

Innovative Ways to Deal with Violent Extremism

Commodore Hotel, Beirut [December 11, 2015]

La Maison du Futur in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, held on Friday, 11 December 2015 a conference entitled "Innovative ways to deal with violent extremism" at the Commodore Hotel, Beirut, as part of its duties to raise awareness regarding contentious issues plaguing the Middle East region and shed light on sustainable and viable solutions.

The event brought together a broad spectrum of western and eastern pundits, to explore new ways of understanding the political, social, economic, cultural and psychological drivers of the violent extremism phenomena, and has to draw a road map to counter this scourge, which have imperiled the stability of human societies in the wake of the twenty-first century.

Opening session :

In his opening remarks, Chairman of La Maison du Futur, President Amine Gemayel, welcomed the attendees, especially foreign and Arab experts, and noted that La Maison du Futur and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung decided to debate the terrorism phenomenon acknowledging the scale of challenge it has represented since its rise in the seventies of the late century until the present day, where its escalation and unprecedented brutality left the world with the reality of a new dimension of international terrorism, stretching out to Arab and European countries and the US like a plague. Hence, he added, a conscience driven approach was crucial to tackle the terrorism issue, especially with the new religious dimension it has acquired faraway from its former branded ideological dimension, along with the lack of a judicious strategy to deter it. He explained that there are several approaches to counter-terrorism, with the military intervention being at the forefront, akin to the international coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) we are witnessing today, and the Arab coalition against the Houthi movement in Yemen and the Russian-Iranian-Syrian alliance against ISIL in Syria. This military approach is useful at this stage, that even the Vatican has supported the resort to military intervention to curb the prevailing violence. Yet, military force alone is seldom sufficient to counter-terrorism. He added that since its re-launch, La Maison du Futur has organized conferences and symposiums focused on debating the problems afflicting contemporary societies in a bid to explore creative and viable solutions. President Gemayel also emphasized on the urgency for an Arab Marshall Plan to address the problems stalking the Arab world and lay the foundations for a better future.

He stressed on three pillars that must be underlined when reflecting on a counter-terrorism action agenda, concurrently with military intervention.

The first one is good governance, underscoring that for too many countries, the absence of good governance was a breeding ground to extremist groups. Good governance requires transparency to prevent corruption and ensure alignment with contemporary and modern governance frameworks. He pointed out that La Maison du Futur intends to study this issue.

The second is education, considered as a cornerstone to counter political violence. "Lack of a culture of tolerance and respect for others have constituted an incubator for extremism", he said, especially in light of the chaotic proliferation of faith schools. He stressed that through education and culture we can directly address religious extremism and political violence, noting that reforming education is a keystone to protect new generations.

The third is development, as the lack of development leads to extremism and violence.

Finally, he hoped that the conference's outcome will address the problem of violent extremism, taking into account these three factors. President Gemayel stressed on the need to establish a permanent inter-faith dialogue body, in the light of the timid reaction of faith institutions towards religious extremism, especially the Islamic ones. He recalled Al-Azhar's initiative in this regard, noting that it was not seized by other faith institutions, expressly in terms of reforming education. He called for a global cooperation to establish such an inter-faith body, so all faith institutions could agree to unify their stance against the violent extremism on rampage across the world, especially that atrocities are committed in the name of religion.

He also underpinned the responsibility that lies on religious scholars in countering violent extremism, urging to establish the inter-faith body to find a minimum common denominator between different religions, and develop a strategy based on human values to counter this phenomenon. He expressed his hope to see continuous cooperation among the research communities to address the critical global issues of our time.

Nils Wormer of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung welcomed the attendees and acknowledged La Maison du Future's proposal to hold this conference, highlighting the cooperation between the two institutions. He commended President Amine Gemayel remarks on violent extremism, saying that he pinpointed the core of the problem in all its aspects. He added that terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Europe, with the heyday of ideological terrorism in the seventies, and religious terrorism in the nineties and its comeback nowadays. He pointed out that the European media sheds light on terrorism whenever an attack occurs, rather than focusing on how this issue started and trying to pinpoint what triggered it to find solutions to annihilate it. Hence, he commended the participation of foreign experts, wishing the conference would come out with positive results.

The Executive Director of la Maison du Future Sam Menassa gave a background call on the conference theme, highlighting the meeting's incentives, particularly in terms of clarifying the wavering and foggy stance of the Arab and Muslim worlds towards violent extremism. He added that la Maison du Future seeks to foster a serene platform to discuss the subject away from the media and political hype, in order to explore its facets and put forward innovative ideas beyond the mainstream that elucidate its quiddity, drivers and worthwhile counter measures.

First session :

“Preventing Violent Extremism : Innovative Approach”

The first session started with its moderator John Bell, Director of the Middle East and Mediterranean Program at the Toledo Center in Madrid, introducing the speakers, Hassan Mneimneh, Principal at Middle East Alternatives, Kristina Eichhorst, Coordinator for Crisis and Conflict Management in the headquarters of Konrad Adenauer in Berlin, and Thomas Volk, Coordinator for Islam and the Dialogue between Religions in the headquarters of Konrad Adenauer in Berlin.

Bell thanked the two institutions for coordinating this meeting, pointing out that the West has witnessed waves of terrorism, but since the Paris incident, the media showed more interest in this issue and is currently unduly debating the violent extremism phenomenon to explore its essence and drives, especially since some of these were harbored within western communities. He added that the fact that some Westerners have embraced extremist ideologies and behavior, shocked Western societies and challenged the political authorities. He noted that on the other hand, whatever the causes and drives of violent extremism were, what stands crystal clear nowadays is the inefficiency of all adopted counter-violent extremism strategies. He added that this conference will allow raising different standpoints in the field of countering violent extremism that need to be discussed in order to determine which scheme is viable.

