



2015 - 2016
Model Arab League

BACKGROUND GUIDE
Special Council on Religion and Extremism

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National
Council
on US-
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Relations



Original draft by Sidney Jones, Chair of the Special Council on Religion and Extremism at the 2016 National University Model Arab League, with contributions from the dedicated staff and volunteers at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations

Honorable Delegates,

Welcome to the 2015-2016 Special Council on Religion and Extremism! My name is Sidney Jones, and I am absolutely thrilled to serve as the chair for the National University Model Arab League Conference. I am currently a junior at Converse College in Spartanburg, SC, with a double major in Politics and History. This is my third year participating in Model Arab League and my second year chairing for the National University Model Arab League Conference. My participation with MAL has been the most rewarding experience of my collegiate career, and I hope that you are able to take away as much as I have been able to.

This year's Special Council is different than years in the past. Within this Council, delegates will have a wide range of possibilities for solutions. Delegates, please note that this Council is not on "religious extremism" but the interplay between religion and extremism. Throughout the duration of this Council, delegates are expected to address the concerns of their country through the discussion of the topics. The topics you will be addressing cover current challenges facing the region as well as your own individual countries. I am excited to meet all of you soon, and I wish you luck in researching!

All the best,
Sidney Jones

Topic I: Countering the use of propaganda by extremist groups, paying particular attention to web-based media and the use of the internet as a means to spread extremist ideology

I. Introduction to the Topic

A. General Background

“Propaganda” is biased information created to promote a certain ideology, viewpoint, or cause. A piece of propaganda can take the form of a video, poster, article, or any other visual and/or auditory platform. Propaganda is often disseminated through digital platforms, known as “web-based media.”

An extremist group, which is an organization known for going to great lengths to achieve its goal, often uses propaganda to spread its ideology or political message. As web-based media has become the fastest way to disseminate information, extremist organizations now utilize online platforms to craft their appeal to broad audiences. A group’s messages are often inflammatory and redundant, easily catching the eyes of potential sympathizers. Online propaganda often blames a certain government for both local and national problems, encouraging those who agree to join the movement. By disseminating propaganda online, extremist groups are able to gain publicity, justify previous illegal acts, train new recruits, incite acts of terrorism, provide practical instruction, and collect funds from supporters. Extremists often provide videos or videogames that encourage supporters to become comfortable with committing acts of violence.¹

In 1998, fewer than half of the U.S. Department of State’s designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations had websites. However, between 2003 and 2005, the number of websites operated by extremists and their supports grew to 4,300. Extremist groups use the Internet to engage and encourage sympathizers because the online platform is relatively cheap, secure, and simple to operate. The Internet provides extremists with easy access to the global communications network with little regulation. In addition to the platform’s simplicity and accessibility, the Internet allows extremists to upload videos, posters, audio, and other sensory graphics.² The use of propaganda and web-based media represents an effort to engage a variety of audiences.³

B. History of the Topic in the Arab World

In 2011, protesters in several Arab nations began to call for the overthrow of long-standing autocratic governments in the region. Civil unrest boiled throughout the MENA region as citizens called for democratic reforms. The Arab Spring, as the movement was dubbed, began in Tunisia and Egypt. Online social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, allowed protestors to not only communicate with other local activists but also to share their stories with

¹ "The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes." United Nations, 2012.

Web.<https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf>.

² Winkler, Carol, and Cori Elizabeth Dauber. *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*. Strategic Studies Institute and United States Army War College Press. Web. <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1213.pdf>>.

³ Ibid.

an international audience. While the exact potency of social media platforms during the Arab Spring is still debated, the Internet undoubtedly helped protestors publicize their demand for democracy. Although the goals of these protestors and extremist groups differ vastly, both use online propaganda in a similar manner; they utilize Internet platforms to disseminate information and gain supporters for their cause.⁴

More recently, Daesh⁵ has developed a sophisticated social media strategy in order to distribute its message. Daesh has caught worldwide attention by uploading execution videos, intentionally seeking international recognition. The terrorist organization produces professional promotional videos that encourage sympathizers to support its campaigns. At the same time, Daesh follows a well-developed media strategy, carefully selecting the pieces of propaganda that it posts.⁶

