

# Militant Islamism: A Strategic Threat

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Articles & Testimony

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**To stem the growing threat posed by militant Islamist groups worldwide, Western countries should implement more effective countermeasures against recruitment at home while bolstering the positive regional examples set by Morocco and the Iraqi Kurds.**

In several countries from Western Sahel in Africa to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the East, militant Islamist organizations (including smaller groups and larger movements) are creating havoc and helping to fuel wars and conflicts. Activities run the gamut from criminality (such as trafficking, hostage-taking, smuggling and counterfeiting) to full-scale military warfare such as in Syria and Iraq.

It goes without saying that all these various forms of militant Islamism need to be treated and analyzed separately. At the same time, all these organizations taken together constitute a strategic threat both to the regions where they are active and to Europe and the US, from which thousands of activists are recruited. Activists who then return (if they are not killed) are oftentimes even more radicalized and intent on carrying their individual jihad further.

Firstly, and for the countries in question, militant Islamist violence is fueling everything from civil war to an increase in criminal activity. Several of these countries already suffer from weak (or in some areas non-existent) central governments and are rife with internal ethnic and religious conflicts, adding to the complexity of the situation. Thus, underlying weaknesses with major social and economic problems that have been allowed to fester for decades play right into the hands of organizations that recognize no borders and abhor secular or non-divine authority.

It is important to name the "white elephant in the room" here. As Gaza lecturer Subhi Al-Yazji was stressing on the Hamas-owned Al-Aqsa TV channel on June 6, it is a firm belief in the Islamic faith that makes some people embark on Jihad and martyrdom missions (i.e., suicide attacks). Most of the jihadists are 'rational and mature,' according to Al-Yazji. It is paramount not to discard Al-Yazji as just another extreme preacher. He is just the latest example of a religious scholar, lecturer and/or preacher with an Islamist bent who is repeating what has been known for decades:

that the most important driving force behind much of Islamist-driven violence is a deep and strong religious conviction.

The idea that the activists who are driving all these organizations are either brainwashed or poor and unemployed is not only proved wrong empirically. It is too often a westernized mode of trying to downplay the religious motivations behind Islamist violence. That is a mistake that the secular, individual-oriented liberal West keeps repeating. The result is a constant inability to look at some of the underlying driving forces behind militant Islamist violence, making the problem much harder to deal with and making it virtually impossible to even make a dent in the trend that keeps seeing individuals leaving the West to pursue jihad in the MENA region and western and central Asia.

Secondly, the fact that the civil war in Syria -- and increasingly in Iraq with the ISIS offensive -- keeps drawing new recruits from Europe and the US clearly shows that despite various counter-measures, Islamist organizations have no real problem recruiting new fighters. Coming into play here is a key feature of several Western countries when dealing with immigrant communities. Namely "multiculturalism" as the preferred way of dealing with new immigrant communities. As British author Kenan Malik points out in an excellent article in the *New York Times* on June 23: "Policy makers have tended to treat minority communities as if each was distinct and homogeneous, composed of people defined by a singular view of culture and faith. Successive governments have managed diversity by putting people into ethnic boxes and using those boxes to shape public policy. As a result, policy makers have too often ignored the diversity within minority communities. And they have taken the most conservative, reactionary figures to be the authentic voices of those communities."

By empowering these "most conservative, reactionary figures" to speak for all Muslims, authorities in western states themselves have managed to simultaneously empower anti-liberal and anti-democratic forces, alienate reform-minded Muslims (and the vast majority of Muslims who only want a chance to be integrated) and actually ease the way for various kinds of Islamists to further their cause. Paired with hand-wringing and an inability to act before it is too late with regard to the increasingly bloody wars in Syria and Iraq, it is not hard to see why Islamists are so happy to establish themselves politically in the liberal democracies of the West.

The discussion of what Islam is or should be is obviously outside the scope of this article and is for Muslims to decide. Suffice it to say that since many of the courageous Muslim individuals who are engaged in that discussion live in western liberal democracies, at the very least we in the West should not make life more difficult by empowering the most reactionary and conservative forces that are actively engaged in demonizing and oftentimes threatening these individuals.

With the combination of a passive West (and, in all fairness, the international community as a whole) and increasing violence and political upheavals throughout the MENA region and western and central Asia, it is likely that these trends, unfortunately, will continue for quite some time.

Dismal as that prediction may be, however, there are at least two examples of countries bucking the trend: Morocco, in the western end of the MENA region, has managed to avoid many of the pitfalls that her neighbors have fallen into when trying to deal with the repercussions of the "Arab Spring" and increased domestic violence. Through a combination of cautious but persistent reforms (political, social and economic) and an assertive "soft-power" approach to her immediate neighbors to the south and south-east, Morocco is going on the offensive in trying to blunt the impact of Islamist violence. The outcome is of course not assured; the increase in Islamist activity in the Sahel and the failure of Morocco's neighbors to effectively counter Islamist infiltration (Algeria and the Polisario camps in Tindouf are prime examples) make this a difficult challenge.

Furthermore, scores of individual Moroccans have gone off to fight in Syria and Iraq, and the country has a long history of Islamist activity. But at least Moroccans in general seem to agree with their authorities that the conflicts

and violence affecting other countries in the MENA region should be avoided at all costs.

The other example is the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq. Contrary to the predictions of many pundits in the West, the KRG has managed to create -- amidst the chaos engulfing Iraq as a whole -- a peaceful, democratic and economically prosperous (comparatively speaking) area in an increasingly volatile part of MENA. This is no small feat and it deserves to be commended. The jury is still out on the outcome, of course, but the KRG should be an example to emulate, and the international community would do well to nurture and help the Kurds to show that it is actually possible to build a stable society even in the midst of a very unstable region.

Finally, the inescapable fact that more and more young men (and some women) are going off to join militant Islamist organizations is slowly forcing governments in the liberal western democracies to face up to the challenges of Islamist violence and its connections to political movements in Europe and North America. Hopefully, this should make it possible to create more efficient counter-measures to combat the strategic threat that these various organizations, groups and movements constitute.

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