Mneimneh began his intervention by highlighting the wide divergence over the definition of terrorism, pointing out the double standards in defining terrorism and

determining who is a terrorist. While some brand a terrorist attack as an act of bravery, others consider it as a criminal act. The same goes for terrorists, seen by some as freedom fighters and by others as criminals. He explained that there are two definitional approaches to terrorism, the first is structural and the second is cultural. He said that the most commonly given structural interpretation attributes the emergence of violent extremism to a set of economic, socio-economic or generational socio-economic factors, emphasizing the importance of the economic factor in the emergence of violent extremism and terrorism, as evidenced by the slogan raised during Egypt uprising in 2011, "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice", which gave priority to a prosperous life. He explained that frustration and nibbling resulting from challenging economic conditions, could lead to unlawful and anti-establishment behavior ; it is thus a must to address economic problems as a fundamental tenet to prevent terrorism. The other structural interpretation has a political dimension, which connects the origins of terrorism with totalitarian regimes and lack of political participation, along with the existence of an international system based on self-interests. He said that implementing a culture of democracy, strengthening political participation and embracing alternation of power, will contribute at preventing extremism. The same goes with resolving some international disputes, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. The third structural interpretation championed by researchers, attributes the emergence of violent extremism to socio-psychological factors, particularly with regard to the Middle East, where repressive societies lead to frustration especially among young people. He stressed that addressing this aspect could be crucial in preventing extremism and terrorism.

Alternatively, the simplest theory within the perspective that relies on cultural interpretations to explain violent extremism, seeks to establish causal relationships between the rise of terrorism in the Middle East and the social structure based on power and force along with the cultural structure it has engendered. The second theory prevalent in Europe and the United States links the origins of extremism and terrorism to the essence of Islam, arguing that the war on terror is a war between the West and Islam. Although this theory is narrow, Mneimneh said it has gained prominence in the West especially after 9/11 events, when the clash of civilizations narrative sprouted in the Western countries in general and the United States in particular. In this context, some have connected terrorism to Salafi Wahhabism, a branch of Sunni-Islam, rather than to Islam in general, saying that the real foe in the war on terrorism is the Wahhabi teachings.

Following this presentation, Mneimneh noted that all these attempts to explain violent extremism highlight aspects of the topic, but do not bring to light this multi-pronged phenomenon. He stressed that the cultural interpretations do not underscore the existence of a clash of civilizations, but rather they highlight the fact that the Western Civilization had succeeded in achieving modernity while Eastern Civilization had not. He explained that throughout its history, the Western society had produced a culture of institutional powers based on respect for human rights, tolerance and acceptance of others, starting with the Renaissance and the enlightenment thought strengthened by the French Revolution.

Alternatively, the East adapted this culture with the advent of Napoleon's army, which paved the road to the rise of the so-called Ammiyat. Albeit the East sought to assimilate this culture, it failed because it was not part of its nurtured cultural structure.

He concluded by saying that when we reflect on the new system that had emerged in the region after World War I, we can objectively say that the twentieth century was in the Middle East, the era of state restructuring and assimilating the state-building concept conforming to the European model. Unfortunately, we did not succeed, and what had been created instead was a series of failed patriarchal nations ; he stressed that what we are witnessing today is the consequence of a 200 years of civilization failure to accommodate the forces of modernity inhibiting us from assimilating the

social values correlated to the political concepts that we had adapted from the West. He said that the extremist mentality runs as such : “their bombs and our martyrs, their violence (the West) is hidden, ours is wide-open, as we resort to violence in order to install a balance of terror”.

Volk began his presentation by stating that ISIL now controls territory in Syria and Iraq the size of the UK, and has power in these areas over eight million people, daily exposed to its Salafist doctrine. He added that more than 30.000 foreign fighters are thought to have joined ISIL’s ranks, and they mostly came from Tunisia and some European countries such as France and Germany. He said that many European countries are facing the threat of Islamic extremism growth among their citizens, despite the fact that most of them are natives. He mentioned that a large number of those who have joined Islamic extremist groups are newly converts into Islam. In addition to those a large number of third-generation Muslim immigrants to Europe, including a significant number of women. He highlighted the role of the online digital platforms as the biggest breeding ground to the so-called “electronic jihad”, by way of the use of the electronic network by Islamist extremist groups to recruit, disseminate their ideology, promote their operations, as well as plan attacks targeting intelligence and security sensitive facilities. He emphasized the need for Europe to adopt a new comprehensive and expanded strategy to root out extremism and prevent its growth, to be developed by joint action between security services, educational and media institutions as well as Islamic institutions.

Focusing on the proliferation of religious extremism in Germany, he unveiled that 4 million Muslim live in Germany, among them 43.890 could be viewed as potential Islamists. He stated that 31.000 of those are considered to be legalists, who observe law and order, but they do promote Islamic thinking. However, the most worrying trend in Germany nowadays is the rise in the number of people with Salafist affiliation, as their number has increased from 3800 in 2011 to 8000 in 2015. He also revealed that the number of people departing Germany for ISIL controlled territories in Syria and Iraq had risen as high as 750, over 100 of them had already lost their lives and around 200 had returned to Germany.

He distinguished between three types of extremists :

- The Salafist puristic non-political branch ; followers adhere to a strict explanation of the Islamic sharia, and can be identified through their dress code and way of life
- The Salafist political branch associated with Salafist political organizations
- The Salafist extremist jihadist branch ; followers are pro-Jihad and the most vulnerable to violent extremism

Volk added that the reasons for embracing violent extremism are varied and can be of psychological, political, sociological or ideological nature. He considered the internet to be one of the most dangerous recruitment tools, as a large number of women were recruited through internet and left their families to join ISIL, while other young people converted to Islam to join extremist groups also through online recruitment.

Finally, he presented Germany’s approach to counter the alarming trend of increasing Islamist radicalization, starting by promoting knowledge about Islam as a way to reduce prejudice and counter Islamophobic attitudes in Europe, that lead young Muslims to join radical movements ; to promote an historical-critical exegesis of the Quran that places the passed-down verses into the context of their formation, both in place and time, and present a non-violent reading of Islam ; expending Islamic religious education in schools and through social media. Young people obtain most of their information from the Internet, and as Islamist and Salafist organizations are continuously increasing their online presence, it is more important than ever to be proactive and offer alternatives to Islamist websites using promotional videos and websites about an Islam that is tolerant and peaceful. He added that Germany also relies in its attempt to prevent extremism on soft and positive measures, engaging

with young people at risk of radicalization or who have already chosen the extremist path in order to induce them to change their beliefs.