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

Hoping to limit the Daesh's online connection with its constituents, Iraq has blocked Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. This method has been adopted by other countries in an attempt to limit the reach that extremist groups have on the region. Because Daesh attracts followers from across the Arab and Muslim world, Iraq's actions may only have a limited effect. This past summer, the U.S.-led coalition against Daesh established the Sawab Centre, devoted exclusively to combating the online presence of extremist groups, in Abu Dhabi. The center will focus on counter-propaganda techniques and help minimize an extremist group's ability to directly engage an online audience.⁷

Efforts like the Sawab Centre are particularly important in the battle against extremism because an online presence is pertinent to a new-age extremist group. The Council should encourage the establishment of similar organizations, but should also identify other strategies that may thwart the online dissemination of extremist propaganda. These efforts might include partnering with social media companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, to limit the volume of violent propaganda uploaded to these platforms. However, the Council should be wary of the fine line between targeting extremist propaganda and preventing public access to web-based media.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- How has the use of propaganda by extremist groups affected my country?
- What is the best way to address and combat these messages?
- Is there a way for Arab League to ensure that social media and other media platforms are not used as a means for spreading extremist ideologies?

⁴ "World Development Book Case Study: The Role of Social Networking in the Arab Spring." *New Internationalist*. Web. Aug. 2015. <<http://newint.org/books/reference/world-development/case-studies/social-networking-in-the-arab-spring/>>.

⁵ Throughout MAL Background Guides, we have attempted to simplify and clarify word usage in reference to the group known alternately as Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL etc. by consistently labeling it 'Daesh,' a widely used name derived from the group's Arabic acronym and one which the group itself despises.

⁶ Irshaid, Faisal. "How Isis Is Spreading Its Message Online." *BBC News*, 14 June 2014. Web. Aug. 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27912569>>.

⁷ Khan, Taimur. "Abu Dhabi Counter-terrorism Centre to Battle ISIL's Online Lies." *The National*, 7 July 2015. Web. <<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/abu-dhabi-counter-terrorism-centre-to-battle-isils-online-lies>>.

- Is there a way to limit the spread of extremist ideologies online without having to completely block public access to social media platforms?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- Should the Arab League place guidelines on the use of social media in the region in order to minimize extremist groups' audience?
- How can the Arab League work with members of the international community to continue its online counterterrorism efforts?

IV. Resources to Review

- [World Developing Book Case Study: The Role of Social Networking in the Arab Spring](#)
- [The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes](#)
- [Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment](#)
- [Terrorists and the Internet](#)

Topic II: Exploring the ideological roots of extremist groups in the region and their connection to sectarianism, political vacuums, and the lack of social services

I. Introduction to Topic

A. General Background

A “political vacuum” occurs when no legitimate authority controls a certain territory. For example, a state may only have enough resources to effectively govern over its major cities, but not the surrounding rural lands. Citizens living in these loosely controlled areas often lack access to resources pertaining to health, education, and safety, known as “social services.” If individuals cannot receive free education, police protection, or medical attention from their state, they are likely to seek these resources from other organizations.

Non-state actors will often take advantage of these in-need individuals by filling these “political vacuums” and administering social services themselves. These organizations flourish in loosely controlled lands because there is no legitimate authority to stop them. Civilians receiving these resources are then encouraged to adopt the terrorist group’s ideology. An organization’s “ideological roots,” meaning its key beliefs and ideals, determine the group’s actions and goals. A terrorist group’s ideological roots often lie in “sectarianism,” the division of a larger group into smaller factions. For example, many terrorist organizations identify with a certain sect of a religion.

While a distinct difference exists between religious ideologies and extremist ideologies, extremists tend to use religious doctrines to justify and support their actions. This has led to an assumption that extremist organizations are linked to religious ideologies, which is not always the case. Through narrow interpretations of religious texts, extremists manipulate religion to fit their cause. For example, militant Islamist ideologues make references to religious texts, lending their violent cause a religious justification.⁸

B. History of Topic in the Arab World

The Middle Eastern and North African countries have made noticeable progress in social development. However, the region still needs to provide minority protection, social cohesion, and greater government accountability. A lack of minority rights can result in domestic conflict and, eventually, civil war between sects or factions. Although social development does not always prevent conflict or guarantee peace, it can reduce hostility between different ethnic or religious populations.⁹

⁸ Lisanti, Dominic. "Do Failed States Really Breed Terrorists?" 14 May 2010. Web. <http://politics.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/10838/lisanti_capers.pdf>.

