think of mosques, religious discourse and the authorities of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic affairs. Watching mosques to end the spread of hardline discourse is necessary, but presenting a convincing alternative Islamic narrative that can refute extremist views is far more important.

However, such an alternative narrative requires certain conditions. Experts from the ministry and other entities, who are well-informed on the extremist discourse and arguments, need to deliver training courses to better equip imams with the necessary knowledge. Moderate and charismatic religious figures or leaders can have a powerful influence on imams and youth. There are numerous religious and non-religious figures, who currently enjoy this influence, but they will need media, religious and social platforms where they can freely promote this alternative discourse.

In addition, a new approach with schools that teach Islamic sharia is needed, in order to promote moderate Islamic discourse among the youth. This approach will create the “new generation of scholars”, with the capacities, tools, credibility and necessary independence to have greater impact in mosques, media, universities, scientific institutes and social media channels.

As for education and text books, more serious and qualitative steps are needed, with the aim of instilling values of coexistence, dialogue and tolerance. Experts in theological, educational and psychological sciences must take part in this gradual process.
However, focusing on textbooks only will fall short of addressing the problem. The entire philosophy, objectives and tools of education need to be revisited, ensuring that students learn critical and scientific thinking. In addition, extra-curricular activities need to be considered in the overall score, such as music, sports, reading, scientific research activities and competitions. With these diverse activities, future generations will have a more balanced and confident character, with multiple moderate identities and hobbies that are celebrated by their society.

While improving the curriculums is, indeed, important, the mindsets of our teachers form the **implicit curriculum that is equally important**. Only a small part of knowledge and perceptions are drawn from the textbook, while students learn the rest from the teacher and his/her opinions. Therefore, counter-extremism efforts need to develop teachers’ knowledge, capacities and techniques.

**Media’s** current counter-extremism efforts remain insignificant. Lacking creativity and innovation, these efforts have very little impact and effectiveness. With a shallow and obsolete discourse, the media has failed to respond to the depth and substance of this phenomenon. It remains incapable of addressing the root causes and different dimensions of extremism, and does not understand how this discourse spreads among the youth.

A well-devised media message with smart content is necessary, targeting multiple audiences with critical analysis of extremists’ arguments. Madarek, a program broadcast on MBC during the month of Ramadan, is a successful example. Jordan TV or any other private TV station can have a special program that hosts Islamic scholars and intellectuals, presenting a more in-depth analysis of extremist groups’ discourse and ideology.

Alternatively, we can co-produce series with implicit profound criticism of this discourse, rather than lecturing the audience with the usual ill-devised rhetoric. Several novels can be turned into scripts, linking extremism to its psychological and social conditions and highlighting its catastrophic consequences. Some episodes of the Saudi satirical series “Selfie” are one example.
Counter-extremism programs target the society at large, with special emphasis on youth. Data shows that youth from the age group 18-30 years are the most vulnerable to extremist or terrorist discourses. In some cases, these groups have drawn juveniles, who become extremists and may engage in terrorist operations.

In this light, re-installing the Ministry of Youth, as an umbrella of youth centers and institutions in Amman and other governorates, is very helpful. However, the ministry needs to actually work on the ground, reach other governorates and encourage youth to engage in community work. For example, the ministry can cooperate with youth sports and cultural centers to nurture scientific, musical and writing talents. This, indeed, entails cooperation between civil society organizations and other ministries.

National competitions in different fields, such as music, theatre and reading in schools, universities and governorates can be organized. In addition, football and other sports tournaments can be held for schools across the kingdom or for clubs in governorates. Youth parliaments, school and university councils are also good examples.

Needless to say, some of these activities do exist, but they need to be increased and given further attention.

Established by engineer Hussam Tarawneh in Kerak, the Creativity Club is one successful model of youth inclusion. Ruwwad Al Tanmeya, managed by Samar Dudin, is yet another example. These civil society efforts need further support and coordination between different entities.

In addition, reading and intellectual initiatives, run by groups of youth, also exist, playing an important role in raising youth’s psychological and intellectual awareness.

Having said that, we need to shed light on King Abdullah Fund and the experience of We Are All Jordan. It is about time to evaluate this experience and re-launch it with a new vision, prioritizing culture, sports and knowledge. Youth can then be fully engaged in the society and loyal to a unified national identity.
In Conclusion: extremism cannot be eliminated through conferences, seminars and abstract religious sermons. On the contrary, it is an accumulative evolving process that requires action in the cultural, sports, social, religious and educational spheres. Extremism, and consequently terrorism, cannot be separated from realities on the ground, as they are not an abstract intellectual phenomenon.

Extremism and terrorism have their psychological, social, political and cultural roots, and therefore, require a free and independent critical culture to counter them. Extremists are frustrated people, who lack faith in the state, the society and themselves. Their own religious values and culture have been altered to serve the agenda of extremists. In short, extremism is an originally social phenomenon, disguised in a religious form. Countering the religious discourse needs to go hand in hand with addressing the social, psychological and political conditions.

4. Counter-terrorism Policies

The state has amended terrorism-related laws, enabling it to tighten its grip and better deal with groups and individuals, affiliated with these groups. These measures are taken against people who actually join these groups or promote their ideas online and in the public sphere at large, with the aim of curbing the influence of their religious and political incitement.

Today, security forces are tracking these activities and preventing active agents from carrying out acts, which undermine national and societal security. Scores of people are currently tried at the State Security Court, while others, who have been convicted, are serving their prison sentences.

However, these are some side effects to these policies and a number of shortcomings as follows:
- There are different levels of allegiance to ISIS, which culminate in terrorist activities. In some cases, a person may sympathize with the group and express his/her views on social media or any other medium. Giving this person a prison sentence with other ISIS members is actually a free “delivery service”, carried out voluntarily by the state to ISIS. While being in the same cell with ISIS inmates, the group can then continue to brainwash this person and recruit him/her.
A better option is to have procedures, steps and a process that precedes trying these suspects. These procedures do exist, but they usually take the form of security measures. Other institutions as well experts in sociology, psychology and theology need to be engaged in the evaluation of these people, prior to their trial. Having a civil organization or department that takes charge of this process is a good option.

- While the state implements an ongoing dialogue program with extremists in correctional institutions, the outcome of this program remains insignificant to date. There is a need to develop this program and have a critical evaluation of it. Experts in sociology, psychology and theology, who are qualified to engage in a dialogue with inmates, need to be engaged. Furthermore, it is important to have different messages that correspond to different characters.

- All of these points bring us to what we call the “exit point”. Young people who wish to renounce extremism and terrorism need appropriate support, either after their trial or during their detention, before or after being released from correctional institutions. They need an organization, or a department, to follow up with them, helping them secure decent livelihoods and ensuring they completely renounce extremism.

- Not only are specialized studies in violence, extremism and terrorism very limited, but there is also no cooperation between think tanks and decision-makers. Social, economic, political and psychological conditions of people, involved in these activities, need to be examined. Based on this in-depth analysis, we can have accurate data and key indicators on age, locations, level of education, economic status, method of recruitment and propaganda. This, indeed, makes it easier for us to understand the correlation between the independent and dependent variables of this phenomenon, and also identify psychological, societal and political frameworks. Relevant state agencies need to cooperate with reliable research centers to carry out these studies.