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Militant Islamism and Jihadism after the End of the 'Caliphate'

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KAS AND ISSAM FARES HOLD A CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE, AL QAEDA AND THEIR AFFILIATES IN ASIA, AFRICA AND EUROPE

In 2017, the Islamic State (ISIL) was defeated militarily and lost its major strongholds in Syria and Iraq. The group and its extreme ideology, however, continue to destabilize great parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. In fact, the Islamic State is currently undergoing a process of transformation from a quasi-state actor and service provider to a terrorist group that operates from the underground and in provinces (*wilayat*) around the world. The same holds true for Al Qaeda; while the Islamic State has dominated the world's attention for the past couple of years, Al Qaeda has quietly regrouped and expanded its transnational network in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Today, Al Qaeda can once again compete with the Islamic State in terms of influence and reach. To discuss the transformation of the Islamic State, the revival of Al Qaeda and the modus operandi of both their offshoots and franchises, the KAS Syria/Iraq office, in cooperation with the KAS Security Policy Dialogue Programme on Sub-Saharan Africa (SIPO-DI) and the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut organized a two-day conference titled "Militant Islamism and Jihadism After the End of the Caliphate". The international conference took place on March 19th and 20th, 2018 in Beirut and brought together 27 experts, academics and practitioners from the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the United States and Europe.

The conference was opened by Marian Wendt, Member of the Internal Affairs Committee in the German Bundestag. In his keynote speech, Marian Wendt outlined the current trends of international terrorism and elaborated on its effects on German as well as European security. He stressed that North Africa and the Middle East, particularly Syria and Iraq, form Europe's immediate neighborhood, making it essential for German foreign and security policy to strategically invest in the stability of this region. It is the weak states and the power vacuum, as Wendt argued, that allow radical groups to flourish at Europe's doorstep and to plan terrorist attacks on the West. Beyond a coherent foreign policy strategy, Marian Wendt called for a more unified and better-orchestrated intelligence and law-enforcement effort on both the German and European level. This will be especially important in coping with the threat returning foreign fighters pose to national security. On this note, Wendt disclosed that 350 German nationals returned from jihadi battlefields in the Middle East to Germany.

The first panel of the conference discussed the ideology, propaganda, recruitment and financial strategies of ISIL and Al Qaeda. Dr. Guido Steinberg from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) put forward his argument that the Islamic State and Al Qaeda follow two different ideological traditions. While Al Qaeda ranks its political interests and long-term strategy higher than theological arguments, the Islamic State is less pragmatic and focuses



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more on the immediate implementation of its puritanical, Wahabi-inspired theocratic system. According to Dr. Steinberg, this might lead to the longer prevalence of Al Qaeda on the battlefield, while the Islamic State might remain more attractive for potential followers and recruits due its ideology and short term promises. Jean-Charles Brisard, Founder and Chairman of the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (Paris), also identified major differences in the financial and resource management strategies of both organizations. Due to the territorial control of ISIL, the group was financially self-sufficient, exploiting oil, gas and mineral resources for its income. Moreover, as Brisard pointed out, the Islamic State put an efficient taxing and banking system in place that allowed it to have a highly flexible resource management scheme. Dr. Nelly Lahoud, the panel's chair from the Institute for International and Security Studies (Manama), added that these financial capabilities were part of the Islamic State's appeal to followers and potential recruits, since ISIL fighters were promised services, housing, and income that were very often lacking in their countries of origin.

The second panel analyzed the core organizations of ISIL and Al Qaeda after the fall of the caliphate. Christoph Reuter, Middle-East correspondent for the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, outlined ISIL's organizational structure and its internal security management. In particular, Reuter demonstrated how ISIL negotiated evacuation-deals in Raqqa and parts of Iraq and managed to regroup in terror-cells thereafter. Some continuous presence of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, he argued, might have been in the interest of the Assad-regime in Syria and other political parties in Iraq. In Reuter's view, however, the popular support on the ground as well as the operational efficiency and creativity seem to be gone. Dr. Anne Stenersen from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment stated that the overall structure and network of Al Qaeda has not undergone significant changes. However, the group has altered its approach in conducting