He concluded by noting that Islamist and Salafist radicalization has been increasing steadily in Germany for years, especially among the third-generation migrants who grow up in Germany and are German citizens. Thus, it is crucial to draw up a national strategy for preventing Islamic radicalization involving a partnership of responsibility between security, education and social welfare authorities, calling on Islamic institutions to join this effort to stop the misuse of religion.

Before giving the floor to Kristina Eichhorst, Bell commented on Volk presentation saying that the emergence of extremism in the West could be seen as a direct offshoot of governance failure as it is the case in the East, wondering if moderate Islam can deter the would-be violent extremists.

Eichhorst began her presentation by asking what motivates Europeans in general and Germans in particular to give up their comfortable life to join ISIL.

She said that this phenomenon caused a public outcry since it arised in Germany four years ago, pushing everyone to wonder about the identity of those who head off to foreign countries to join armed fighters in their battle. Even political authorities were baffled by this new trend.

She stressed that today and after 4 years, we can say that we still have little insight about this phenomenon, as reality shows that the legion of foreign fighters includes persons with varied and often overlapping motives, coming from a range of economic and socio-cultural backgrounds and do not fit one stereotype.

Hence, we stopped asking about their identity, she added, trying instead to elucidate their motives and considerations.

– One theory says that they suffer from mental illness and their personalities are weak. However, the field studies have shown the invalidity of this theory, since the majority of those who join the ranks of extremist movements are not mentally unstable.

– Another theory says that they do not suffer from mental illness but rather from neurosis, especially depression. Once again, reality has shown the invalidity of this interpretation.

– A third theory says that the reason behind this phenomenon lies in the manhood psyche, mentality and way of thinking, in terms of his strive for wars, power, adventure, bragging and fame etc... Here too, there is no conclusive evidence proving the validity of this theory.

– A fourth reasonable theory, Situation of Radical Change Theory, talks about young people joining extremist movements during a turning point in their lives (trauma). She explained that when a significant negative turning point occurs in someone's life, he becomes weak and vulnerable to recruitment attempts. However she stressed that despite the logic behind this theory, it is not inclusive and totally effective in explaining foreign fighters' motivations.

She concluded by saying that we still have poor insight into the phenomenon of violent extremism in the West, and it is likely impossible to fully understand this ambiguous occurrence in light of the complexity of human psychology. She added that in Germany, we are still at square one and need to share experiences with other European countries in order to tackle this issue.

Public debate followed Eichhorst presentation, with some participants claiming that confining youngster westerners' motivations to join extremist groups to solely personal and psychological factors is pure chimera. They said that any attempt to understanding violent religious extremism should consider its historical context, pointing out that the region has been suffering from terrorism for over 30 years. So what happened during these years to lead violent extremism into a religious path ?

As answer to this question they gave three reasons :

– The oil revolution in the Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the emergence of what they called the Islam Nomad Warrior

– The Iranian Revolution

– The Cold War and the consequent support of Salafist jihadist movements

They stressed that all states are responsible for the emergence of this terrorism, either by support or tolerance or complicity for furthering personal gains.

In the same vein, some saw that confining the phenomenon of violent religious extremism to psychological drivers is a simplistic view.

They considered that what paved the way for the emergence of these radical movements is the failure of all attempts to reform Islamic thought, the Western support for authoritarian regimes in the region and the lack of a serious quest to solve the Palestinian cause.

They also said, while subjective motives should be taken into consideration when attempting to explain terrorism, we should not however overlook the existence of objective drives, stressing that deterring terrorism is a common Arab, Islamic and Western responsibility.

Second session :

“Understanding Extremism : Psychological Perspective”

The second session started with its director Hassan Mneimneh presenting the speakers, John Bell and Ivan Tyrrell, Director of the Human Givens College in the United Kingdom, and founder of the Human Givens approach of psychotherapy and clear thinking about emotional health, education and social issues, and Jean-Pierre Katrib, Director of Strategic Relations at Quantum.

Tyrrell began his presentation via Skype by emphasizing the importance of understanding human behavior through a Human Givens approach that links human behavior to a given set of innate needs and the extent of their fulfillment. He explained that humans have several basic emotional needs :

– Security : A sense of safety and an environment in which people can live without experiencing excessive fear so that they can develop healthily.

– Autonomy and control : A sense of autonomy and control over his life economically, emotionally and professionally.

– Status : A sense of status – being accepted and valued in the various social groups we belong to.

– Connection to the wider community : We have evolved as a group animal and need to feel part of something larger than ourselves.

– Intimacy : Emotional connection to other people – friendship, love, intimacy, fun.

– Competence and achievement : A sense of our own competence and achievements, that we have what it takes to meet life’s demands, which boosts our self-esteem

– Meaning and purpose and spiritual sustenance : A sense of meaning and purpose which comes from being stretched in what we do and how we think. It is through ‘stretching’ ourselves mentally or physically by service to others, learning new skills or being connected to ideas or philosophies bigger than ourselves that our lives become purposeful and full of meaning.

Tyrrell added that the human givens model also consists of a set of ‘resources’ (abilities and capabilities) that all human beings are born with, which are used to get the innate needs met. These constitute what is termed an ‘inner guidance system’. Learning how to use these resources well is seen as being crucial to achieve and sustain robust bio-psycho-social health as individuals and as groups.

These resources are : Memory, ability to communicate with others, imagination, rational thinking, the ability to know and understand the world, the ability to step back and be objective and the ability to dream.

Tyrrell then wondered, what happens when our needs are not being met ? Humans in this case will get emotional and often act foolishly. When one loses control over his life he/she will also lose control over himself /herself, and when he/she loses

his / her self-esteem he / she will be disoriented and when he / she becomes anxious he / she will get depressed. If these disturbances occur with means to fulfill human innate need for recklessness and adventure, he / she will use his resources such as memory, imagination and ability to acquire new skills in reckless gears such as terrorism.

As for the triggers that turn youngsters to extremism, he spoke about their growth in sick environments, preventing them from fulfilling their needs and obstructing their advance and the nurture of their internal guidance system. He also spoke about mental illness or defect of the brain caused by physical or psychological reasons.

