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REPORT on WORKING GROUP 4
Religion-inspired political movements, the spread of radicalism and the consequences of the “War on Terror”

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Religion has always played an important role throughout the world, both in the east and the west. It played a central role in great changes in human society through the centuries. Through the 20th century might be seen as the most secular one, we are now witnessing a revival of religious movements and increase in their radicalization.

In our working group we dealt with this interdisciplinary issue from different perspectives, and devoted our three sessions to discussions on geographical areas as the Middle East and Central Asia and to a global discussion on the consequences of the so called “the War on Terror”. We concentrated mainly on Islamic movements in these regions and in the context of the War on Terror, as they have been major players. The leading question of the discussion was why is there an increase of Islamist political movements and what is their nature?

During the first session we focused on the idea of the Shia Crescent as a myth or reality. The Crescent is the continuous of Shiite communities from Lebanon, through Iraq, the Gulf countries, Iran and further on into Asia, and presented by surrounding Arab and western leaders as an ethno-religious based threat. The second session dealt with the Middle East, particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the third session we discussed the issue of the “War on Terror” and its consequences.
A consensus in the group was that it would be a mistake to consider the Shiites as one monolithic entity. The Shiite world in itself is divided to different political levels and frameworks, a fact that is expressed in aggressive confrontations between Shiites, both on local and international spheres. It seems that the loyalty and political affiliation of local Shiite communities are not dictated by the religious element, which only play one part in a much more complex system of identity characteristics.

It is important to note that states and local groups, whatever their religion may be, are still largely motivated by political interests rather than religious ideology. The examples for this are many and varied: in the war between the Christian Armenia and the Shiite Azerbaijan, Iran chose to support the Armenians, rather the Shiites; today, Sunni groups in Iraq are fighting the Sunni al-Qaeda; Shiite groups in Southern Iraq use more violence against each other than against the foreign British forces; in Afghanistan, Shiite Jihadists are now taking part in the Sunni government, and the list goes on. It is to say, national and political interests usually override religious affiliations.

Our focus quickly shifted to a more fundamental issue of the relationship between Persian-Shiite-Iran and the Arab-Sunni-World that historically have experienced violent enmity and lasting tensions. The rise of Shiite groups to power, first in the Islamic revolution in Iran, Hizbulla in Lebanon and now the US-supported elected government in Iraq, has a potential of a wide range political influence on neighboring countries, especially in the Gulf area, which have significant populations of Shiites, some even as a majority of the general population.

Traditionally, deprivation of civil, social and political rights is common with regards to these groups, who do not get proportionate, and sometimes even any, political representation. As in other cases, suppressed communities turn to look for assistance from external players, namely Iran. This is true not only for Shiite groups but for the Palestinians as well. While the official regimes are insensitive, unable or unwilling to insure stability and human rights for their population, social-religious movements come to fill this gap and gather a wide popular base of support. Therefore, it is a social and political phenomenon by its nature, rather than religious, and it is strengthen also by the weakening of the Arabic nationality and political regimes.

In the more general context of globalization, nationality is losing its presence with the mass populations. Old-new identities of ethnicity, tribalism and religion are rising, and with them old-new confrontation. The media is contributing significantly to these confrontations, with an
extensive use of a language that stresses an “us vs. them” approach, expressed even more in context of the so called “War on Terror” – when you are “either with us or with the terrorists”. The parallel processes create intra and inter state tensions and evoke instability throughout the area, to the level of posing a threat to contemporary regimes. The major players to utilize this situation are Iran, which gather support with growing Shiite populations, and Islamists-wahabi groups, inspired by Afghan Jihad, supported by Saudi money. These groups were first to introduce religious justifications to existing ethno-national conflicts, such as in Pakistan, Kashmir and Chechnya.

Therefore, it was the consensus in the working group that in this respect, religion itself is not an engine behind political movements, but rather is used as a mobilization tool by political leaders and groups. On the other hand, religious movements use the political sphere to gain more influence and expand their constituency by political tools. In fact, religion and politics play a game of two-way interaction and cannot be separated.

Political vacuum invites militancy and extremism. In most cases, religion and religious justifications come to play as a reaction to bad rulers, when it becomes the only available channel of expression, venting frustration and welfare for many. This facilitates the rise of spontaneous religious leaders who find it easy to play on emotions of fear and hatred, in order to gain popularity, and by that fueling a process of radicalization and conflict.

Since it is indeed a campaign for the hearts and minds of people, we noted that the best way to counter this process is by establishing good governance, in a format that is relevant to the local traditions, sensitive to its peoples’ needs. It was noted that in Pakistan, the process of opening to democratic ideas helped to reduce tensions and weakened the ability to mobilize for violent acts. As long as liberal and moderate voices cannot be heard and new forms of conflict management between the state and the individuals cannot emerge, a polarized environment is sustained, between a suppressing, usually corrupted regime, and extremist, radical and usually violent movements.

However, there was a consensus that a blanket response to these movements is a mistake that will harm our ability to differentiate between groups, as there are many shades of gray there. It is essential that we both understand and engage with these groups to create an environment in which new possibilities for change in the relationship can be developed.
Furthermore, the development of the “War on Terror” shows clearly that the use of only military means is counter productive with winning the campaign for the hearts and minds. During the six years of this War, the Jihad arenas have only expanded to different countries and violent Jihadi terrorism is rising. On the account of the growing violence, opposition groups in Arab states are gaining power, building on the unrest in the Muslim street.

When taking about Terrorism, we acknowledged that it is the deliberated targeting of civilians. If we wish to overcome terrorism we have to pay the relevant attention to both elements of operational capabilities accompanied by motivation, with a greater emphasis on reduction of motivations. This can come in the form of establishing effective institution and education, increasing economic investments and opportunities, restoring a sense of dignity and more. In this way we would be able to isolate the radicals and win the hearts and minds of the people.

This does not mean a full and immediate withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. The “magic solution” of “Democracy” is also not suitable, and Western forces should not impose ethno-centralistic ideas. Rather there is an urgent need to increase efforts for reconstruction and reconciliation, based on conversation with the local people. Efforts should be designed to emphasis the advantages and interests of working together and support good governance. This responsibility is shared both by western forces and by local regimes.

Several short points for conclusion:

- Social injustices are a focal source for internal instability, and it has profound influences on regional and international relations. Therefore we should focus on common interest of internal stability and prosperity, based on human rights and equality.
- As principle, initiate conversation and dialogue with an attitude of including, not excluding.
- Regimes should improve relations with existing local communities, in terms of civil, social and political rights, and economic conditions.
- For external forces, with emphasis on the US, it is crucial to shift efforts back to the use of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Great power can bring about tremendous damage but can also create tremendous good.
- Utilize positive interpretations and peaceful elements in Islam. As religion was used to divide us, we can use it as a source of unity for all humans, stressing our communalities rather than minor differences. This is a long-term mission for mass education process.
especially in the Muslim world, and a responsibility of the states to override the Madrassas’ influence, but it can start now.

- All players must be SELF-critical, continually re-choosing the more humanistic interpretations of their own religion and policy.

One comment was made, which we personally find deeply important. It is probably the most quoted sentence in this conference: “Remember your humanity and forget the rest”. We say that again because during our very interesting discussion, we found ourselves repeatedly drawn into a political debate, focusing on politics rather than on humanity, drifting away from the power of this idea. So in this context it is curtail that we continually remind ourselves of this two-fold truth: Remember your humanity and FORGET the rest.