⁹ "Social Development." *Middle East and North Africa*. The World Bank Group, n.d. Web. Aug. 2015. <<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/0,,contentMDK:20529511~pagePK:146736~piPK:226340~theSitePK:256299,00.html>>.

For example, Daesh militants began taking advantage of regional political vacuums in 2013. The terrorist group has taken territory in Eastern Syria, where the country's civil war has left no legitimate authority. The Iraqi cities of Mosul, Ramadi and Raqqa have also fallen to Daesh as the Iraqi government struggles to maintain control of its lands. Once a terrorist organization has gained control of an area, it begins establishing legitimate infrastructure in the region. Daesh militants construct power lines and sewage systems, offer jobs to local civilians, and provide security in regions of Iraq and Syria left neglected by their faltering governments. By providing necessary social services, Daesh increases its popularity in the region, making the fight against the extremist group increasingly difficult and complex.¹⁰

On the other hand, Yemen is currently caught in a sectarian conflict between Zaidi Houthi rebels and al-Qaeda militants, most of whom are Sunni Muslims. After pushing south from the northern mountains of Yemen, the Houthis seized Yemen's capital of Sanaa last year. However, these rebels have recently met resistance from al-Qaeda operatives; many believe the conflict between these two non-state actors relates to their differing religious sects.¹¹

C. Finding a Solution: Past, Present, and Future

Growing social, economic, or political strife causes discontent, which can lead to a state's loss of control over a region. Because political vacuums are most likely to occur within failed states, the Council should aim to increase stability in such struggling nations. The Council could work to combat civil unrest in order to prohibit extremist groups from taking advantage of instability. An ideal draft resolution should address the areas that the League believes are most at risk for political turmoil. The Council may then identify which social services or benefits are most lacking in these areas. Needed resources might include humanitarian aid, educational and vocational opportunities, military protection, and/or government infrastructure. Lastly, the Council should make concrete efforts to increase each needed resource in vulnerable regions.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- Does my country risk becoming socially, economically, or politically unstable?
- How do extremist groups in/near my country use religious doctrines to legitimize their actions?
- Which social services offered by extremist groups are the most compelling to native populations and why?
- Why have certain governments failed to provide social services to vulnerable populations?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

¹⁰ Hubbard, Ben. "Offering Services, ISIS Digs in Deeper in Seized Territories." *New York Times*, 16 June, 2015. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/offering-services-isis-ensconces-itself-in-seized-territories.html?_r=0>.

¹¹ Al-Batati, Saeed. "Houthis vs al-Qaeda: Yemen's New Sectarian War?" *Middle East Eye*, 25 Oct. 2014. Web. <<http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/houthis-vs-al-qaeda-yemen-s-new-sectarian-war-1517359090>>.

- What initiatives can the League implement to ensure that Arabs are receiving necessary social services?
- How are religious ideologies connected to the formation of extremist groups and how can the League best combat this?
- Which regions are most likely to fall into political turmoil?
- What specific social services does each at-risk region lack?

IV. Resources to Review

- [Do Failed States Really Breed Terrorists?](#)
- [Breeding Grounds: Failed States and the Origins of Terrorism and Political Violence](#)
- [ISIS Provides Legitimate Social Services to Conquered Territories](#)
- [Is Yemen's Conflict Rooted in Sectarianism?](#)

Topic III: Assessing the role of religious minorities in the region and their place in the economy, society, politics and government processes

I. Introduction to Topic

A. General Background

Sunni and Shia Muslims make up the two largest sects of Islam. 85% of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims identify as Sunni. The division between these groups began amidst a succession dispute following the death of the Prophet Mohammad.¹² The differences between Sunni and Shia religious doctrines have widened since their initial split; these religious discrepancies have caused economic and political divides as well. "Government processes," the procedures governments use to determine laws and administer order, are often controlled by one sect or the other. Populations of Arab countries are usually heavily dominated by either one of these sects. This fact makes "religious minorities," groups of people whose proclaimed religions are not the most popular in their regions, very common in the Middle East.

