

September 2017

## Improving Understanding of the Roots and Trajectories of Violent Extremism

Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief

The U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, together with the National Center for Scientific Research of France (CNRS) and the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), convened a workshop in Paris on **June 20-21, 2017**, to consider the roots and trajectories of violent extremism. The goal was to identify common interests and priorities that could provide the basis for sustained cooperation involving research, analysis, and field investigations. Such a collaborative effort would contribute both to improved international understanding of the challenges posed by outbreaks of violent extremism and to the development of promising strategies and programs to reduce the global threats associated with the upsurge in outbreaks in a number of regions of the world.

On the eve of the workshop, President of CNRS **Alain Fuchs** and his colleagues who were hosts for the workshop introduced the U.S. and Russian workshop participants to the recently launched CNRS initiative that has expanded significantly its research activities in France of direct relevance to the widely publicized incidents of violence in Europe and to the growing threats in other areas of the world.

At the beginning of the workshop, **Valery Tishkov**, president of the Russian Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, highlighted the contributions of earlier U.S.-Russian academic collaboration in promoting research on conflict in multiethnic societies and in improving the framework and priorities for academic research. Of particular importance was a landmark report on conflict and reconstruction developed by leading specialists from Russia and the United States 14 years earlier (National Research Council, 2004).<sup>1</sup> The current revival of cooperation provides an opportunity to build on the earlier analyses.

Also in introductory remarks, **Glenn Schweitzer** of the National Academies reported on the topics of special interest when Russian and American experts met during an exploratory workshop in Moscow in November 2016, following a pause in U.S.-Russia collaboration concerning terrorism and violent extremism of more than a decade. The participants considered a number of contemporary issues that set the stage for the deliberations in Paris. Topics of special interest in Moscow included (1) collection, organization, and use of high-quality data concerning the drivers of violence in specific situations; (2) criteria for setting priorities for research at the national and international levels; (3) importance of case studies, and particularly methodologies that have been used, in considering developments in specific regions in turmoil; and (4) processes of radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters. Several participants in the workshop in Moscow urged that future dialogues include researchers from France, a widely held sentiment of many in attendance. Figure 1 reflects anxieties in Europe concerning the spread of violent extremism.

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<sup>1</sup>Conflict and Reconstruction in Multiethnic Societies: Proceedings of a Russian-American Workshop. Washington, DC. The National Academies Press, 2003 (<http://doi.org/10.1722/10879>).



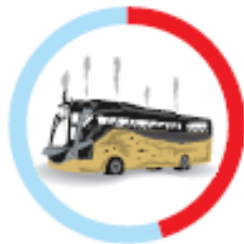
**Figure 1** Strasbourg, France - November 14, 2015: French Police checking vehicles on the 'Bridge of Europe' between Strasbourg and Kehl, Germany, as a security measure in the wake of attacks in Paris. Photo credit: Adrian Hancu.

## SESSION 1: ROOTS, PROFILES, AND CASE STUDIES OF OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

**Scott Atran** (CNRS Institut Jean Nicod-Ecole and University of Michigan) reported on “devoted actors,” who adhere to sacred or transcendent values that generate terrorist actions that quickly exceed rationally expected outcomes, calculated costs and consequences, and risks and rewards. ISIS approaches in Iraq, the behavior of radicalized populations in Morocco, and activities of an al Qaeda affiliate in Spain are examples of developments that spiraled out of control amidst collapsing and conflicting cultural traditions in the search by malcontents for salvation and escape from what they consider to be the dark side of globalization. Atran argued that for devoted actors, the search for comradery with like-minded individuals and the willingness to accept personal sacrifice in the search for salvation are not only personal goals but also a response to global efforts to prevent the collapse of cultural traditions.

