The Radicalization of Islam in the Syrian Conflict: A Systematic Review from the Interreligious Dialogue Perspective

Authors : Cosette Maiky

Abstract : Seven years have passed since the crisis erupted and the list of challenges to peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue is still growing ever more discouraging: Violence, displacement, sectarianism, discrimination, radicalisation, fragmentation, and collapse of various social and economic infrastructure have notoriously plagued the war-torn country. As the situation in Syria and neighbouring countries is still creating a real concern about the future of the social cohesion and the coexistence in the region, in her function as Field Expert on Arab Countries at King Abdullah bin Abdelaziz Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, the author shall present a systematic review paper that focuses on the radicalization of Islam in Syria. The exercise was based on a series of research questions that guided both the review of literature as well as the interviews. Their relative meaningfulness shall be assessed and trade-offs discussed in each case to ensure that key questions were addressed and to avoid unnecessary effort. There was an element of flexibility, as the assessment progressed, to further provide and inject additional generic questions. The main sources for the information were: Documents and literature with a direct bearing on the issues of relevance collected in all available formats and information collected through key informant interviews. This latter was particularly helpful to understand what some of the capacity constraints are, as well as the gaps, enablers and barriers. Respondents were selected among those who are engaged in IRD activities clearly linked to peacebuilding (i.e. religious leaders, leaders in religious communities, peace actors, religious actors, conflict parties, minority groups, women initiatives, youth initiatives, civil society organizations, academia, etc.), with relevant professional qualifications and work experience. During the research process, the Consultant carefully took account of sensitivities around terminologies as well as a highly insecure and dynamic context. The Consultant (Arabic native speaker), therefore, adapted terminologies while conducting interviews according to the area and respondent. Findings revealed: the deep ideological polarization and lack of trust dividing communities and preventing meaningful dialogue opportunities; the challenge of prioritizing IRD and peacebuilding work in the context of such a severe humanitarian crisis facing the country; the need to engage religious leaders and institutions in peacebuilding processes and initiatives, the need to have institutions with specific IRD mandate, which can have a sustainable influence on peace through various levels of interventions (from grassroots level to policy and research), and lastly, the need to address stigma in media representation of Muslims and Islam. While religion and religious agendas have been massively used for political issues and power play in the Middle East – and elsewhere, more extensive policy and research efforts are needed to highlight the positive role of religion and religious actors in dialogue and peacebuilding processes.

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