Coming home: Deradicalization for returning Syria Jihadis

Mark Dechesne¹
Charlotte De Roon²

Abstract

The present contribution considers the nature of the threat coming out of Jihadis returning to Europe after involvement in the fighting against the Assad regime in Syria. Three contexts are considered particularly relevant: 1) the context of social protest in the Muslim world; 2) the context of the emergence of the Jihadi movement; 3) the context of veteranship. It is argued that approaches that rely solely on security or focus on ideological differences will not be able to reduce the threat. Rather, comprehensive programs that include consideration of the complex social and psychological reality of Jihadis may turn out of greatest strategic use. In this respect, much can be learned from existing veterans programs.

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The ongoing fighting in Syria is increasingly posing challenges to European governments. The close proximity of Syria force the states of Europe to separately and jointly determine their course of action in the conflict. Perhaps most acutely, Europe is faced with many individuals who wish not to wait for official governmental action, and have decided to leave their livelihood behind and set course to Syria to fight against the injustices and gross human rights violations perpetrated by Assad against parts of the Syrian people. While in many cases noble in its intent, the ideological justification to travel to Syria and pick up arms, i.e. to wage Jihad, have set off alarm bells within intelligence, law enforcement, and policy community circles (e.g. Telegraph view, 2013). After more than a decade of the “war

¹ Senior Researcher University of Leiden; Centrum Regionale Kennisontwikkeling Den Haag
² Research associate at the Dual Phd Centre; Campus Den Haag - Universiteit Leiden
against terror”, the case of Syria shows that Jihadism, the belief that it is a religious duty to fight against injustices committed to the Muslim community anywhere in the world, is still very much alive in the hearts and minds of more than a couple of Europeans. And what’s more, now the number of veterans returning from Syria is increasing, new challenges emerge: How to best deal with these returning veterans? What’s the nature of the threat coming back at us? And what are best practices when it comes to dealing with individuals who radicalized and went abroad, and those who radicalized while in the conflict zone? This paper seeks to provide a context in which to understand the nature of radicalization associated with Jihadi inspired travel to Syria and to consider response options; are current deradicalization programs of use? And what are the preconditions for these programs to work?

The story continues....

The Syrian case is often considered in isolation, without reference to the broader wave of turmoil that has characterized Northern Africa and the Middle East since the onset of the Arab Spring, nor to the longer history of (violent) protest in the Arabic world, Middle East, and South Asia. Moreover, in discussions on how to deal with returning fighters from Syria, insights in previous episodes of veteran re-integration are overlooked. This is unfortunate, because by overlooking the broader context in which current events take place, significant pieces of the puzzle are ignored; pieces that may turn out essential for understanding the drivers behind the Jihadist struggle in Syria, and for understanding the appropriate reception of those coming home from Syria.

The Arab Spring

The events in Syria cannot be considered in isolation from the events that have dominated the news about Northern Africa and the Middle East since the eruption of the Arab Spring. To be sure, located amidst regional contestants Israel en Iran, the unstable and traumatized neighbors of Iraq and Lebanon, and in an area of interest for major global powers including the USA, Russia, and China, there are elements that make the Syrian case unique and more
explosive than anywhere. At the same time, when it comes to the motivation of the local resistance movement in Syria, there are considerable similarities between these movements and the protest movements elsewhere in the region. The Syrian resistance, too, seeks to address the inequalities and injustices of a regime that carries little legitimacy but seeks to impose its will through the use of excessive force. By now, there seems to be little doubt that the current regime utilizes means against opponents that are excessive by all standards. Indeed, the international community has recognized this in the aftermath of the chemical weapons attacks perpetrated against innocent civilians (e.g. Pitzke, 2013). Additionally, the United Nations has recognized this in a recent proclamation claiming "massive evidence" that the highest levels of the Syrian government are responsible for war crimes (e.g. Jivanda, 2013).

