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**Closed Session**

# Counter-Terrorism in the Post-Daesh Era

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## Summary

For years, Daesh – otherwise known as ISIS or ISIL – has been at the forefront of global counter-terrorism concerns due to its territorial ambitions and the particularly gruesome and theatrical manner in which it has conducted its attacks (Weiss and Hassan, 2015). However, as dangerous and as brutal as the jihadist terror group is, the international obsession with Daesh has arguably allowed for threats posed by other terrorist organisations to be downplayed and minimised, sometimes to the point of global powers such as the United States arming and training terrorist organisations and subsequently justifying such moves by indicating the threat posed by Daesh. This closed session, held under Chatham House rules, aimed to discuss the counter-terrorism landscape in the post-Daesh era following the organisation's territorial collapse earlier this year. The speakers attempted to place the discussion with reference to Turkey's role in the global fight against terror, while also discussing counter-terrorism dynamics utilised by other powers, particularly the US.

During the session, the two panellists shared their analyses and experiences with other convened experts and stakeholders. The first speaker spoke at length about the threat to Turkey from the Kurdistan Workers Party – better known by its Kurdish acronym, the PKK – and the terror group's sister organisations, such as the Syrian People's Protection Units, or YPG. The first speaker outlined Turkey's approach to

counter-terrorism, both as an independent actor and as the country with the second largest army in NATO. The second speaker took a more theoretical approach and discussed the evolution of counter-terrorism strategy at a global level, before moving on to Turkey's domestic and near-abroad approach to combating terror. At a global level, the second speaker argued that counter-terrorism strategy has been weakened by its overreliance on being a US-centric activity. This in turn has influenced the way other countries have used counter-terrorism as a tool without having any normative commonalities state-to-state on how to define 'terrorism'. Turkey's approach has therefore been specifically tailored to its own threat perception rather than following the lead of the United States.

Finally, during the question and answer session, other experts engaged in the discussion, thus leading to further analysis being offered by the two speakers. The session concluded with an acknowledgement that the discussion would have been more rounded had there been experts present who were specialised in the counter-terrorism issues of Iraq, it being the country where Daesh found its roots. Attendance from specialists from other regional countries would also have been welcome. There is a general understanding that the Daesh threat may not actually be over, despite the huge losses the organisation has suffered recently. It may therefore be too early to talk about a true post-Daesh era.

## Key Points

- It is not possible to defeat terrorism by supporting one terrorist group over another
- NATO has been undermined by the United States' and European Union's support for the YPG
- The lack of a normative definition for 'terrorism' has harmed global counter-terrorism efforts
- The counter-terrorism theoretical toolkit is disproportionately shaped by the US' counter-terrorism paradigm

## Introduction

**S**ince it burst onto the global scene with such visceral ferocity in 2013, Daesh has been the primary focus of international counter-terrorism efforts. The United States-led global coalition against Daesh was formed in 2014, bringing together dozens of countries to face off against the extremists in what was seen as an existential threat to modern Iraq and Syria as nation-states, and a significant threat to the global population deemed 'non-believers'. Daesh militants would subsequently become targets for their own acts of terror.

It is not hard to see why such a global effort was launched. After all, Daesh's terrorist attacks have been wide-ranging and broad spectrum in nature. Daesh has conducted insurgency in a manner that radically differs from other jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda, its progenitor. Daesh has attempted to seize and hold territory, and they have also struck population centres around the world. They have been savvy in using the media, inflicting maximum carnage while drawing maximum media attention to further bolster their propaganda efforts.

However, in light of the collapse of Daesh's short-lived and self-proclaimed 'caliphate' following the final capture of the Syrian town of Baghuz in March 2019, it has become apparent that the international community has downplayed the destabilising threat posed by other terrorist organisations, some of whom have enjoyed extensive logistical and military support from

the US. Principle amongst these groups - particularly within the Turkish counter-terrorism context - is the PKK and its sister organisations such as the YPG in Syria.

Having forged an alliance with the US administration under former President Barack Obama, ostensibly to fight Daesh, the YPG - operating under the banner of the US-concocted Syrian Democratic Forces - started holding territory in northern Syria, directly threatening Turkey's national security and leading to a chain of events that culminated in Ankara's recent Peace Spring border security operation.

Turkey's national security priorities led to the launching of such an operation despite consternation from European Union member states and mixed messages emanating from the White House under President Donald Trump. Such a blasé approach to Turkey's national security caused a fissure within NATO, and it was within these circumstances and the backlash against Ankara's decision to secure its borders that the closed session took place.