**Vitaly Naumkin** (Russian Institute of Oriental Studies) discussed the ISIS outsourcing of Jihadism—arranging for some foreign fighters to travel to Syria and Iraq while others remain at home where they can do the bidding of ISIS. In 2014, ISIS began to establish Wilayats (geographical provinces) wherein groups from several Arab countries pledged allegiance to ISIS leadership, a practice that later spread to groups outside the Arab world, including factions in Central America and the Caucasus. Another example of outsourcing is the creation of world-wide on-line capabilities to send and receive messages that facilitate recruitment of fighters and IT specialists. Meanwhile, young women, who are ready to marry Jihadists and give birth to a new generation of fighters, are increasing in number while wives and widows of Jihadists are all too often used as “on-call” human bombs (Naumkin provided the information in Figure 2 as background for the discussions during the workshop).

**Sebastian Roche** (University of Grenoble) reported on a study of 12,000 adolescents (12-15 years old) in Bouchest-du-Rhone concerning determinants of attitudes that may lead to violent extremism. Two types of attitudes were of interest, namely de-identification with the nation/political community and justification in using violence against police and other ethnic groups. Based on several hypotheses (value incompatibility, deprivation, institutional alienation, social learning), the results indicate that each of the two attitudes (hostility toward the nation and justification of violence) is driven by a distinct model. World-wide economic and social variations must be considered to explain rejection of liberal values and the nation, Roche contended, while material variables explain adverse contacts with authorities and justification of violence.



**45%** of the world's terrorist attacks in 2014



**5%** of the world's population



**17.6%** of all global conflicts between 1948 and 2014

**Most devastated countries**



**57%** of the world's refugees, including Palestinian refugees, 2014



**47%** of world's internally displaced, 2014



**68%** of the world's battle-related deaths between 1989 and 2014

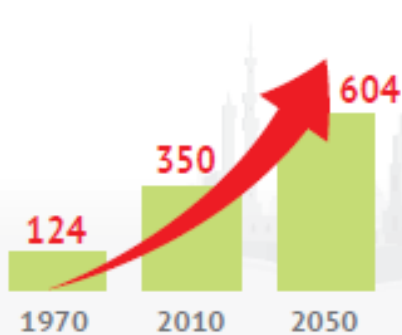


**21%** military spending rise since 2009

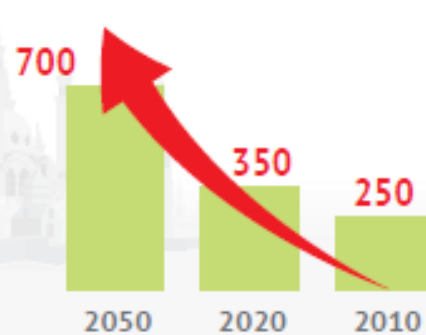


**30%** Youth unemployment in 2014

**Muslim population increase (mln)**



**Number of inhabitants living in countries vulnerable to conflict (mln)**



**Figure 2** The Arab region in figures.

Source: Vitaly Naumkin, presentation June 20, 2017, Paris, France. A. Aksenok, V. Kuznetsov, V. Naumkin, N. Soukhov, I. Zvyagelskaya. *The Middle East: Darkness Before the Dawn? Regional Conflicts and the Future of the Global Community*. The Valdai Club. Moscow, June 2017. The data were provided by the United Nations Development Program.

**Mohammed Hafez** (U.S. Naval Postgraduate School) discussed three hypotheses concerning the recruitment of German foreign fighters, namely (1) peer-to-peer social-network recruiting, (2) failed integration in Germany, and (3) online mobilization. Compelling evidence supports the social-networking theory, mixed evidence supports the integration-deficit theory, and meager evidence supports the on-line theory. Converts to Islam are substantially represented in the data. One interesting aberration indicates that young women are mainly recruited through on-line radicalization in contrast to the general experience concerning the use of IT. This idea might provide a template for other studies of foreign fighters in Europe, Hafez observed.

**Valery Tishkov** described indoctrination as the process of inculcating a person with ideas, attitudes, cognitive strategies, or professional methodologies, noting that it may represent a powerful universal mechanism of group control over individuals. Such control was relatively easy on the level of small-scale societies, but became more complicated in complex societies when members were not personally acquainted. This anonymity provides an environment for deception and manipulation of public attitudes and beliefs. With emergence of IT, there has been unprecedented opportunity for brainwashing and cult recruitment. The sensitivity to indoctrination has often been a factor in manipulation, group alienation, and terrorist practices, according to Tishkov.