The Jihadi Struggle

The events in Syria, and indeed, the events of the Arab Spring cannot be considered in isolation from protest movements within the Arabic world. The Jihadi struggle, in turn, cannot be considered in isolation from these protest movement. Major players in the Jihadi movement, including its ideological founder Said Qutb, the founder of Al-Qaida Abdul Azzam, and Al-Qaida’s current leader Al-Zawahiri, originate from national protest movements seeking to overthrow rulers in the Arabic world in the name of political Islam (e.g. Wright, 2006). However, as opposed to other movements, the Jihadi struggle is defined by the central place of violence as the critical instrument to bring about societal change. This emphasis on fighting has not always been considered a threat by the West (see e.g. Coll, 2004). Indeed, as “foreign fighters”, mostly males from Muslim countries who joined the fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, they were initially embraced by the rulers of Muslim countries and the West for their support. However, the decision of the Saudi kingdom to bring in Western troops, rather than the returned religiously inspired Afghanistan veterans, to oust Saddam Houssain from Kuwait in 1991, enraged Bin Laden, a facilitator of the contact between the Islamic fighters and the local Mudjahideens in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet war, and led him to believe that in order to establish true
Islamic state, violence against the impious in the Muslim world and their supporters in the 
West is required and justified. This belief, that is it is a religious duty to pick up arms to fight 
against the impious in the Muslim world, against foreign presence in the Muslim world, and 
to fight against anyone defending the perceived corrupt and unjust rulers of the Muslim 
world and against those actively humiliating or attacking Muslims, has since the early 1990s 
served as an inspiration for Jihadi activity throughout the Muslim world and beyond, with 
the civil wars of Algeria and Bosnia, attacks against Westerners in Egypt and Yemen, and of 
course the 9/11 attacks, as key examples.

Although the current rise of Jihadism in Syria is often portrayed as a new development, seen 
through the lens of history, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider it the continuation of 
developments that originate in the seventies. The most notorious Jihadi groups in Syria, 
including the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, have historic ties to Al-
Qaida in Iraq, which in turns has historic ties to Al-Qaida core and affiliates that have been 
active since the early eighties. A critical aspect of the mission, to facilitate the recruitment 
and training of Muslim outside of Syria, bears considerable resemblance with the 
foundational mission of Al-Qaida during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Realizing the 
history, most notably the fact that the “foreign fighters” coming from all over the world to 
fight injustices committed against Muslims, have not always been enemies of the West, may 
provide a critical element to a well-balanced response to Jihadi inspired Syrian veterans 
returning to their European homes.

Returning veterans

Realizing this history makes an additional issue salient that may also be critical to a well-
balanced response: We are dealing with war veterans. As the story of Al-Qaida and the Jihadi 
movement illustrates, veterans, if not appropriately taken care of upon returning from the 
battleground, irrespective which, may pose a considerable threat to society. A former 
soldier, with experience in using weapons and a mind set to survival, is capable of creating 
considerable havoc to society. Of importance, the challenges of dealing with veterans are in 
no way restricted to the Jihadis. History is replete with examples of veterans going astray,
with dramatic political and personal consequences. Take the veterans of the first World War forming the Nazi movement in Germany, or Franco and his inner circle in Spain, veterans rising to power in the wake of the traumatic defeat during the Rif war. In fiction, the first movie featuring Rambo portrays, not entirely inopportune, the struggles of a former Vietnam veteran trying to come to grips with the societal pettiness for which he has lost his appetite during his time in combat, with dramatic consequences.

Taking into account the consequences of veteranship may constitute another critical element to a well-balanced response. First, it highlights the seriousness of the threat of those coming back from the Syrian conflict zone. Second, highlighting veteranship makes clear that this threat does not necessarily emanate from the specific group of jihadis, but rather (also) emanates from people who are exposed to combat. Third, and related to the second point, to the extent that at least part of the threat does not emanate from the ideology of the Jihadi movement, but rather from veteranship, perhaps our understanding of the motives and intent of those returning from Syria is better served by psychological analysis rather than ideological or theological analysis.

