



## THE DITCHLEY FOUNDATION

### **Global ambitions and local grievances: understanding political Islam**

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Many millions of words have been written in recent years about risks and problems coming from the Islamic world. Even those who have consciously avoided expressions such as the global war on terror juggle terms such as extremism, jihadism, and Islamism. It is assumed that we know what they mean. But how far do we really grasp the essence of what is happening to the people behind these terms? What really drives those who choose to take up the call of jihad, and to become suicide bombers?

One assumption is that a kind of global ideology or religious ambition must lie behind jihadist activity, for example the desire to establish a new caliphate of the kind apparently dreamed of by Osama bin Laden and those close to him. ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State has given this new life by occupying territory in Iraq and Syria, and proclaiming a caliphate there. Even if ultimately short-lived, this movement seems to have proved inspirational for some within Muslim communities around the world, despite the accompanying intolerance, brutality and sectarianism. What are those behind Islamic State really seeking, and how much support do they really have? How should we react? Is there any approach other than a military one?

There is also another side to the alienation of many of those who have taken up arms: local and regional allegiances and grievances, and shared despair at the disappearance of long-established ways of life and of social and cultural organisation. For example, a startlingly high proportion of those involved in 9/11 came from the same part of Saudi Arabia, formerly Yemeni territory, as Osama bin Laden, and shared with him a background of humiliation at the hands of other tribes in the years after the first world war. The so-called shoe bomber was also from the same community. Some Egyptians who have declared allegiance to jihad also appear to be driven as much by economic despair and political disenfranchisement as commitment to a broader global struggle.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, some of those most committed to the struggle against the US are relatives and friends of people killed by the Americans or those seen as their proxies, especially by drone strikes. Again the personal and the local seem at least as important as any wider ideology or political struggle. Could such considerations also help to explain why so few, relatively speaking, from Muslim populations in south-east Asia seem to join the jihadi movements?

This conference aims to bring together scholars and analysts of the Islamic world, as well as policy experts and practitioners, to try to gain a better understanding of the forces behind the phenomenon of militancy in the name of Islam, and to draw conclusions about how others can and should react to this phenomenon.