## Contested Approaches to Terrorism and Revisiting the Alliance: NATO and Turkey

The first speaker began the session by highlighting Turkey's role, as a NATO member, in the international fight against terrorism as part of a wider US-led alliance. As a NATO army, Turkey has fought 'chest to chest' against Daesh, and then again against the PKK/YPG in occupied Syrian cities such as Afrin. The first speaker paid homage to Turkey's role as a coalition partner, stating that it had done 'more than its fair share' in the fight against terror. As a result, the first speaker said that Turkey had paid a high price in the fight against terrorism stemming from Daesh, Al-Qa-eda, the PKK/YPG and the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation (FETO).

However, due to bad faith shown by the US and the EU, Turkey has had to reassess its national security imperatives to match its own priorities, taking less notice of the priorities of its traditional allies. Turkish allies within existing frameworks, such as NATO, have struck alliances with the YPG despite the overwhelming evidence that it was an extension of the PKK, which has been recognised as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the EU. According to the Turkish perspective, the first speaker said that it made no sense to proclaim a desire to defeat Daesh terrorism by supporting other terrorist groups.

The first speaker then discussed how Turkey took on the initiative to ensure that its own border and national security priorities were defended. Operation Peace Spring was launched primarily to clear the YPG east of the Euphrates, and to establish a safe zone where Syrian refugees could voluntarily return to their country under Turkish, and what was hoped later to be international, protection. Turkey currently hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees; their voluntary repatriation was touted as a way to both help reduce

the burden on Turkey, while also contributing to the rebuilding of Syria.

Ankara also planned to secure Daesh prisoners held by the YPG and ultimately to repatriate them. The first speaker argued that such repatriation efforts for foreign Daesh terrorists must be a multilateral effort, and that Turkey expects its friends and allies to reciprocate and not prevaricate on their international legal obligations. The first speaker said that allied 'states should not shirk their responsibilities,' and that it was unreasonable of them to expect Turkey to shoulder the responsibility of incarcerating hundreds if not thousands of terrorists on their behalf. The EU's failure to honour their obligations to help fund refugee relief efforts was highlighted as being an example of how Turkey felt its allies had previously acted in bad faith. Therefore, they could not be relied upon to absorb terrorist prisoners they did not want in their own countries.

*Turkey had paid a high price in the fight against terrorism stemming from Daesh, Al-Qa-eda, the PKK/YPG and the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation (FETO)*

In terms of countering radicalisation, the first speaker said that Turkey was the largest threat to extremist Islamist groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda. According to the speaker, this was because Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had shown the world how a successful Muslim-majority country could be run in a democratic fashion while not abandoning the religion, culture, and customs of Muslims. This posed a threat to the worldview espoused by radicals such as Daesh, as it gave a viable and successful alternative to their ideological outlook which seeks the imposition of a radical and hardline interpretation of Islamic law.

In light of Turkey's position as a bastion in the fight against terror and in countering radicalisation, the first speaker argued that it was 'time for the international community to stop its double standards when it comes to dealing with terrorism' and to take Turkish concerns seriously. The first speaker highlighted how the PKK/YPG has committed blatant acts of terror; the

PKK has been explicitly recognised as a terrorist organisation by NATO, the EU and the US. Ankara has therefore had expectations that its allies would 'work with us [Turkey] on the ground, not just offer words'. As an example of Turkish commitment to fighting terror, the first speaker indicated that 7,000 people had been deported from Turkey for links to foreign terrorist organisations.

The first speaker concluded by stating that 40,000 Turkish citizens, many of them Kurdish, had been killed by PKK terrorist attacks; Turkey had expected that its allies would stand by them. As a result of the double standards employed by Western powers, particularly within the NATO framework, the first speaker said that this had brought NATO solidarity and reliability into question. This was in and of itself deemed to be globally destabilising; the traditional alliances that have propped up the post-Cold War world order have eroded, and allies have lost trust in one another.

## Counter-Terrorism Approaches and the Middle Eastern Dynamic

The second speaker's presentation began by focusing upon the theoretical aspects of counter-terrorism approaches, and how these have evolved and changed over time. The speaker examined the development of theories according to the context of world events, taking into account the prevailing and dominant powers of each era. The speaker then discussed how these approaches applied to Turkey, and how the Turkish approach to counter-terrorism was influenced by the failure of the Arab Spring, particularly in its near-abroad relationship with Syria.