**Ideology or Psychology?**

Terrorism is, in essence, the use or threat to use violence to advance political, social, or religious goals. As such, terrorism may be differentiated from other forms of violence by zooming in on the ideological motives claimed to be behind the attacks. However, research indicates that the nature and structure of ideologies associated with violence are different from non-violent ideologies (even when violent and non-violent ideologies aspire to the same ideals), and that psychological factors contribute to the appeal of violent as opposed to non-violent ideologies. From these findings, one may infer that there is more to violent political engagement than ideology alone. Although scholars emphasize that there is no such thing as a terrorist personality or a terrorist psychological disorder, psychological factors are critical, if not primary, to understand the appeal of ideologies propagating violence.
Allison Smith (2013), a social scientist working at the Department of Homeland security, recently compiled the insights of various scholars regarding the structural features of political exclamations of violent organizations and matched non-violent organizations. Across the board, it was found that the violent organizations espoused ideologies of relatively lesser complexity, to put greater emphasis on group affiliation, to focus on threats, and to stress issues of control and power (see Conway and Conway, 2011). Thus, ideology per se is not a predictor of violent intent, but structural features of the ideology are.

Of further interest, theory and research on post-traumatic stress disorder among war veterans hints that the characteristics of lesser complexity, group affiliation, and issues of power and control, resonate particularly well among those exposed to life-threatening situations (Dechesne, in press). According to Chemtob and colleagues (1997) authoritative analysis of anger regulation problems of traumatized war veterans, these life-threatening situations activate a “survival mode” of functioning entailing the “hyperactivation of various cognitive structures” that are characterized by the primacy of pattern matching, a tendency to react quickly rather than to meticulously consider all available pieces of evidence before judging and acting, and a threat-confirmation bias and threat vigilance that facilitates the recognition of the threat. The survival mode is further argued to put a considerable burden on arousal regulation capacities and to potentially undermine the effective functioning of these capacities. Veterans with PTSD are argued to remain in survival mode, even long after they have left the combat zone.

Note that there is considerable “affordance” between simplistic ideologies that emphasize threats to the group and that focus on issues of control and power, and the characteristics of the survival mode. A simplistic view of the world affords pattern matching and leaping to judgments. An ideological focus on threats affords hypervigilance and confirmation of the existence of the threat. Finally, the issues of control and power resonate well among people chronically trying to come to grips with their affective state. Thus, the appeal of extremist ideology is to a great extent determined by the psychological state of the individual upholding that ideology. From this perspective, dealing with extremist ideology and the
violence that is associated with extremist ideology implicates to an essential extent dealing with the psychological mindset that contributes to the appeal of the extremist ideology.

**From psychology to policy: Deradicalization is more than an ideological debate**

The foregoing observation is in line with earlier comments by the first author of this article. In a survey of deradicalization programs that were developed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the global war on terror, it was emphasized that in order to bring about effective deradicalization, it is essential to not only consider ideological but also psychological factors, and the interplay between ideology and psychological state. Thus, it should be stressed that in the fight against terrorism, and in dealing with the threat of Jihadi veterans returning from Syria, we are not fighting radical ideas per se, even if they are associated with violence; we are fighting radical ideas that coincide with a survival mindset of the individuals espousing the radical ideas (cf. Ramakrishna, 2013). And dealing with this survival mode may be just as important if not more important than ideology in creating effective policy to deal with fighters returning from Syria.

While terrorist attacks or threats posed by terrorism give rise to elevated threat levels and public calls for a harsh counter response, there is growing awareness that a hardline approach using police and other security forces alone to reduce extremism may not be the most efficient (e.g. Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009). Especially in the case of returning jihadis, the means available to law enforcement, including possible imprisonment and intense surveillance may even further promote their radical ideas and violent intent. Research on animal aggression provides some lessons in this context. It has identified two distinct types of aggression: defensive and offensive aggression (Adams, 1979). The former, aggression as a defense against territorial intrusions, can be just as readily observed among humans as among other species in the animal realm. Conveying that those returning from Syria pose a threat to society, may thus trigger a defensive aggressive response. In other words, emphasizing the threat may trigger the already activated survival mode of those coming
back from Syria, thereby increasing rather than decreasing their chances of carrying out attacks in areas outside of Syria. Indeed, recent research by Hegghammer (2013) shows that the vast majority of Jihadis returning from abroad have no intent to carry out attacks. But once they are perceived as threat, and are forced to react accordingly, the number of returned Jihadis planning to carry out attacks may rise.