**Wael Garnaoui** (University of Paris-Diderot) reported on his research to discover the various psychological, economic, political, and other factors that prevail when young Tunisians are attracted to two “elsewhere” locations—Europe for a better material life and Jihadism for promises of a “beyond” ideal. The target group for his investigations includes Tunisian illegal migrants, Jihad candidates, and ghosts of the various Jihadi channels. Departures—whether to Europe or to Jihad—are high risk, but those leaving have high expectations (western paradise or heavenly paradise), Garnaoui observed. His presentation reviewed data analysis to date and clinical observations to support the hypothesis that the two reasons for departing diverged completely, with the only common element being a desire to leave Tunisia.

## SESSION 2: NEW METHODOLOGIES FOR FIGHTING EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

**Thomas Pickering** (Hills and Company) underscored that nowhere has violent extremism been more of a problem than in the Middle East. Deeply entangled in civil conflict in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya, it provides a knotty tangle of forces and contention for military leaders, diplomats, researchers, and analysts. In dealing with Daesh there may be no military solution, but the implication that there is a diplomatic path forward is also fraught with uncertainty. Police and intelligence officials, in dealing with Daesh’s franchise network along with violent activities in Russia, Europe, and North America, are in need of better understanding, authoritative assessments, and fresh recommendations. Of critical importance, Pickering said, is development and acceptance of an agreed vision of a long-term solution, which is essential if short-term steps are to lead down a meaningful pathway.

**Nadia Marzouki** (CNRS, CESPRA EHESS) argued that programs for countering violent extremism are based on the assumption that adhering to moderate religious tenets results in moderate political behavior. However, scholars of religion and social science have long dismantled the idea of a causal relationship between the intensity of religious practice/belief and the radicalness of political attitudes. Also, national security agencies in Europe and the United States have ample evidence that individuals committing acts of violence are rarely the most fervent or educated believers. The way this correlation was constructed in the U.S. Executive Order of January 2017 banning entry into the United States of travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries is of interest. Also of interest in this regard is the contention in this approach that radicalization and radicalness are systematically assimilated, Marzouki added.

**Irina Staradubrovskaya** (Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy) reported on several aspects of her eight years of research in the Muslim republics of the North Caucasus, with particular attention to the involvement of Muslim youth in different civil society activities. One of her many important findings was that different Islamic ideologies are in competition for followers, and Muslims can become either more or less radicalized depending on their choices among them. She suggested that state policies distinguishing between various ideologies can often strengthen the positions of moderates and weaken the positions of Jihadists. In considering de-radicalization measures, Staradubrovskaya believed that a complete change of values is unrealistic, particularly when protest ideology is in demand. If a decision on individual disengagement is based on a cost/benefit analysis, state policy can significantly affect the outcome.

**Erin Fitzgerald** (University of Maryland) reported that while security-relevant research is supported through many science-funding organizations and carried out by scholars world-wide, some mission-oriented government agencies in the United States, such as the Department of Defense (DoD), also support academic research relevant to violent extremism. The motivations for these investments include identifying research questions that otherwise would be missed, incentivizing researchers to focus on fields of critical relevance to the agency’s mission, and fostering a community of potential subject matter experts on defense topics and global regions of particular interest. As an example, the

DoD Minerva program funds research on the social and cultural forces shaping conflict to inform more effective security policy and engagement. Most grants support multidisciplinary (and sometimes multinational) teams. The program emphasizes communicating findings to policy makers and the public, as well as to the scientific community.