He concluded by stressing the need for human rational mind to organize his thoughts and to possess a clearer view of the world's issues. Human needs more a systematic way of thinking than he needs beliefs and ideologies.

Bell started his lecture by emphasizing the Human Givens theory presented by Tyrrell, saying that when one's needs are not met, the person will react, and the extent of the reaction will be in line with the level of deprivation. He said if we apply this logic to the political reality, we will find that governments in the Arab world, for example, do not meet the needs of their citizens, and therefore we should not be startled by the occurrence of reactions that could reach terrorist behavior. He added that this theory is not simplistic, yet its straightforwardness reflects the existent reality. He pointed out that extremist movements starve to fulfill some of the human needs, and they are proficient at attracting people and driving them to comply with their demands. He said that mass movements such as the phenomenon of violent extremism, we are witnessing today, only arise in certain conditions, when sturdy social structure is in a state of disintegration. This is a good description of parts of the Arab world, he added, and of isolated pockets of our own Western society.

He denied the existence of a unique background profile for extremists, or specific social, economic, cultural and psychological conditions that lead to the rise of terrorism, saying that the reasons often given to explain the emergence of terrorism and violent extremism, such as poverty, ignorance, social marginalization and political tyranny do not apply to all cases. He sustained this view by saying that 48.5% of jihadi recruited in the Middle East and North Africa had a higher education of some sort, of these 44% had degrees in engineering. Among Western-recruited jihadi, that figure rose to 59%. He added that an unpublished report by the World Bank shows no link between increased employment and decreased violence. He pointed out the difference between foreign recruits' motives and local ones, as well as between Western and Eastern contexts. He added that three-quarters of those who become foreign fighters for ISIL are recruited through friends and 20% through family members, noting that ironically, in the West, it is often when they are expelled from Mosques that they radicalize and they are recruited in fast food hangouts and soccer fields. He unveiled that most foreign fighters who have joined extremist groups did so willingly triggered by a broad array of motives such as: pursue of a heroic path, desire of adventure, activism, romance, power, belonging, along with spiritual fulfillment. As for local recruiters, driving factors fluctuate from bad governance to money enticement, to seeking revenge, ending occupation and defeating the enemy. They perceive terrorism as the sole means to reach their goals.

On countering and preventing extremism, Bell said the first step should be understanding this phenomenon, to be followed by healing social disintegration considered as the seedbed of extremist movements, and offering to vulnerable to be-recruiters positive inspiring causes to replace the suicidal ones used by extremists as pull-factor. He added that keeping a track policy is impossible especially in Europe, as it requires thousands of unavailable security agents.

He concluded by stressing that counter-terrorist policies which are only based on a narrow range of repressive mechanisms produce serious negative side-effects and push those who already chose the path of violence deeper into their imagination. He noted that between 1968 and 2006, only 7% of terrorist groups were militarily

defeated, stressing on the West duty to provide financial, technical and social support to their allies in the Middle East who manage to keep ISIL outside their borders.

Katrib presented a white paper prepared by Quantum. Entitled “Understanding jihadists in their own words”, this white paper aims to tackling the question of violent extremism thorough understanding the psychology of ISIL fighting force and their state of mind prior to recruitment, through personal testimonies of a 49 sample ISIL and other extremist organizations’ fighters in Syria and Iraq aged between 18 and 43, who are currently either detained, defected or still operating. Among those were 9 foreign fighters, 9 Arab fighters and 31 local fighters. The testimonies were accessed through monitoring more than 200 hours of one-to-one interviews on Saudi and Iraqi TV channels, inter alia, that were later transcribed into an academic categorization matrix and coding tool from which conclusions were derived.

He continued : In this study we have analyzed the discourse of these fighters by identifying keywords they used to express :

- How they perceive themselves
- What are their own limits
- What they consider as positive
- What they consider as negative

Accordingly, three categories were identified based on jihadist’s Geographical origins, the local fighters category (as in Iraqis in Iraq and Syrians in Syria), the foreign fighters category and the Arab fighters category. The study key-finding was the classification of extremist fighters into 9 categories, based on the push-factors that led them to join the ranks of ISIL and other extremist groups :

- Status Seekers (77% are local fighters): They want to improve their social standing ; their main drives are money, employment and certain recognition by others around them.
- Identity Seekers (63% are foreign fighters): Need the identity that comes from belonging to a group.
- Revenge Seekers (80% are local fighters): Consider themselves to be part of an oppressed group, and thus want to inflict harm on their oppressors and anyone who might support them (oppressors).
- Redemption Seekers: Perceive their engagement in Jihadi enterprise as a vindication from previous sinful ways of living.
- Responsibility Seekers: Value family ties and want to preserve their family’s well-being
- Thrill Seekers (67% are Arab fighters): Are filled with energy and drive. They want to prove their potential/power by accomplishing an arduous task or surviving a harrowing adventure.
- Ideology Seekers (7% of the study sample): Are mainly in search of a certain world view that they can identify with and the “Islamic Ummah” provides a pre-packaged transnational ideology. The ideology seekers aim at “imposing” their world view on at least one other group.
- Justice Seekers : Consider what is happening in the conflict areas as a major injustice and feel they have a certain inner calling to reverse this injustice.
- Death Seekers : Have most probably suffered from a significant trauma/loss in their lives and consider death as the only way out with a reputation of martyr instead of someone who has committed suicide.

Other push factors were also detected such as : Defending Sunnis (15), Jihad (11), extremist environment (8), Being Muslim and the Syrian war (8)K money (6), former prisoners (5), and being anti-Western culture.

He concluded by pointing out that ultimately, this White Paper edition demystifies some existing theories on ISIL & co. For one, Islam is not the full side of the story. As the wording of the fighters suggest, Islam is a means to an end and not the end itself.

Alternative, earthly pursuits seem to be the underlying end for a majority of sampled fighters.