The second speaker began by commenting upon the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the post-Cold War era, defining a new understanding of terrorism. This was explained in the context of the

United States having prevailed over the Soviet Union, and how Washington's views on terrorism influenced the formation of a counter-terrorism strategy. Of particular concern were Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and the rise of so-called 'religious terrorism'. This was perhaps best exemplified by Al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden; they grew in power and influence over other jihadist groups, committed to the establishment of a fundamentalist understanding of an 'Islamic state'.

The second speaker then segued into how Al-Qaeda's operations led to the 9/11 terror attacks that claimed thousands of lives in New York City in 2001. This marked a paradigm shift. The US counter-terrorism strategy 'experienced a diversification', as the inter-



nationalisation of terrorism had become a global phenomenon. Counter-terrorism was no longer confined to special forces or intelligence operations; it involved regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of the 'Global War on Terror', led by the administration of US President George W. Bush. The United States began to more seriously examine and classify nation-states, such as Iran, as state sponsors of terror.

According to the second speaker, the failure of the Arab Spring in several countries then changed counter-terrorism dynamics once again. This time, terrorism was not only internationalised, but terrorist groups attempted 'to physically control territory', as in the case of Daesh controlling large swathes of Syria and Iraq, establishing a short-lived 'caliphate'. The YPG also controlled vast stretches of Syrian territory. These developments necessitated the primacy of hard military methods to preserve the national integrity and sovereignty of existing nation-states, at the same time protecting the borders of other states from spill-over and the instigation of terror attacks within their borders. A prime example of this was Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, which followed similar operations such as Euphrates Shield in 2016-2017 and Olive Branch in 2018.

The second speaker posited that the 'counter-terrorism toolkit' had been disproportionately influenced by the US counter-terrorism paradigm; as threat perceptions vary from state to state, creation of a global counter-terrorism strategy becomes very difficult. As there is no normative definition of 'terrorism', and that commonalities differ from state to state, there is 'no cohesion in defining terror groups'. Instead, states have even abused the US-established Global War on Terror paradigm, justifying some military actions against dissident groups as being 'counter-terrorism' operations. An example is the Russian intervention into the Syrian conflict in 2015.

Turkey's counter-terrorism strategy was assessed by the second speaker in light of the above, where he drew attention to Ankara's threat landscape. This landscape was predominantly defined in the present era as involving both Daesh and PKK/YPG actions and op-

erations, designed to harm Turkey both domestically and in Turkey's near-abroad in Syria. Due to the lack of commonalities, Turkey has therefore had to develop its own homegrown counter-terrorism strategy. This involves using hard power in both these arenas to ensure Turkish national security objectives are achieved.

The second speaker concluded by defining Turkey's counter-terrorism strategy as being influenced by the proliferation of armed groups and violent non-state actors who seek to use terrorism to take and hold territory. The Turkish approach is therefore characterised as follows:

1. Giving the state primacy as the ultimate legitimate authority
2. A multidimensional containment of primarily the PKK; significant security sector reform, particularly following the FETO coup attempt of 2016
3. Attaining and maintaining intelligence superiority

*Terrorism was not only internationalised, but terrorist groups attempted 'to physically control territory', as in the case of Daesh controlling large swathes of Syria and Iraq, establishing a short-lived 'caliphate'*

## Areas to Address in Future Discussions

While the discussion was centred around counter-terrorism in the post-Daesh era, it was highlighted in the question and answer session that it might be too soon to discuss a post-Daesh environment. At the time the session was held, the Daesh leadership was still at large. (Many senior figures, including self-styled Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, have since been killed.) Daesh cells have begun to increase their activities, particularly in Iraq, where they had already been declared defeated. In addition, the regional circumstances which initially led to the rise of Daesh have not yet been addressed: rampant sectarianism; Iranian interference in both Iraq and Syria; and weakened states which have become very susceptible to instability.

Recently published scholarly literature indicates that because the circumstances which facilitated the rise have not been ameliorated, Daesh itself could make a comeback, or it might morph into a far greater threat, perhaps by aligning with other smaller jihadist groups (Frantzman, 2019). Experts in the field of counter-terrorism with specific interest in Daesh have warned for years that the perpetuation of Iranian interference and government sectarianism in countries like Iraq will allow Daesh to regroup. It could rebuild its capacities, even after having suffered defeats on the battlefield (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield, 2016).