Various states that now recognize the importance of interventions that seek to rehabilitate and de-radicalize jihadists rather than merely isolate them through fierce prosecution and imprisonment. However, many of these programs revolve around the content of radical ideology rather than dynamic interplay between psychological and ideological factors. For example, in some Muslim-majority countries, counselors and clerics visit terrorist and jihadi detainees to reevaluate ideologies and teach them the ‘right’ beliefs. Also programs such as the Religious Rehabilitation Group in Singapore and the Detoxification program in Canada aim at promoting other versions of Islam and Islamic history (Seifert, 2010).

But as noted before, ideological factors tell only part of the story. Social and psychological factors also play a major role in the development of violent or extreme behavior. Factors associated with a survival mode such as anger, insecurity, and the need for closure, are proven to increase the likelihood that a person erupts into violence or joins a radical organization. Moreover, economic instability and a low social economic status create conditions that may further promote extremism. Because of the complex interaction of the numerous factors, programs aiming at de-radicalization of jihadists must adopt an individually-tailored approach that recognizes the psychology behind radicalization processes.

Some de-radicalization programs indeed touch upon these factors. For instance, the German EXIT program seeks to stimulate disengagement of former members of Neo-Nazi supremacist groups by offering cognitive treatment, building effective interpersonal relationships and involving friends and family in the process. The EXIT initiative is now extended to dealing with Jihadis. The Channel project in the UK aims at the prevention of people from radicalization into all forms of terrorism by adopting a multi-agency approach in

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3 Retrieved from http://www.exit-deutschland.de/, 6-12-2013
key sectors (health, civil, and security) and institutions with the aim to support vulnerable individuals and prevent the spread of terrorist ideology (HM Government, 2012).

To the extent that an effective approach to returning Jihadis entails a comprehensive program, much can be learned from programs set up to deal with returning veterans. Many measures have been developed to promote the reintegration of war veterans in society and help them pick up their lives where they left off. Challenges, ranging from mental health disorders to restoring interpersonal relationships to unemployment, are addressed by programs such as the US Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program⁴, the US Soldier for Life program⁵, the Australian Defence Force Rehabilitation Program⁶ or the Dutch National Care System for Veterans⁷. The National Care System for Veterans in the Netherlands, for example, aims at providing psychosocial care to veterans, service victims and their partners and families. It is an umbrella organization for seventeen military and civilian health care facilities that are spread throughout the country (Morren, 2011). Veterans and injured soldiers are informed about the National Care System for Veterans by handbooks and brochures they receive immediately after their return.

Obviously, considering Jihadis ‘veterans’ with a similar status to soldiers who return from the battleground may raise some eyebrows. Indeed, there are considerable legal and political barriers preventing the use of the label veteran in the context of Jihadis. But the label ‘veterans’ may turn out to be not necessarily soft, but rather, strategic. It can help to overcome some of the drawbacks that law enforcement approaches and ideologically focused deradicalization programs entail. The returning fighters no longer have to be considered a “them” that are a threat to “us”, and in labeling accordingly, alienating many sympathizing with the resistance against Assad. Also, they no longer have to be considered to possess “wrong” ideas that need to be corrected and replaced by “right” ideas, thus preventing complex theological debates and unwanted mixing of religion with democratic politics. Indeed, “us versus them” and “right versus wrong” may be inappropriate categories

⁴ Retrieved from http://www.yellowribbon.mil/, 6-12-2013
⁵ Retrieved from http://www.army.mil/soldierforlife/, 6-12-2013
to use to make sense of what’s in the mind of people willing to fight in Syria, and the larger context of the fighting in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Clearly, there is a threat of violence coming out of returning Jihadis. But only by fully recognizing the complex psychological lifespaces of the Jihadis and the Jihadi movement, and developing comprehensive programs, the threat may effectively be reduced.
References