The debate started with some participants claiming that the approach presented by speakers to understand the push-factors behind violent extremism, is a diagnostic-therapeutic approach and does not capture the core of the problem or unveil the outer and factual root causes of this phenomenon. They added that a key question was so far ignored which is, why religious criticism that started in the Arab World in the 19th century was hindered? They stressed on the need to revisit the traditional interpretation of Islam's view on all aspects of life as the latter are dynamic and not static.

Other participants believed that the psychological approach to analyze the phenomenon of violent extremism is worthy; nonetheless, what we are witnessing today is not a particular and individual violence but rather a mass phenomenon. They added that what contributed to the rise of violence in our region is the failure of the state and its inability to cross the line between authoritarian and violent states to developmental states that seek to fulfill people's needs. They pointed out that the current debate on political violence is confining this phenomenon only to Islam, despite the fact of the presence of extremist movements in Europe not related to Islam or Jihad but rather to the stagnation of modern state in the movement towards providing social justice. Accordingly, they added, if we genuinely want open and honest debate, we should consider extremism in general rather than singling out only its Islamic-religious facet.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that motives behind the recent outbreak of terrorism in Arab nations and worldwide are of political roots, and all nations bear a heavy responsibility for political grievances, either because of their authoritarian regimes or because of their complicity with the latter for strategic interests. They also stressed on the responsibility of religious authority in the Arab world in exacerbating this phenomenon because it failed to provide a new interpretation of Islam; adding to this the failure of the Arab elite in fulfilling its social and cultural role, merely importing Western values without trying to draft a genuine alternative.

Emphasizing the peculiar role of religion in the rise of terrorism, some participants stressed on the political roots of terrorism which simply uses religion as a facade, wondering why ISIL has flourished in Iraqi Sunni areas? They alleged that the US invasion of Iraq interchanged the power play between Sunnis and Shias, bringing the latter to power. Backed by Iran, the Shia rule marginalized Sunnis in revenge to decades of oppression. This retaliatory politic has spawned Sunni extremist movements, which reached its apogee with ISIL. The same applies to Syria, where the regime violence has fostered extremist movements, stressing that the core problem in the region is of political nature and not religious.

Underscoring the wide range of social, political and psychological factors behind the rise of terrorism and religious extremism, some participants wondered why the Arab and Islamic worlds had constituted a breeding foothold for this groundswell of extremism. They added that Arab and Islamic societies suffer from a lack of democracy, marginalization of citizens and their exclusion from public life, considering thus the state failure as a key driver for the rise of extremism and terrorism.

Other participants highlighted the role of the Iranian Revolution in bolstering Sunni extremist movements, saying that the Shia expansionist policy paved the way to the upsurge of the Sunni extremism phenomenon. They wondered why the international community is focusing on Sunni extremism while dismissing Shia extremism.

Third session :

“Dealing with extremists : Applicable methods”

The Third session began with its moderator Hanin Ghadar, editor in chief of NowLebanon news website, presenting the speakers, General Fuad Allam, former Agent in the State Security Investigations in Egypt and former Director of the Port

Said security department, General Abdel Rahmann Shehtly, Director of administration and member of the Lebanese Military Council at the Ministry of Defense, and Max Taylor, former head of the department of applied psychology at the University College Cork and former Professor in international relations at the University of St Andrews and director of CSTPV in Ireland.

Ghadar described the session's subject by saying that the international community is currently focusing on fighting ISIL by waging a military war, and that is useless. She explained that ISIL is no stranger to our societies which are inherently violent, noting that violence begins at home where men taunt their daughters and wives. She evoked the recent statement by Al Azhar, refusing to declare ISIL apostate, arguing that it is an Islamic organization. She added that both the West and the East bear the responsibility for the emergence of extremist movements, saying that when the West sides with one party in the conflict, things will worsen. The West cannot cozy up to Iran, and expects a no-reaction stance from Sunnis in the region.

General Allam began his intervention by commenting on Ghadar's sayings, stressing that Al-Azhar condemns ISIL but has stopped short of declaring it as an apostate, firstly because it rejects the Takfirism process ISIL plays on, and secondly because only God can judge on the matter of apostasy. He added that terrorism has no religion, and Al Azhar believes that the three monotheistic religions are not fundamentally opposed to each other, yet there are misconceptions among hard-liners in each of these religions, which incite violence and terrorism when a believer considers that his faith was offended.

Talking about factors abetting the rise of terrorism, Allam firstly cited wars. He explained that the inability of conventional warfare to be conclusive in military conflicts bolstered the emergence of terrorist organizations, which attempted to settle these conflicts while achieving political gains. Terrorism is a politically-inspired phenomenon and its root-causes are not of religious order, he furthered, stressing that recent wars, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Sudan, presented good opportunities for sympathizers to extremist ideology to obtain military training and acquire arms and explosive materials.

The second factor in boosting terrorism is the fact that some European and Arab countries have provided a safe haven for these organizations under cover of preserving human rights. He revealed that more than 650 terrorists in Britain were granted political Asylum, and that the UK is currently in process to release the perpetrators of the dirty bomb attack on its territory. He added that if those terrorist elements were not given political asylum, the scene in Europe nowadays would have been different. He mentioned that the Muslim Brotherhood organization who had taken refuge in Europe has flourished by gaining funds and controlling lodges of Islamic research centers abroad politically and financially supported by host countries.

He continued that based on his experience in countering terrorist organizations, none was as dangerous as ISIL is today. Unlike other extremist groups, ISIL has gained a significant swath of territory (25% of Syria and 45% of Iraq), controls oil fields and crude is the group's biggest source of revenue, along with kidnaping ransoms and the jizya tax imposed on Christians. He warned that ISIL possesses dangerous weapons that could destroy countries, and some of it is aggressively pursuing the development of chemical weapons, creating a team dedicated to research and experiment using the internet.

He stated that confronting violent extremism must be done on several levels :

– The religious confrontation : confronting the phony and erroneous interpretations of Islamic beliefs and practices used by extremist organizations to polarize youth. While Allam emphasized the need to update Islamic jurisprudence, he refused views about developing Islam suggested by some colleagues. He added that our societies need to update Islamic concepts, blaming the historic stalemate in this field on the religious authority.