Religious minorities have often been targets of repression and violence. A growing number of Arab countries are becoming entrenched in sectarian violence, a phenomenon that could greatly impact the makeup of the Middle East. Most recently, the religious divide between Sunnis and Shias has led to the Syrian civil war and spurred violence in Iraq. However, Muslim sects are not the only minorities who face persecution in the Middle East. Christian minorities are targeted often, especially in Daesh's territory of Iraq and Syria. Adherents to less popular religions, such as monotheistic Druze or polytheistic Zoroastrians, also experience persecution.¹³

B. History of the Topic in the Arab World

In most Arab countries, members of the dominant political party often discriminate against those who do not identify with their religious sect. Individuals in this situation may find it difficult to participate in politics. Religious minorities are often denied access to certain careers, and some individuals do not receive promotions due to their religion. Thus, minorities are often underrepresented in positions of power, both in the private and public sectors. Besides the workplace, minorities also feel marginalized in their daily lives. Their religions might dictate which schools they may attend or which restaurants they might frequent.¹⁴

In some Arab nations, the ruling party does not identify with the majority religion. This is the case in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad's Alawite regime rules over a majority Sunni population. In fact, Assad occasionally allies with other religious minorities, like the Christian or Druze populations. This strategy discourages cooperation among different sects, leaving less opposition

¹² Ward, Clarissa. "In Detail: Sunnis vs. Shiites." *CBS News*. CBS Interactive, 5 Apr. 2015. Web. Aug. 2015. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/in-detail-sunnis-vs-shiites/>>.

¹³ Griswold, Eliza. "Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?" *New York Times*, 22 July 2015. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html>.

¹⁴ Clarkson, Anya. "Saudi Arabia: Anti-Shi'a Discrimination in Employment and the Work Place." *Foreign Law Guide* (2014): n. pag. July 2014. Web. <<http://www.shiaresearch.com/Doc/Anti-ShiaDiscriminationintheWorkplace-SaudiArabia.pdf>>.

of the Assad regime. Generally, Alawis occupy the most prestigious positions in Syria's government and its largest businesses. The regime's relationship with Syria's Kurdish population is especially contentious, particularly after the government brutally suppressed a Kurdish uprising in 2004. Assad worries that Kurds are looking to establish their own independent state in northern Syria and Iraq.¹⁵

Discrimination of religious minorities is not abundant in all Arab countries. 75% of Omani citizens are Ibadhi Muslims, while the nation's minorities consist of Sunnis, Shias, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. Although individuals usually organize according to religious sect and/or ethnicity, Omanis are known for being generally tolerant of other religions. Minorities are granted protection under Omani laws; individuals are free to practice any religion as long as their worship does not disrupt order.¹⁶

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

While some efforts to combat religious discrimination in the MENA region have been successful, progress has been uneven.¹⁷ The League should look for solutions that garner support for religious minorities in the region. The Council should consider solutions that improve minority access to a nation's workforce and allow for greater participation in the political process. These solutions will not only improve the lives of individuals within minority populations, but will also expand the regional economy and stabilize the governments of Arab nations.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- Is my country working to bridge the gap between religious minorities?
- What has my country done in the past to improve the positions of religious minorities?
- Are minorities in my country currently discriminated against in the workplace? What can my country do to combat this discrimination?
- What is the percentage of government positions held by religious minorities in my country? Are religious minorities underrepresented in my country's political processes?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- What policies can my nation implement to expand economic opportunities for minorities?
- How can the Arab League assist countries in creating a more inclusive environment for religious minorities?

¹⁵Minority Rights Group International. "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Syria: Overview," Oct. 2011. Web. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce5ac.html>.

¹⁶"Oman 2012 International Religious Freedom Report." U.S. Department of State, 2012. Web. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208618.pdf>.

¹⁷"Discrimination at Work in the Middle East and North Africa." International Labour Office. n. pag. Web. <http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_decl_fs_92_en.pdf>.

- How can minorities become more involved in my country's political system?

IV. Resources to Review

- [Discrimination in the Saudi Arabian Workplace](#)
- [Discrimination at Work in the Middle East](#)
- [In Detail: Sunnis vs. Shiites](#)
- [The End of Christianity in the Middle East](#)
- [Oman 2012 International Religious Freedom Report](#)

Topic IV: Identifying paths to radicalization, particularly for Arab youth, and the most effective methods for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society both economically and societally

I. Introduction to Topic

A. General Background

The Council will define “Arab youth” as individuals under 18 years of age who originate from an Arab nation. Boys and girls within this population are especially vulnerable to “radicalization,” the process by which an individual adopts increasingly extreme political, social or religious ideals and beliefs. Radicalized individuals disapprove of views besides their own and go to great lengths to achieve their extreme goals. Accordingly, “de-radicalization” refers to the process by which previously radicalized individuals surrender their extreme beliefs in favor of less radical ideals. Individuals are often de-radicalized through “rehabilitation,” the act of restoring something to its previous state through therapy. De-radicalized individuals must “reintegrate into society,” meaning they must reenter the public social environment they previously abandoned.

