



The Syrian Conflict:

Promotion of Reconciliation and its Implications for International Security

6 – 7 February 2014
Semper Depot, Akademie der Bildenden Künste
Vienna, Austria

Conference Report

Conference Organizers:

Institute for Near Eastern Studies, University of Vienna
Terrorism Research Initiative
University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Venue Host:

Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna)



Report Authors and Disclaimer:

This conference report was written by Nico Prucha of the University of Vienna and Robert Wesley of the Terrorism Research Initiative. The content of the report and views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions or individuals represented at the conference.

Introduction

From 6-7 February 2014, over 100 participants from over a dozen countries gathered in the Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien (Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria) for a unique conference: *The Syrian Conflict: Promotion of Reconciliation and its Implications for International Security*. The conference was jointly hosted by the Institute for Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna, the Terrorism Research Initiative, and the Centre for Terrorism and Security Studies of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

The conference brought together ten speakers with various disciplinary, religious, socio-political and geographic backgrounds to provide their perspectives on the current conflict in Syria. Syrian political actors who are present and active in Vienna and abroad provided an opportunity to offer insight into the current conflict, its violent and non-violent manifestations, and prospects for future reconciliation. Reflecting Vienna's traditional role as a neutral venue for the discussion of international issues, the conference provided a fertile atmosphere for the exchange of perspectives on the interconnected issues of the promotion of civil society, political cooperation, violence, and the conflict's implications for international politics and security.

Photographic Exhibition

The conference venue at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna also hosted an exhibition of contemporary Syrian artists, reflecting the war through their photographic artwork. The exhibition provided a complementary perspective on the conflict through the lenses of the photographers risking their lives to document the conflict and its ramifications on Syrian society. Art has an effect of eliciting contemplation and activating creative centres of the brain – responses conducive to addressing 'hard problems' such as the Syrian conflict. Photographers active in Homs, Damascus, Dara'a, Aleppo, and the small town of Mlehani exhibited their artwork for the conference participants. Participants expressed their appreciation for the additional element of depth to the conference, and there was encouragement to provide additional exhibitions in the future.



Summary of Presentations

Below is a brief summary of each speaker's presentation. The conference, which was held on two consecutive afternoons, was recorded on video and the presentations can be viewed in full at the following address:

(<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLySkUpqHARDfi3GN6zQBhzcKGjobX49-3>)

Day 1: 6 February 2014



Syria at the Crossroads of Turkey and the EU

Cengiz Günay of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs outlined the Syrian-Turkish relationship prior to the initiation of protests against the Syrian regime and assessed the current status of relations between the two countries. The talk provided an introduction to Syria from the perspectives of both the Turkish government and the European Union. Mr Günay stressed that the Turkish government is in a difficult situation being severely affected by the war in Syria, especially concerning refugees and regular incidents on its border. He argued that with no coherent military or political unity on the Syrian side fighting against the regime, the Turks are facing a neighbour with an uncertain future, especially given the growing number of Islamist and al-Qa'ida linked fighters. He emphasised that the Turkish strategy is tied to the American strategy, especially when it comes to the influx of Iranian fighters intervening in the conflict in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government.

How Jihadists managed to infiltrate a democratic Syrian revolution

Noman Benotman of the Quilliam Foundation detailed the nature of Islamist and jihadist groups active inside of Syria and explained how the global jihadist agenda affects individuals in the country. Mr Benotman indicated that the relationship and support by Kuwait, Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood and its impact on the ground has resulted in a changed security perspective rendering the Syrian conflict even more unpredictable. He furthermore contended that the coherent organisational structures of Sunni jihadist groups has affected local moderate Islamist groups, driving many into the hard-core outlets of The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Minorities and Violence

Marie-Therese Kiriakly of the Association for Arab Women provided an account of working with women and juveniles inside Syrian refugee camps in Turkey. She indicated that the gruesome violence committed by Syrian regime forces has traumatised and subsequently radicalised many - with yet uncertain implications for the future. Additionally, she asserted that despite the fact that Christian minorities in Syria have refused to be armed by the regime to fight against ‘terrorists’, some minorities are considered to be willing ‘henchmen’ of the regime of al-Assad, thus enabling extremist groups to label them as legitimate targets.

Syrian-Kurdistan and its Political Actors

Thomas Schmidinger of the University of Vienna discussed the implications of the Syrian-Kurdish relationship and the refusal to consider any notion of Kurdish independence by Syrian Arabs. Mr Schmidinger explained that after being rebuffed by Syrian Arab oppositional representatives when Kurds demanded the right of self-determination, the debate turned to the potential future of Kurdish autonomy within Syria and the wider region. The negative reaction to the Kurdish question by Syrian opposition representatives, the speaker concluded, was also the reason for Kurdish scepticism towards the current revolution.

