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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief presents six policy recommendations for containing and countering growing terrorism-related threats and radicalization generated by the protracted conflict in Syria, as they were elaborated during the PfPC Combating Terrorism Workshop held at the Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, Sept. 23-24, 2013.

(Content is authored by and based on a presentation to the group by Jahangir Arasli, Advisor on International Issues to the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, and a long-standing member of the PfPC Combating Terrorism Working Group).

Contrary to initial optimism in the wake of the unfolding Arab Spring, the situation rapidly evolved into persistent violent processes in a number of countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The most severe crisis scenario is currently developing in and around Syria.

Within its complex facets, the Syrian conflict has produced one specifically distressing result – the emergence, sharpening and strengthening of jihadist Islamist forces, currently fighting both against the regime and the moderate secular opposition. The jihadist domain is flourishing in the nurturing environment of a war-ruined country, drawing extremists and radicals from all over the world to Syria.

The ongoing Syrian dynamic poses the potential for creation of jihadist sanctuaries “next door” to Europe, a kind of hotbed of Islamist extremism, similar to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. In light of such developments, some readjustment of policy and implementation may be warranted.

CONTEXT

Background: The Syrian conflict, in its current phase, has been underway for the last two and a half years. After starting as a movement of widespread popular unrest against rule of the authoritarian regime, the conflict has passed through several stages, attaining finally the features of a full-scale civil war, an ethnosectarian war, and a regional war-by-proxy steered by the competing centers of power in the Middle East.

The conflict exacerbates the centuries-long Sunni-Shiite controversy in Islam and raises tensions and mutual hostility between two regional centers of power (the Arab Gulf states and Iran), thereby posing serious implications for stability in the MENA area.
**Current Dynamics:** At the current conflict phase, Syria does not exist as a homogenous functioning state, breaking up instead into warring cantons controlled either by the regime or opposition factions. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed or wounded, and millions more have been displaced. The economy as well as governmental and public service infrastructure remains dysfunctional while a massive humanitarian catastrophe continues.

Moreover, the ongoing hostilities generate multiple negative effects on Syria’s neighbors (Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey) and throughout the entire region in the form of a potential for horizontal spillover of violence into their territories, and involvement of local extremist actors directly into the conflict.

At the same time, the abilities, capabilities and will of outside actors to influence the situation, remain limited, as was demonstrated by the August – September 2013 dynamics resulting from the reported use of chemical weapons by the regime against the civilian targets. Above all, in the international community, there is no cohesive and universally shared vision of how to cease and/or resolve the conflict.

**Counter-terrorism Implications:** In contrast, widespread agreement exists that the conflict in Syria may well pose an increase in terrorism well beyond the MENA region. Some also suggest that as Russia and the United States are perceived as major foreign players in the conflict, Russian and United States interests will be among the highest-priority targets for those seeking to place blame on outsiders for negative consequences of the conflict.

The terrorist-extremist environment in Syria and its neighbors is complex and evolving. It is characterized by a pool of armed insurgent actors who are constantly regrouping, and altering affiliations and chains of command while pursuing different strategies, and declaring often-contradicting end state visions. Notwithstanding, the share of the hardcore Islamist extremists in the mentioned pool is substantial, and grows rapidly as the conflict protracts.

Noteworthy in the Syrian conflict are four characteristics with potential implications for decision makers:

1. **Revitalization of Al-Qaeda (AQ):** The Syrian war has become a cause-célèbre for AQ providing the AQ-Central ideological core and its local franchises (such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), the opportunity to gain momentum in the Levant and beyond.

2. **Growth of jihadi-governed areas:** With large pieces of the Syrian territory falling out of the regime’s control a threat exists that hardcore AQ-like Islamist factions will take control of these areas. Such areas, ruled by jihadi-armed factions and governed by the Sharia law, correspond with AQ strategy aimed at the creation of precursors of the long-dreamed “Global Caliphate”. If created, such entities will likely serve as terrorist incubators and training grounds.

3. **Creation of well-armed “field armies” for jihad:** The ongoing combat in Syria increases organizational cohesion, tactical skills, sophistication, and war-fighting expertise of the extremist jihadist cluster of the Syrian opposition forces. Add to this the access to modern weapons and equipment (man-portable air-defense and anti-tank guided missile systems, communication, cyber and information technologies and possibly chemical weaponry) and the result is ordnance and personnel potentially available for use by AQ-Central and/or AQ-Inspired (AQI) elements in future conflicts in the Muslim world and beyond.