international terrorism: Inspired by ISIL, Al Qaeda turned away from massive attacks organized by the organization's top leaders and adopted a more flexible tactic that gives followers more leeway in executing individual, cost-effective attacks. Moreover, Al Qaeda has shifted its operational focus from Afghanistan/Pakistan to the Arab Middle East. Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler, Coordinator of the ISIL, Al Qaeda and Taliban Monitoring Team at the United Nations Security Council (New York), argued in his presentation that the post-caliphate networks of ISIL greatly resemble the structures of Al Qaeda and that these respective networks often cooperate on a tactical level. Mapping the worldwide reach of both ISIL and Al Qaeda, Dr. Schindler clarified that the core organizations only have a tenuous relationship to their global offshoots and, thus, have no effective command and control oversight. Both the cores of ISIL and Al Qaeda invest, however, in these affiliates or *wilayats* by sending money and trained fighters in order to strengthen their global grip.

Dr. Serhat Erkmen from the Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy (Ankara) opened the third panel, which focused on ISIL and Al Qaeda outside the Arab world and was chaired by Benedikt Seemann, Head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Team Asia and the Pacific. Dr. Erkmen elaborated on the transformation of the Turkish jihadist scene, especially since the Civil War in Syria. He explained that ISIL networks inside Turkey were built and based upon existing Al Qaeda structures, while terrorist activities and attacks were directly coordinated by ISIL's leadership in Syria and Iraq. Dr. Erkmen outlined that the many ISIL fighters fleeing Syria and Iraq and currently hiding in Turkey pose a particular security threat to Ankara, since they are difficult to track down and make easy targets for recruitment for terrorist attacks. Bennet Clifford from the George Washington University (Washington D.C), argued in the subsequent presentation that not very much has remained of ISIL and Al Qaeda in the Caucasus. In fact, Russia's

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extensive counter-terrorism operations eradicated Al Qaeda's "Caucasus Emirate", whereas ISIL's province has been significantly diminished by the relocation of fighters to Syria and Iraq, making Russia the biggest producer of foreign fighters for both ISIL and Al Qaeda. A significant number of fighters were also recruited in Central Asia, as Noah Tucker (George Washington University) illustrated. Approaching the issue from an anthropologist's point of view, Tucker identified economic grievances and social marginalization as major driving factors for joining ISIL or Al Qaeda. This is also true for Kazakhstan, a relatively wealthy country, where most recruits stem from single-purpose, single-industry towns that have lost their economic significance in recent years. Dr. Bilveer Singh, from the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore), highlighted the high degree of online radicalization and the heavily ideologized discourse in the South Asian context, with the epicenter of ISIL activity having shifted from Indonesia to the Philippines.

The second day of the conference began with a panel on the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the Arab World that chaired by Dr. Mohammedali Taha (Member of the Kurdish Regional Parliament of Iraq, Erbil) and President of Open Think Tank. Mona Alami, a non-Resident Fellow at the Atlantic Council, alluded to the specific regional drivers behind terrorism in Lebanon and Jordan: Major terror cells and activities have roots in radical Palestinian movements, while recent terrorist activities are instigated by geographical proximity to Syria as well as sectarian and geopolitical clashes that affect the entire region. Dr. Elisabeth Kendall, from Oxford University, focused on the resurgence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), particularly in Yemen. It is, in her view, the Saudi Arabian intervention in the civil war in Yemen that empowered militant jihadism there and led to organized jihadist crime networks in recent years. According to Dr. Kendall, the success of AQAP lies in its strategy of nurturing kinship ties to tribes, buying

the loyalties of cities and exerting only limited control over local populations, while praising local cultures, histories and narratives. Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler, in his presentation, examined the jihadist battleground in the Maghreb. He concluded that the traditional take-over strategy of the Islamic State did not succeed in Libya and neighboring states. However, IS in Libya is organized in a cell-network that operates especially in the Libyan border-regions, where it manages its human, fighters and weapons trafficking streams and threatens neighboring states, such as Tunisia and Algeria.