– The legislative confrontation: Enacting terrorism-specific laws has become necessary in order to achieve a balance between society's need for security and stability and the rights and freedom of citizens.

– Confrontation via the media: Establishing an on-going media policy of confronting terrorism. There are various roles media can play to confront the problem of terrorism by disseminating well-founded opinions, raising basic issues related to terrorism and engaging citizens as an essential tool in confronting this phenomenon.

– The security level: Although it is now agreed that security measures alone are not enough to confront terrorism, it should also be noted that such security measures should be the last stage in the process of confronting terrorism. Security agencies must be supported and empowered appropriately considering the scale of the challenge involved and they also must be availed of all assistance enabling them to perform their role with greater efficiency and competency. He noted that care must be taken to ensure that security measures adopted to confront this phenomenon do not lead to an escalation of the problem.

Allam concluded by stressing the need of establishing an international body that includes experts representing the countries that are most impacted by terrorism, charged with studying the underlying causes of violent extremism in order to implement a comprehensive strategy to counter this phenomenon.

General Shehtly started his contribution by defining extremism as being a deviation from what is usual and trendy, noting that extremism is not constrained to a religion's ideology but could be inspired by a range of political, social and economic beliefs.

Shehtly refused to associate terrorism with Islam owing to the actions of a few radical Muslim individuals who have taken it upon themselves to do the most heinous crimes in the name of Islam, defaming Islam by their deeds. While distinguishing between radicalization and religious piety and observance of the Islamic statutes, he said that according to Islamic teachings, the extremist is a person who oversteps the boundaries of the Sharia in all aspects of life. He added that the authoritarian trend of radical movements and their intolerance against anyone, individual or government, who refuses to apply their harsh and regressive interpretation of Islam, denies any possibility of political negotiation with them.

He stressed that this ideological extremism has two pillars: An outright anti-western stance that considers the West as responsible of all ill-deeds in the world, and a self-inflating attitude stating that only Muslims can engage the process of human reformation. He laid out grievances that extremists capitalize on to promote their ideology, namely:

– The continued Israeli occupation of Arab lands and the failure to implement a just solution to the Palestinian issue

– Increased threats to the holy sites in Jerusalem

– The Western control over the Arabic countries' natural resources

– Political despotism, unjust ruler, lack of democracy and the suppression of freedoms

– Cable television's massive spread, which play a crucial role in diffusing extremist ideology and deepening sectarian rift

– Poverty caused by political and administrative corruption and the waste of the countries' resources.

– Extremists' infiltration into the educational system, which made pupils vulnerable to recruitment

– The existence of internal and external parties that sponsor these extremist organizations and use them in proxy-wars

Amidst the current violent extremism rampage in many parts of the world and the subsequent acts of terrorism, he stressed the need of implementing a joint and comprehensive global strategy to counter this phenomenon, starting with the adoption of a preventive policy through understanding the political, social, economic

and cultural drivers of this trend in order to address them ; investing in education and instigating an inclusive development of the education system ; strengthening the role of Islamic religious authority in countering extremism through awareness raising regarding the real essence of Islam ; engaging non-Islamic religious authority in raising awareness among believers about real Islam ; emphasizing the role of media in the waged battle against violent extremism.

As for deterrence measures to counter extremism, he mentioned : The exchange of information between countries ; the need to invest in enhancing the security services efficiency and readiness both at the military and ideological level ; enact special legislation to deter terrorism. He also underscored the role of the United Nations in countering terrorism by taking crucial action under Chapter VII against any State or institution or group classified as terrorist or providing support for acts of terrorism, and first and foremost, the need to reach a unified definition for terrorism that differentiates between the rightful resistance against occupation and terrorism.

Finally, with terrorism gaining an international dimension, he stressed the need to amend the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols to suit the nature of modern asymmetric warfare between nations and terrorist groups and how to deal with individuals or groups classified as terrorists.

Taylor began his contribution by asserting that a deep scrutiny of terrorism requires overweighing an array of factors and restraining from adopting prior interpretations to ascertain its nature without monitoring factual baselines that elucidate its essence. He outlined a series of fundamental points that might help to understand violent extremism and could contribute to the development of systematic initiatives to counter it. He said that the starting point in the process of understanding this phenomenon is the adoption of the principle of "do no harm" through resorting to rational rather than emotional analysis to ensure its clarity.

The second point is trying to figure out whether the goals of violent extremism are collective and violence is used as a tactic in an ongoing war or they are individual. The third point is determining what behavior is problematic? Maintaining fundamentalist beliefs or putting deeds by ones words? Who is the enemy: non-violent extremists or violent extremists ?

He stressed the need to detect the short-term individual factors playing on the emergence of violent extremism (live events, local conditions) which may be different from the long-term factors affecting the massive violent extremism (ideological, social and environmental). He talked about the importance of revisiting prevailing ideas about leadership and responsibility within mainstream extremist groups, and acknowledging that it is currently a networked structure instead of being a hierarchical command/control structure. He said that the reasons behind the emergence of violent extremism in the West (foreign fighters) are different from those in other communities, and every community should take it upon itself to recognize the local root-causes that have contributed to the emergence of violent extremism in order to be able to confront it.

Taylor also underscored the need to recognizing the role of the internet as element of network based violent extremism and a critical tool for spreading extremist ideology and propaganda. He also underlined the need to understanding the relationship between online and personal contact which can be mutually supportive and very powerful. Additionally, we should comprehend the emotional context of propaganda to implement a similar one in counter narratives.

He talked about the existence of similar characteristics between individuals who have chosen the path of violent extremism, revealing that most Westerners who have gone this route have previous criminal records, which could, according to him, indicate a pre-existing marginal life. He added that we should not overestimate the role of religion as initiator, as opposed to motivator or director once someone is already involved in violent extremism. He also highlighted the difference between people born into and brought up in a religious environment, where there is a limited

sense of choice, and converts who have made a choice. He also noted the significance of personal psychological factors and mental health as push factors, especially in the case of foreign fighters.

Speaking about initiatives that have been adopted so far to confront extremism, he considered that none was a winning strategy, proposing a series of questions that could be used as a road map to draft viable initiatives to contain violent extremism :

– What are the goals of these initiatives : Altering beliefs and behavior changing ? What is the measure of success : to stop violent acts or deterring the extremist ideology that drives this violence ?