4. **High participation level of European/Eurasian Jihadists:** The conflict in Syria has mobilized and brought into the region unprecedentedly numbers of violent jihadist-followers, far exceeding those deployed in previous conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq or Bosnia. The most alarming sub-trend, though, is the scale of European and the Eurasian nationals attracted by the Syrian war magnet. Being driven by grievances, ambitions, radical views, and vivid TV/YouTube images, it is to be expected that such elements will be further indoctrinated and radicalized on the battlefield. Those who survive and manage to return back to their home-countries will return as seasoned fighters, armed with experience, networks, and ideology. Such leaderless horizontally-distributed small veteran groups or individuals in Europe and in the post-USSR space can be expected to lay the foundation for the upcoming fourth-generation of AQI jihadists, throughout the aforementioned regions, as well as in the United States and the West, in general.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Hostilities in Syria are currently characterized by structural and tactical fragmentation, operational limbo, strategic deadlock, and politico-diplomatic stupor as stabilizing and exit solutions are sought. While the negative energy, capabilities and political agenda of the organized Islamist jihad in the Levant are currently largely contained, a protracted conflict in Syria is likely
to have a disruptive impact on global security in the mid-
to long-term.

Six recommendations -- not necessarily reflecting the
full consensus of the working group -- are offered for
consideration in the context of discussions on the Syrian
issue in the following six generic areas.

1. **Diplomacy.** *Continue and support the Geneva
   track II process,* at least, for the moment. The
   process, which aims at promoting negotiation
   between the parties involved, provides a mechanism
   to help define the thinking of mainstream actors
   focused on stabilizing the Syrian situation and
   exiting from the conflict. At the same time, the
   process can prove useful in sorting out the hardcore
   Islamist elements from more moderate elements that
   may warrant strengthening.

2. **Societal engagement.** *Seek to actively engage
   families of active, former and/or potential volunteers
to the Syrian armed conflict as a first line of defense
against fuelling the conflict and follow-up violent
activities.* The role of civil society is fundamental in
ideological transformation. A grassroots, cradle-to-
grave strategic engagement strategy should be
adapted to employ full-spectrum recruit-prone
community involvement in radicalization
prevention, de-radicalization and counter-narrative
delivery in the conflict region and beyond. Kinship
and networks play central, powerful roles in all
societies and Muslim society is no exception.
Families, community leaders, and religious leaders
(imams, muftis) should be part of curbing the
sustained cycle of radicalization prevention, counter-
narrative delivery, and de-radicalization. The Arab
Gulf states could also play important roles as
stakeholders.

3. **Law & legislation.** *Seek innovative legislative
   mechanisms to support a policy designed to curb the
flow of foreign fighters to the Syrian conflict zone.*
This includes active employment and/or reform of
preventive and pursuit mechanisms. For example,
conventions and domestic laws prohibiting
mercenary activities are seemingly quite applicable
to the Syrian case. The initiative of a local
municipality in Belgium stripping the
unemployment allowance from the family of a
citizen, who went to fight in Syria, though not
without downsides, is a case that could be studied as
one of the potential countermeasures.

4. **Law enforcement & intelligence.** *Enhance law
   enforcement and intelligence focus and co-operation
on preventing and combating Syrian war spillover
activities outside the Middle East.* Inherent here is
redirecting of activities and capabilities of
intelligence services and law enforcement agencies,
including their analytical, technical, and human
intelligence (HUMINT) tools and assets.
International cooperation and information sharing,
where feasible, should be encouraged. In this regard,
some have suggested the creation of an international
open source, restricted access, online database on
jihadist actors.

5. **Border control.** *Intensify cooperation with Turkey
on border control issues.* Turkey, unwillingly, by the
gift of geography, has become a major jihadist
gateway to Syria.

6. **Research.** *Intensify engagement of the CT expert
   community—both governmental and non-
governmental—to provide informational and
   analytical support to policymaking on Syria,
   including early warning.* One model might be that
of the “brain trust” group established by the United
States intelligence community to advise on terrorist
trends and reporting methodologies. The PIPC
Combating Terrorism Working Group could
potentially play a role in coordinating such an
initiative in a multilateral context.

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