Young men and women make up the demographic most susceptible to radicalization. Arab youth living in areas of civil unrest or war are especially vulnerable, because individuals in these regions are less likely to have legitimate opportunities. As unemployment in affected regions rises and individuals become increasingly discontent with their failing governments, extremist groups use convincing propaganda to recruit young members. These radical organizations gain supporters by identifying a common enemy and promoting the notion that extremism will help defeat said opponent. Young Arabs are attracted to extremist groups because they provide a sense of identity, belonging, and cohesiveness. A youth can become radicalized by a group of friends or online through a host of social networking sites.¹⁸

B. History of Topic in the Arab World

While other demographics are also susceptible to radicalization, the increase of youth involvement in extremist organizations within the past decade is especially concerning. Any young person with access to the Internet can become radicalized via propaganda websites, radical forums on social media sites, and other online platforms frequented by extremist groups. Adolescents recruited by radical organizations can serve as soldiers, financiers, “lookouts,” or recruiters. In organizations such as Al-Qaeda, Daesh, and Al-Shabaab, Arab youth have been recruited to carry out attacks on specific targets. Al-Qaeda and Daesh both produce propaganda videos to appeal to the youngest generation. Many of these videos depict young children expressing their allegiance to senior members, and some of these films are used to train new recruits.¹⁹

¹⁸Bizina, Margarita, and David Gray. "Radicalization of Youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy." *Global Security Studies* 5.1 (2014): n. pag. Web. <<http://globalsecuritystudies.com/Bizina%20Youth-AG.pdf>>.

¹⁹"Recruitment and Radicalization of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups." *Homeland Security Institute* (2009): n. pag. 23 Apr. 2009. Web. <<http://www.cleanitproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/2009-recruitment-and-radicalization.pdf>>.

In response to the above, Saudi Arabia established rehabilitation centers that use counterterrorism methods to de-radicalize extremists. Since these programs began in 2004, more than 3,000 men have graduated from the centers. Individuals are de-radicalized via religious education and psychological counseling; ultimately, the program is supposed to allow previously radical individuals to reintegrate into society. However, these programs are not always successful for each individual, as some return to their respective extremist organizations after graduation.²⁰

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

While the League can examine how to best reintegrate different age demographics back into society, it should pay particular attention to Arab youth. The Council should focus on both preemptive measures that discourage the initial radicalization of youth, as well as reactive initiatives that aid in the de-radicalization process. Preventative programs might include counter-recruitment and counter-radicalization initiatives tailored to local populations. These initiatives should engage not only youth themselves, but also adults who can identify and address specific factors leading to radicalization. These preemptive programs must evolve with the young audiences that they are intending to reach, meaning they must adapt to the latest forms of technology used to recruit youth.

Besides preemptive measures, the Council may explore the success of de-radicalization programs similar to that of Saudi Arabia. The League might encourage research on such programs' success rates and the continued development of treatment plans. It is important to accept that de-radicalization programs cannot successfully reintegrate every extremist back into society. However, as these initiatives are still in their infancy, they are worth exploring.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- How are Arab youth recruited by extremist organizations?
- What positions do youth fill in radical groups?
- In which regions are youth recruited the most?
- Have any programs or initiatives been developed in my country to counter the recruitment efforts of extremist organizations?
- How successful have reintegration programs been in the MENA region?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- How can the League most effectively reintegrate radicalized extremists into society?
- What can be done to prevent Arab Youth from joining extremist groups?

²⁰ Taylor, Adam. "Saudi Arabia Says 12 Percent of Its 'Rehabilitated' Terrorists Have Returned to Terror." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 28 Nov. 2014. Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/11/28/saudi-arabia-says-12-percent-of-its-rehabilitated-terrorists-have-returned-to-terror/>.

- How does extremist propaganda play a role in radicalizing Arab youth and how can this be prevented?

IV. Resources to Review

- [Radicalization of Youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy](#)
- [Recruitment and Radicalization of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups](#)
- [The Lure of Youth Into Terrorism](#)