– Whom these initiatives are reaching : Are they preventive aiming to reach the would-be extremists or they focus on the rehabilitation of those already involved in violent extremism ? Should they reach people who advocate terrorism or persons who are already engaged in violent acts ? Do they have to engage with extremists' broader families ? What are the foundations to be adopted in developing a strategy to contain violent extremism ? Should it use religion or should it focus on the economic factors ?

He concluded by emphasizing the need for post-release monitoring to detect recidivism and strengthening the process of reintegration into society.

The debate started with some participants praising the speakers' emphasis on distinguishing between terrorism and radicalization, saying that countering each one of these two trends needs a different philosophical approach. They stressed the necessity to view the spread of an ideology of radical extremism with a degree of urgency comparable to the way we view the spread of violent groups animated by that ideology, highlighting the global threat of extremist organizations. Others said that while security measures are a critical part of a comprehensive counter-terrorism approach, they alone are insufficient; they emphasized the necessity of understanding the general context that has laid the groundfield for the emergence of violent extremism, especially in what pertains to the Sunni victimization and marginalization.

Acknowledging that Britain has become a safe haven for terrorists, they said that some of those have returned to their home country repented and open minded. They refused to denounce Britain asylum policy, asserting that the core problem is related to the prevailing situation in our communities. They added that the absence of religious authority, particularly among the Sunnis, left the field open for extremist interpretations of religion, saying that strengthening religious institutions has become an urgent task while ensuring their autonomy. Additionally, they refused to brand all Islamic movements as extremist and terrorist, noting that declaring Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group in Egypt is at the core of all problems plaguing this country.

Other participants warned against Arab regimes using security and counter-terrorism measures to crackdown on civil liberties, imperiling the Arab people's gains at this level and bolstering terrorism, stressing that Arab societies have had their fair share of violence.

Fourth session :

“Terrorism through the eye of the Arab world”

The fourth session started by its director Sam Menassa introducing the speakers, Oraib Al Rantawi, Founder and Director of Al Quds Center for Political Studies, Safa Hussein, Deputy National Security Adviser in Iraq and Ubeidly Ubeidly, journalist and researcher.

Menassa opened the session by quoting journalist Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, who said that “not all Muslims and Arabs are terrorists, but today most of the acts of terrorism are carried out by Muslims.” He explained that it was necessary to end the meeting by reviewing Arabs' standpoint pertaining to violent extremism, in light of their current confused and blurred stance towards extremist Islamic movements in particular and terrorism in general.

Maj. Gen. Hussein began his intervention by distinguishing between religious extremism, extremism, and terrorist organizations, defining the latter as religious, military and political groups which brand themselves as Salafist and jihadist, and seek to establish an Islamic state using terrorism as a means to achieve this end. He said that terrorist organizations such as ISIL, and Al-Nusra Front and al-Qaida, share the goal of establishing an Islamic state, but are using different tactics to reach this goal.

He pointed out that all attempts to combat terrorism have failed, wondering about the where and why of this shortfall. Talking about the Iraqi experience with terrorism, he outlined three decisive periods :

- Pre-emergence of terrorist organizations phase : It started in the nineties when Iraq was under a UN Security Council system of comprehensive embargo. The consequences of the embargo have been catastrophic for the people and the economy of Iraq, and the country struggled with an increase in poverty rates. The Saudi humanitarian aids began then to flow to the country going directly to some mosques which become later on a hotbed for Salafists. He stated that the former regime militarized the society and escalated its crackdown against political dissidents using harsh and cruel measures including beheading and mutilation. He added that the perilous security vacuum in some areas produced an environment conducive to the growth and success of armed extremist organizations such as Ansar al-Islam and Jamaat al-Tawhid and Jihad, which mutated into al-Qaida in Iraq. As for the lessons learned from this phase, Hussein highlighted the danger of linking humanitarian aid to broader political goals ; when a foreign party capitalizes on a country's dire economic conditions and uses aid as a political tool, this could contribute to the emergence of terrorism. Additionally, he underscored the danger of indiscriminate arrests on terrorist related charges, which could make of innocents an easy prey for recruitment by extremist groups especially in prisons.

- The aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq phase : The second phase began with the US invasion of Iraq and continued until 2006. This phase saw the emergence of groups who took up the banner of resistance against the occupation, which emboldened terrorist organizations to follow into their steps using nationalist sentiment as a trap for recruitment and sectarian rift as a selling point. Alternatively, the US military withdrawal from vital areas led to a vacuum that terrorist organizations were eager and ready to fill. As to lessons learned from this phase, Hussein stressed that foreign interference often breeds terrorism, allowing terrorist organizations to wield control over populated areas.

- The third phase, between 2006-2015, witnessed the beginning of the defeat of terrorist organizations for many reasons, the first being the Sunnis rejecting al-Qaeda regressive rule and their backlash against the groups' handgrip on their regions ; secondly, the divergence between Indigenous, and Arab and foreign insurgents mainly caused by cultural and social differences, and thirdly the continued military and security pressure on al-Qaida and its offspring.

He concluded by explaining the internal and external reasons behind the recent rise of ISIL. Regarding internal reasons and in addition to corruption and ill-management, Hussein cited the inability and incompetence of local police to deal with terrorist organizations, coupled with the federal police reticence to intervene fearing to incite animosity with Sunni citizens as most of its manpower are Shia. As to external reasons, he said that the civil war in Syria, which turned to become a proxy war, has left the region open to terrorist organizations. They gained control of heavy and hi-tech weapons along with financial capacity through controlling oil fields in Syria and Iraq. With that caveat in mind, ISIL is no longer a mere terrorist organization, but one that operates like an army.

In his presentation, Rantawi outlined the most important points that must be taken into account when developing a counterterrorism strategy :

- A counter-terrorism initiative requires the adoption of a comprehensive and multidimensional approach addressing the various political, social, economic, cultural, religious and educational factors, which have contributed to the spread of terrorism ; otherwise it will be meant to fail.