**Elena Filippova** (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology) described two major Russian national-level databases, namely (1) the Russian index of scientific citations, and (2) the scientific electronic library of dissertations and author reports. During the past 20 years, with the beginning of the Chechen war, there has been considerable growth in the interest of the research community in the spread of terrorism. Since June 2011, 10,000 relevant publications have been added to these databases. The majority of publications are in the fields of law and political science; but also included are efforts by sociologists, philosophers, historians, psychologists, economists, and language specialists. However, she observed, poor theoretical frameworks, the lack of in-depth analyses and on-the-ground case studies, and an insufficient number of dedicated journals and research centers or networks limit synergy and interdisciplinary approaches.

### SESSION 3: REGIONAL CONTEXT AND GEOPOLITICS OF EXTREMISM

**William Courtney** (Rand Corporation) stated that while he believes the West could do more to assist Central Asian countries in countering violent extremism, cooperation is not a high priority. Some countries in the region are reluctant to acknowledge vulnerabilities, social service entities are ill-equipped to step forward, and Russia resists Western involvement. Given these realities, what can be done by Central Asians and the West to reduce risk? One strategy, he believes, is to build resilience of vulnerable populations through such steps as improving education and implementing economic reforms that lead to the creation of jobs. Deradicalization and reintegration could comprise a second strategy, but both processes require substantial effort and expertise in the social and security spheres. Most Central Asian governments lack resources or the commitment for these steps. Western governments, the United States, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Courtney noted, could help in strengthening regional law enforcement and judicial capabilities, combating recruitment of young fighters from the region to join Daesh, and investigating networks of concern.

**Hosham Dawood** (CNRS Institute of Contemporary Anthropology) discussed his experiences in Mosul, as a researcher and as a front-seat observer of death and destruction in that city. Relying on freshly drawn maps of Mosul overlaid on Google imagery, Dawood documented the complexities of the battle for each block of the city as he spoke. Focusing on the role of tribes within the broad society, he emphasized the different roles of the tribes allied with the Organization of Islamic States and the roles that the tribes will play in a post-Daesh period, which many not be a post-Jihad period.

**Vasily Kuznetsov** (Institute of Oriental Studies) reported his findings in Tunisia. The argument that the central government succeeded in destroying the country's tribal structure does not hold up in some regions of the country where a distinctive tribal identity has been preserved. Some radical Jihadist groups have positioned themselves as opposed to traditional tribal structures, but more often Jihadist ideas have become accepted by traditionally weak groups in their attempts to penetrate informal markets. At the same time, Jihadist ideologies allow these groups to operate beyond the local scene and seek partners at the regional level as well. Kuznetsov argued that these processes have produced a causal triangle in which Jihadist ideology strengthens the shadow economy, raising considerable concern over the expanding role of smugglers and other related concerns.

**Matthieu Cimino** (University of Oxford, IREMAM-CNRS) reported on a case study of educational strategies in the city of Manbij, Syria, that revealed the institutional practices of Daesh, acting through its "Ministry of Education" (diwan at-ta-'lim), to create and maintain an educational system. The research project documents the significance and objectives of the Ministry's overall education program directed to grades equivalent to 4 through 12. In an effort to understand ISIS's nationalist ideology and the conception of alterity (i.e., definition of identity and representation of the "other"), the project reviewed a 2015-2016 series of textbooks obtained and distributed by the Ministry. The books were produced locally and covered a wide range of topics, from English language and theology to biology and mathematics.

**Nikolay Plotnikov** (Institute of Oriental Studies) expressed concern over the deepening of the water crisis throughout the Middle East. It is particularly severe in Syria, where desertification threatens 60 percent of the territory. There are no rivers in Yemen, which has a constant water deficit. The volume of water losses in Jordan is staggering. In Iraq the water and irrigation systems are in a catastrophic state. Even if the battles over terrorism come to an end, the states of the region will have to solve the water crisis. Many approaches have been suggested and attempted—desalination, pump and water supply stations, cross-border water channels, sewage treatment plants, drip irrigation, and

abandonment of water-consuming plants. But much greater effort is needed now throughout the region, Plotnikov concluded.