On the subject of Iran, it would be beneficial for experts in the field to assess Iran's level of support for militant groups. Arguably, Tehran has a disproportionate influence on the operations of non-state actors throughout the Middle East. Iran operates a vast network of proxies, from Afghanistan to Iraq, onward to Syria, and even into territories as far away as Yemen. Iran's relationship with the Lebanese Shia Islamist Hezbollah also bears considerable scrutiny, as Hezbollah has been branded a terrorist organisation by regional Arab powers, the United States and others. Hezbollah has been instrumental in the training of Shia jihadists who fight at the behest of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Their involvement in the war in Syria may give an example of how non-state actors may conduct military interventions as if they were state actors.

Future discussions would also greatly benefit from counter-terrorism experts and practitioners who specialise in the various approaches offered by regional state actors: for example Iraq, including its Kurdistan region. The perspectives of international powers such as the United States would also be welcomed, especially in respect to the future of counter-terrorism in light of evolving terrorist organisations. Such discussions would profit from a frank examination at the present state of alliances and alliance building, especially in respect to the efficacy of NATO, which has been called into question in recent years. A combination of regional perspectives and a globalised understanding of terrorism and counter-terrorism would significantly add to understanding.

Finally, it would be very useful to address non-kinetic approaches to counter-terrorism, especially in respect to various countries' approaches to de-radicalisation. As the second speaker highlighted, the current focus is upon hard military power. Softer approaches exist, which utilise mainstream media and social media in countering terrorist propaganda. They offer de-radicalisation programmes for high-risk individuals, build citizenship and encourage 'buy-in' from vulnerable, marginalised and disenfranchised segments of society. These softer approaches, along with other politico-social methods of counter-terrorism, have been side-lined in favour of a more brute force approach.

*Tehran has a disproportionate influence on the operations of non-state actors throughout the Middle East*

## Conclusive Remarks

The closed session on counter-terrorism in the post-Daesh era paid particular attention to Turkey's national security and the application of its counter-terrorism strategy. Specific attention was focused upon the PKK terror group and associated organisations. Turkey's unique counter-terrorism position was assessed from both a policy perspective and a more theoretical approach, taking into account the dominance of American counter-terrorism thinking and the influence of the paradigm in which that thought came about.

Turkey's counter-terrorism strategy was assessed in terms of kinetic aspects, including Ankara's operations on Syrian territory against both Daesh and the YPG, as well as multilateral efforts with the international community to reduce the terror threat. According to the first speaker, the Turkish government, under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was recognised as an example of a Muslim-majority country which posed the most significant threat to groups like Daesh who espouse intolerant worldviews, incompatible with the international system.

The Turkish approach to counter-terrorism was also framed within the wider discussion of the evolution of counter-terrorism dynamics. Three main periods were examined, beginning with the end of the Cold War, moving on to the post-9/11 era, and concluding with the time frame of the Arab Spring.

However, the question remains whether the Daesh era has actually come to an end. Daesh activities have seen a recent uptick in hotbeds such as Iraq, even though the group was officially declared defeated in December 2017. Daesh and organisations like Al-Qaeda have repeatedly shown a great capacity to exploit unrest in countries, taking the opportunity to launch attacks or find breathing space from which they can regroup and rebuild (Lister, 2015).

Iraq, for example, is currently being convulsed by protests against endemic government corruption, as well as the meddling of foreign states like the US, and es-

pecially Iran. Security forces and allied militias, many of whom are loyal to Iran's IRGC, have reportedly used excessive force, leading to hundreds of civilian deaths. In retaliation, some demonstrators have taken matters into their own hands and retaliated with actions like the repeated arson attacks on the Iranian consulate in the southern city of Najaf. With security forces busy stamping out dissent among the Shia Arabs, this could lead to less emphasis placed on intelligence operations designed to root out Daesh cells. This could lead to the terror group's ability to restore some of its military capabilities.

Daesh is not the only terror group, but it has proven itself to be the most lethal. It has been the most effective in putting conventional forces to flight, as was demonstrated by its fearsome effect in 2014 when it conquered one-third of Iraq and a large swathe of Syria (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield, 2016). It might therefore be very beneficial to discuss the resurgence of Daesh, or how it could metamorphose into something far worse.

*Three main periods were examined, beginning with the end of the Cold War, moving on to the post-9/11 era, and concluding with the time frame of the Arab Spring*

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