- A concerted and unified response to deter terrorism in Arab states is impossible due to domestic divergences. Rantawi rejected the proposal of enacting special anti-terrorism laws, positing that they could be used by regimes to crackdown on civil liberties under the guise of counter-terrorism for self-serving political ends.

- The need to reach a bare minimum national consensus on counter-terrorism and deradicalization.

- The need to set key benchmarks for political reform and engage in the democratization process, as it was proven that the lack of political participation has fostered increased radicalization among disaffected. He called for establishing a secular rule in Arab countries, urging the Arab elite to be bold in clinging to this crucial plea.

- The need to rethink the stance towards political Islam and abstaining from portraying all mainstream Islamist political movements as terrorists. He slammed the massive campaign waged in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood because of their old ideology. He emphasized that during the last decade the Muslim Brotherhood has embraced a more open rhetoric espousing democracy and reform ; thereafter they should not be equated with other terrorist organizations.

- The need of stepping in the role of societal actors and engaging stakeholders in civil society in counter-ideology efforts to alter Islamists' narrative with persuasive counter-arguments and contribute to remodel their rigid worldview.

- To promote dialogue with these organizations and capitalize on internal fringe in the persuasion process.

- The need to address the chronic economic and marginalization problems, along with bridging the gap between the poor and the rich, fighting corruption and finding new horizons for young people enabling them to live in dignity.

- The need to undertake a comprehensive reform of the education system including curricula, as nowadays, the diverse streams of education in the Arab world are considered as a factor for facilitating the process of radicalization, graduating pro-ISIL students as they fail short in building resilience against the groups' impact.

- The need to strengthening religious institutions and reforming curricula in religious school and faculties which according to him, graduate pro-ISIL militants. Speaking about Jordan, Rantawi said no one can prevent the building of mosques in the kingdom, and their number have reached 7000, knowing that Jordan has only 2400 credited preachers. He casted doubt about the affiliation of preachers filling the gap to cover the 7000 mosques.

- He concluded by pointing out the responsibility of the West in spurring violent extremism in the region, saying that one of the things that really does play into the hands of terrorists is the western double standards foreign policy in dealing with Middle Eastern problems.

In his intervention, Ubeidly said that terrorism is not a new phenomenon in human experience, adding that throughout history it has been used by dissidents and had threatened the stability of societies and their peaceful coexistence. He refused tying terrorism to Islam, stressing that the wave of terrorism we are witnessing today is not a unique or exceptional case, as political violence has been a significant part of social and political relations since the oldest civilizations.

Amid continued terror attacks, an unprecedented terrorists' military prowess and a widespread radical indoctrination which ignore age and societal boundaries, he underscored the failure of all counter-terrorism initiatives. He added that crafting an effective counter-terrorism Strategy requires following three main steps :

- Reaching consensus over a unified definition of terrorism.

- Undertaking a throughout diagnosis of the underlying root causes and factors behind this phenomenon and its persistence.
- Developing and implementing a viable and sustainable counter-terrorism strategy.

Noting the existing divergence in defining terrorism and perceiving terrorists, he said that the causes behind terrorism are varied, and can be of psychological, cultural, political, and economic nature. Nonetheless, we can detect local and external causes. Outlining the local causes, he mentioned tough economic conditions, poverty and social injustice, marginalization, misconception of religious and political ideologies seeing in violence the only means to reach goals, despotism and lack of political participation particularly among young people, lack of political pluralism and alternation of power, in addition to widespread corruption, lack of civil liberties and the systematic violation of human rights.

As for the external causes, Ubeidly talked about the foreign occupation, the shock of modernity and cultural alienation as a result of globalization, the ruling zeitgeist and the unequal distribution of global power that dominates the unipolar world-system, in addition to regional conflicts that were catalyst for the emergence of terrorist organizations.

Speaking about counter-terrorism efforts, he pointed out that the absence of a general consensus on the definition of terrorism makes of deterring this phenomenon almost an impossible task. Nonetheless, he presented a counter-terrorism strategy founded on the following principles :

- Fully understanding the root causes of terrorism
- Counter-terrorist policies which are only based on security military measures are unproductive and will breed new generations of more violent radicals.
- Implementing political agendas able to address the upstream causes of terrorism
- Strengthening the role of de-politicized civil society organizations
- Promoting substantive political reform that emphasizes pluralistic governance, as an exclusive rule will very likely foster increased radicalization among disaffected
- Promote dialogue with terrorist organizations through the so-called “persuasive ways.”

He concluded by reiterating his stance stating that terrorism is not a radical religious phenomenon fueled by anti-western culture sentiment, stressing that all initiatives forged by western powers to mitigate this growing threat were doomed to fail because rather than addressing terrorism root causes they contributed to trigger them. He finally called on Arab countries to seriously participate in the fight against terrorism by implementing a broader and independent Arab strategy which gives the upper hand to Arab interests.

In the discussion, some participants considered that Salafist movements should have been represented at this conference to speak out about the topic, emphasizing the role of religious leaders in countering violent extremism. Others praised mentioning the western double standards policy towards terrorism, arguing that the West does not consider the daily killing of thousands of people in Syria as an act of terrorism, while the death of hundreds in a lonely operation, triggered global condemnation and prompted the intervention of air and ground forces.

Finally, Mneimneh presented a conclusive overview of the meeting’s outcomes, after briefly talking about the history of religious reform in Islam. He said that the ambiguity that surrounded the discussion pertaining to violent extremism is due to the complexity of this trend, stressing however that further similar meetings will try to shed light on the problematic issues identified while discussing the psychological, social and cultural aspects of this phenomenon.

Menassa announced the closure of the conference, appreciating the input of all the attendees and participants and promising further alike fruitful meetings.

La Maison du Futur intends to organize future events to ensure a follow-up and continuation on problematic issues identified in this meeting :

- There is a gap between the West and the East when it comes to explaining violent extremism and combatting it that needs to be tackled.
- The need to reform religious institutions in the Arab and Islamic world and to engage religious leaders in the fight of violent extremism.
- The need to achieve political reform and good governance in the Arab World.
- Reforming educational programs in general and sharia faculties programs in particular.
- Reviewing immigration laws.