## SESSION 4: DOMESTIC AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

**Akhmet Yarlykapov** (Moscow State University of International Relations) addressed ISIS networks in Russia: their causes, roots, and routes. Russian Muslims from the North Caucasus are joining ISIS because of the deep systemic crisis in the region—economic troubles, corruption, lack of social justice, absence of trust, and little social support. In late 2014, ISIS called for terrorists to leave the region; and many moved south. Then in 2016, ISIS began to finance terrorists in the North Caucasus to carry out local attacks. Even though ISIS has been losing territories in Syria and Iraq, it is achieving success in creating networks on Russian soil, Yarlykapov believes.

**Tamar Mitts** (University of Michigan) reported on her research examining the link between anti-Muslim hostility and pro-ISIS radicalization in Europe. Employing new geo-referenced social media data on the online behavior of thousands of Islamic State supporters in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Belgium, she showed that local-level, off-line measures of anti-Muslim hostility strongly correlate with pro-ISIS radicalization online. Her research shows that, in areas where anti-Muslim hostility is high, Islamic State supporters tend to post a greater number of social media messages sympathizing with ISIS, discussing foreign fighters, and expressing anti-West sentiment. An analysis of high-frequency data surrounding events that stir anti-Muslim hostility, such as terrorist attacks and anti-Muslim protests, shows the same pattern.<sup>2</sup>

**Robert Axelrod** (University of Michigan) discussed the strengths and weaknesses of automated text analysis in anti-terrorism research. In addition to social media, there is a wide range of textual materials that can be exploited for anti-terrorism research, including periodicals, policy statements, and governmental records. Meanwhile, the capabilities of automated text analysis are increasing rapidly due to advances in machine translation, natural language understanding, and artificial intelligence. However, much remains to be done. For example, better techniques are needed to provide good causal arguments in a text. Also, if and when terrorists use malware, forensic analysis of the source code should be able to employ text-based techniques to help identify the authorship or at least the provenance of the malware.

**Victor Shnirelman** (Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology) analyzed various manifestations of religious violence in Russia, with particular attention to Russian Orthodox fundamentalist movements. Nowadays Russian Orthodox fundamentalists strongly support an established social order with loyalty toward the state. However, he stated that they attack LGBT people, use volunteer patrols to secure holy places from blasphemous acts, and protest exhibitions, performances, and movies which in their view violate moral norms. At the same time their aggressive actions are not condemned and sometimes are even approved by certain priests, according to Shnirelman.

**Gary LaFree** (U.S. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism) reported that few studies have sought to apply criminological theories to the analysis of individual-level political extremism. Using newly available data on Profiles of Individual Radicalization (PIRUS), tests have shown that variables derived from prominent criminological theories are helpful in distinguishing between violent and nonviolent extremists. According to the tests, individuals with stable employment, higher education, and ongoing marriages are significantly less likely to be engaged in violent extremism. On the other hand, individuals with radical peers or radical family members, histories of mental illness, or criminal records are more likely to be engaged in violent extremism. LaFree argued that terrorism research would benefit from considering radicalizations as a dynamic evolving process much as life-course criminology does.

**Farhad Khosrokhavar** (CNRS EHEES) focused on the urban dimension of extremism, which is a critical aspect in understanding Jihadism in some of the North African and European countries. It is possible to distinguish between developments in poor districts, with high proportions of unemployed migrants of the first, second, or third generations, and middle-class districts with other social and economic problems at the top of the priority list of concerns. Khosrokhavar analyzed the diversity of profiles among Jihadists taking into account their urban environment, and observed that incarceration in prison provides an important venue for radicalization. In some major prisons, 60 percent of the inmates come from poor districts.