Tinko Weibezahl, Head of KAS Security Policy Dialogue Programme Sub-Saharan Africa (SIPODI), chaired the session on ISIL and Al Qaeda's Grip on Africa. In his remarks, he pointed to the worrisome demographic trends that are likely to exacerbate the economic imbalance and grievances in Sub-Saharan Africa. As Dr. Yan St. Pierre elaborated in his subsequent presentation, it is exactly this economic hardship that drives people into the arms of terrorist organizations. Other reasons and motivations include the quest for recognition and prestige in their communities, a will for revenge and ethnic rivalries. The Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Mali has, however, not gained traction in recent years as ISGS is relatively small and has a low frequency of attacks, while the relationship between the group and the ISIL-leadership in Syria and Iraq is rocky. The same is true for Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2015. Colonel Thomas Brillisauer, from the German Embassy in Nigeria, argued that the pledge of allegiance to ISIL had no real effect on Boko Haram. In fact, the allegiance can be interpreted as a sign of weakness and as an attempt to shine under the transnational brand of ISIL when Boko Haram's local legitimacy and social acceptance decreased. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that, according to Brillisauer, Boko Haram only profited in the field of propaganda, but displayed no significant improvement in its

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tactics or financial and military capabilities after the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State. Dr. Stig Jarle Hansen, Professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (Oslo) shed light on Al Shabaab in Somalia, an Al Qaeda affiliate since 2012. He explained the group's strategy of 'semi-territoriality' that guarantees its long-term persistence and high efficiency. The population awaits drastic sanctions (executions, starving communities) if it does not comply with the rules of Al Shabaab, at times partially controlled by the Somali Army. Moreover, Al Shabaab forces communities to fully integrate to the organization through marriage, recruitment of children and/or heavy taxation. Despite its affiliation to Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab has, as Dr. Hansen outlined, an explicit regional focus and nationalist agenda.

The last panel of the conference analyzed the terror threat that ISIL and Al Qaeda pose to Europe and Germany. Bernard Rougier, from the Sorbonne University (Paris III), underlined the importance of Salafist and political trends in the Muslim world to developments in the European jihadist scene. He identified the direct linkage of radical clerics and religious institutions in Muslim countries to Muslim societies in Europe as constituting a major problem that leads to radicalization, crime and violence, and alienates Muslims from the general European society. However, according to Rougier, the principles of secularism make it legally difficult to systematically counteract clerics' hate speech and incitement in mosques or other religious institutions. The European Union (EU) has put forward guiding principles to tackle the terrorist threat from a different angle, as Dinah Khwais from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Working Group on Terrorism and Domestic Security outlined. The EU's counterterrorism efforts focus on a better exchange of intelligence and data (such as entry, travel and criminal records) as well as secure and smart external borders that guarantee the free movement within Europe. Moreover, EUROPOL is at the forefront of blocking hate speech and radical content on the internet,

while the EU is more engaged, as Khwais pointed out, in creating viable economies and efficient state infrastructures in its immediate neighborhood. Alexander Lang, also from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Working Group on Terrorism and Domestic Security, ultimately stressed the importance of charismatic Salafist clerics and their personal networks when it comes to the radicalization process in Germany. German law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, Lang elaborated, have significantly stepped-up their capabilities in tracking the Salafist scene in the country. 720 highly dangerous Islamists are currently part of this scene, while German courts are additionally dealing with 800 terrorism-related legal proceedings.

The two-day conference ended with a final recap and forecast by Peter Bergen, Vice President at the New America Foundation. Bergen reflected on the ongoing religiously motivated terror-wave that started with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and turned into a massive confrontation between the Muslim world and the West as well as into a violent power struggle between various Islamic confessions and sects. This terror wave was, in his view, reinforced by the Arab Spring that started in 2011, which allowed jihadist organizations to thrive in an environment of instability. According to Bergen, the underlying conditions leading to the emergence of terrorist organizations will continue to exist in the Middle East, Europe and in other parts of the world. These persisting conditions are, in Bergen's eyes, the sectarian confrontation between Sunni and Shia, collapsing Arab governments that lead to instability and anarchy, weak or failed economies in the Middle East and Africa as well as the phenomena of immigration and societal alienation. Bergen claimed that Europe is composed of relatively homogeneous societies that make it hard for Muslims to be integrated and to escape marginalization. He is convinced that jihadist organizations will continue to adapt very well to trends in the modern world, leading even more so to crowdsourcing and virtualization of jihad.