The Kurds and the Regime: Historical Dissent and Future Prospects

Jamal Omari, representative of the Kurdish National Council in Syria and Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi), gave a historic overview of the suppression of the Kurds by the Ba’ath Party. Being deprived of fundamental rights and citizenship until very recently, Mr Omari asserted that the Kurds are demanding greater autonomy and freedom from Ba’ath rule while their role in the revolution remains undecided. However, he called for the unity of all Syrian factions to oppose the brutal regime and hopes that Syria may once again be a garden for all confessions and ethnicities the rule of al-Assad tries to uproot.



Day 2: 7 February 2014



Social Media: A New Layer in Modern Warfare

Rüdiger Lohlker of the University of Vienna described how the al-Assad regime relies on modern media strategies that utilise social media outlets for its propaganda and framing. Prof. Lohlker provided an example of how the regime relies on Facebook and Twitter to employ memes to brand the war as a universal war against evil and as a religious war, with the regime having God on their side. He further explained that, with the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) at the disposal of the Syrian government, the conflict in Syria has reached a new dimension in terms of electronic and information war. Twitter was also mentioned as a platform being utilized by the SEA to boast about its alleged hacking attacks against international news outlets, opposition groups, and to announce websites it has claimed to have hacked and defaced in favour of al-Assad.

The Syrian Revolution in the Context of Resistance

Waleed Bonni, a former I'tilaf representative, outlined his personal engagement in politics in the past years and in the wake of the 'Damascene Spring' and the consequences for himself and his family. Questioning the potential for reconciliation, Mr Bonni highlighted the suffering of the Syrian peoples, independent of their confessional or ethnic background, calling for support by the West to oust the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Islamic Groups in the Syrian Conflict and their Ideology

Kamal Allabwani, a former I'tilaf representative, demanded an understanding of the politics of genocide and attrition of the Syrian regime against their own people. Mr Allabwani expressed fear for a steep increase of particularly Sunni jihadist radicalization as a consequence of random arrests and torture by the regime against the mainly Sunni populace. He discussed how jihadists and their professional media groups use gross human rights violations to their advantage. He characterized their activities as highly organized, with a coherent message. He also highlighted their activities utilizing social media since the conflict in Syria turned into widespread violence, and emphasized the growing sectarian divide.

The Perception of the Syrian Revolution by the Brotherhood

Molham Aldroubi of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Executive Committee provided the audience with a detailed description of the Muslim Brotherhood's perception of the Syrian Revolution. While remaining hopeful that the Syrian people will turn away from extremism, intolerance and violence, Aldroubi claimed that the increasing sectarian war in Syria was part of the regime tactic. He further elaborated how the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was trying to be understood as a moderate Islamic legitimate party for the future, and outlined how the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood aims to achieve a political representation for all Syrians.

Syria before and after the Geneva I and II Talks

Tarafa Baghajati, a Syrian Affairs Correspondent and Imam, detailed the Syrian regime's tactics on a political level, namely during the Geneva I and II talks, to brand and frame any opposition group as a 'terrorist' entity, thus justifying the harsh crackdown. He criticized the international community for not acting responsibly towards Syria in this conflict, fearing that national interests superseded the fate of the Syrian people. He felt that this irresponsible position underlined the fact that Western values are not being prioritized. Mr Baghajati stated that even the employment of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against their own people did not result in negative consequences to al-Assad. He further questioned why the promise to destroy the chemical weapons has led to the West to stop debating bombing Syrian military targets. Additionally, he wondered why the West had accepted this without any conditions such as the creation of corridors for humanitarian aid. He claimed that this has resulted in great disillusionment among Syrians, alienating the Syrian society as a whole even further.



Conclusion

The Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna, the Terrorism Research Initiative and other supporters of the conference invested considerable time and energy to bring together such a diverse array of stakeholders concerned with the future of Syria. The speakers themselves also demonstrated an admirable resolve to put aside animosities and previous disputes to come together and present their perspectives on the conflict. More such efforts are necessary to initiate or re-initiate dialogue, which is a key precondition for wider reconciliation efforts.

In order to continue to enhance engagement mechanisms and further top-down and bottom-up peace building, the Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna and the Terrorism Research Initiative will continue, depending on funding, to provide support and platforms for dialogue for stakeholders in the Syrian conflict. There is already a high level of interest from various Syrian factions in continuing with the conference series and other related events to promote understanding and reconciliation. These events are designed to gather stakeholders for honest exchanges. It is our sincere hope that we will be able to maintain momentum within the communities of interest and to nurture the seeds of reconciliation that have been planted.

Future Events

The next step in this engagement process is a conference that will be held on 2 May 2014, again organised by Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna and the Terrorism Research Initiative. This one-day conference – *Religious Extremism in Syria: A New Launching Pad for Global Terrorism?* – to be held in Vienna will bring together a diverse group of speakers who will provide insights into extremist and other militant actors involved in the conflict while also outlining the ramifications for regional and international security. For more information on the conference please visit www.terrorismanalysts.com.

Supporting the Syrian Engagement Project

The continuation of the Syrian Engagement Project of the Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna and the Terrorism Research Initiative is contingent upon the securing of additional funding. We invite interested sponsors to contact one of the following points of contact to register interest.

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