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<sup>2</sup>Mitts, Tamar, From Isolation to Radicalization: Anti-Muslim Hostility and Support for ISIS in the West (March 31, 2017). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2795660>.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This section highlights a few sample comments by individual workshop participants during discussion sessions that followed each presentation. Opinions and statements are solely those of individual participants and do not necessarily represent the views of other workshop participants, the planning committee, or the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Sample observations of individual participants on carrying out and combating violent extremism:

- Foreign fighters who have been recruited in distant countries or regions have generally been well-educated young men, often recruited in groups, and often seeking recognition of their noble purpose rather than remaining anonymous with no purpose.
- Many foreign fighters have become disenchanted with their status and try to return home, a challenge that can lead to execution. Some have married women from abroad, and wives often have an easier time leaving with their children than do foreign fighters.
- Extremist groups need territory and finances. While territory can be lost and finances can be difficult to arrange, in the Middle East there are always new areas for activities.
- Understanding local context is essential to combat Jihadist movements.
- Often urban residents dominate disaffected populations, prisons provide many Jihadist recruits, and small countries are most open to migrants with unknown intentions.
- A long-term regional security framework is important if the strategies of the western countries in addressing violent extremism are to be effective in the long term.
- The impact of social media is a priority area for research, although it is difficult to come up with reasonable hypotheses that can be effectively tested.
- Research often threatens religious leaders, increasing risks for the researchers.
- Voter turnout may be a useful indicator of future governance trends.
- Access to water is of spiraling importance in the Middle East, and cross-border approaches to increase water availability can at times help reduce political tensions.
- Differentiating between first, second, and third generation migrants is often of critical importance in analyzing attitudes relevant to violent extremism.
- Jihadists are probably fewer than 100,000 in number, with annual budgets of less than \$10 million. Western governments have spent hundreds of billions of dollars in combating the Jihadists, and it is difficult to identify our successes. What are we doing wrong? (An unanswered question raised at the end of workshop by one participant.)

Sample observations of individual participants on organizational and procedural issues:

- Joint U.S., Russian, and French efforts provide a good basis for a broad range of research and analytical activities. The CNRS international research network across North Africa and the Middle East is an important asset. Decades of Soviet/Russian involvement in ethnic and religious relationships in Central Asia and adjacent areas can be very informative. The heavy U.S. military presence in the Middle East often influences personal perspectives.
- Information about well-documented, but little-known, research and about availability of rare but insightful documents can be useful to scholars around the world.
- Interactions between residents in areas in turmoil and local authorities that build mutual understanding and trust may be difficult to arrange but can have high payoff.
- General discussions during annual meetings of experts from the U.S., Russia, and France can be valuable, but such meetings can also benefit from reports on specific field investigations of mutual interest—and ideally jointly organized investigations.
- Providing international and national officials with results of well-designed research programs, and particularly research involving on-the-ground observations, deserves high priority.

**DISCLAIMER:** This Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief was prepared by **Glenn Schweitzer** as a factual summary of what occurred at the workshop. Gwynne Evans-Lomayeva provided assistance. The statements that are made are those of individual workshop participants and do not necessarily represent the views of all meeting participants, the Planning Committee, or the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

**PLANNING COMMITTEE:** **Thomas Pickering**, Hills and Company; **Gary LaFree**, U.S. National Consortium for Study of Terrorism; and **William Courtney**, Rand Corporation.

**Valery Tishkov**, Russian Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, and **Pascal Marty** of CNRS, also provided important inputs, with CNRS taking all of the suggestions into account in establishing the workshop agenda.

**REVIEWERS:** To ensure that the Proceedings-in-Brief meets institutional standards for quality and objectivity, it was reviewed in draft form by **Fabrice Boudjaaba**, National Center for Scientific Research of France; **Yoshiko Herrera**, University of Wisconsin-Madison; **Audrey Kurth Cronin**, American University; and **Valery Tishkov**, Russian Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology. The review comments and the draft manuscript remain confidential to protect the integrity of the process.

**SPONSORS:** The workshop was supported by the Richard Lounsbery Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Academy of Sciences Kellogg Fund, the Russian Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies, and CNRS. CNRS deserves special accolades for its organization and support of many of the workshop activities at its headquarters in Paris.

**SUGGESTED CITATION:** National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017, *Improving Understanding of the Roots and Trajectories of Violent Extremism. Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17226/24887>.

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