

## Announcements

### Announcement by the TRI Thesis Award Jury

by Alex P. Schmid

Since 2014, the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) has annually awarded a prize for the best doctoral dissertation in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. The jury currently consists of Prof. James Forest, Prof. Clark McCauley, Prof. Edwin Bakker and Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid (chairman). The criteria which the jury set as quality standards include that deserving theses must demonstrate originality in terms of introducing new data, theory or methodology and that award-worthy theses manifest novelty/uniqueness in their findings. Of the theses submitted in 2017, three met these criteria better than the others and ended as finalists:

Dr. Nicole Tishler. *Fake Terrorism: Examining Terrorists' Resort to Hoaxing as a Mode of Attack*. Carleton University, 2017.

Dr. Vera Mironova. *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists Non-State Armed Groups' Human Resources*. University of Maryland, 2017.

Dr. Dara Conduit. *Breaking the Shackles of 1982: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 2011 Uprising*. Monash University, 2017.

The jury was impressed by all three doctoral dissertations but ultimately decided that the award for the best thesis of the year 2017 in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies should go to Nicole Tishler whose thesis covers a real gap in our understanding of terrorism in a magistral way. The jury was also impressed by the thesis of Vera Mironova whose field research in a number of ongoing civil wars was extraordinarily courageous and produced illuminating results. The third finalist is Dr. Dara Conduit who, based on a wide array of Arabic and other sources, revisited and reconstructed the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian conflict.

The jury wishes to congratulate the three finalists for their achievement. The winner, Dr. Nicole Tishler, will receive a check of US \$ 1,000.- and a formal award certificate from the Terrorism Research Initiative. The other two finalists will receive a formal award certificate, signed by the president of TRI, Robert Wesley.

While the main findings of the winning thesis by Dr. Nicole Tishler have been summarised in the opening article of the current issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, an Abstract of the thesis of Dara Conduit can be found below, alongside some passages from the cover letter with which Vera Mironova submitted her thesis to the jury.

The deadline for submissions for the next competition for the TRI Thesis Award 2018 is 31 March 2019. Conditions remain the same as in previous years

(see: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/494/pdf>).

#### **From the Cover letter of Vera Mironova introducing her Dissertation:**

As of the first part of 2018, the Syrian Civil War is the bloodiest ongoing conflict in the world, and the many attempts to bring the struggle to an end have been ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. One central reason this war has been so protracted is the number of armed factions involved. As the American Chairman of

the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, commented in 2013: “Syria is not about choosing between two sides, but rather about choosing one among many sides.” This multifactional front is a growing military trend in conflicts. Two-thirds of all civil wars between 1989 and 2003 involved more than one rebel group fighting against the government, and since that time, the number of armed groups per civil war is constantly increasing. (...) And although academics and policy-makers have accumulated a substantial body of knowledge about the interaction between groups fighting on opposite sides of the frontline, the internal dynamics between rebel factions and, more specifically, the role ideology plays in these dynamics is not understood as well, which makes choosing a group to support a dangerous guessing game. (...)

And while previous research has looked at this problem from militaristic or religious points of view, my goal is to contribute to understanding how internal competition between rebel factions works and what makes a rebel group successful. I will do this by employing labor market theory and comparing, among other important factors, the human resource policies of different groups. This entails not only looking at the groups, but also the individual fighters. It’s difficult to understand the factions inside rebel forces without understanding the group’s human resources; no armed group can be successful without qualified manpower. Therefore, groups fighting for the same goal within a rebel bloc are also competing for the same potential members, and it is a group’s policies that determine their recruiting, and ultimately their overall, success. And in understanding which policies are successful, it is also important to understand the fighters these groups recruit. First, what decision making process leads prospective fighters to take up arms? And then, once they choose to fight, how do they choose a group to fight with?

In this dissertation, I will explain what I’ve discovered about different fighters’ decision-making processes, step by step. I show that after the initial decision to take up arms (which is based on individual grievances), fighters view armed groups as institutions and make the decision to join or switch groups by comparing their capabilities. The groups that are the best organized internally become the most popular with fighters. At the same time, once a group becomes popular (its supply of fighters exceeds group demand), it is in danger of decreasing the quality of its manpower and its conversion capability. In this case, adopting strict rules grounded in an ideology ensures that only the most dedicated people are in its ranks. Individuals joining for reasons other than dedication to the group’s goal will think twice before joining because membership requires a great deal of individual sacrifices. However, one side effect of using ideology that way is attracting people more interested in ideology than in actual goal of the group: power. Those people not only waste group resources, but their presence is dangerous and leads to internal conflicts. So to be the most effective, a group has to strike a delicate balance between using ideology as a screening mechanism and preventing it from attracting fighters who negatively affect a groups’ military and political strategies.

I illustrate my theory with data based on more than 600 interviews and a focus group conducted with local and foreign members of different armed groups on the Syrian frontlines - ranging from the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) to an al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS - and a dataset of human resource policies from 40 armed groups based on qualitative interviews with group leaders. I also conducted in-depth interviews with members of an ultra-radical sect inside of ISIS, who are currently in hiding. Most previous evidence in insurgency violence literature is post hoc, relying on retrospective interviews of survivors or an individual fighter’s online footprint. My data, drawn from in-person surveys and interviews on the frontlines of the ongoing conflict, affords information gathered in near real-time, avoids survivorship bias, and also sheds light on the intentions of fighters in making particular decisions. My year embedded with Iraqi Special Operations Forces for the Mosul Operation against ISIS allowed me to further confirm these findings through ethnographic research.

### ***Abstract of Dara Conduit’s Dissertation***

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was one of the best-known Syrian opposition groups on the eve of the 2011 Syrian uprising. It immediately involved itself across the emerging opposition landscape, and pledged to uphold the uprising’s democratic goals. Although the Brotherhood’s political platforms had supported democratic

principles for more than six decades, it is more often associated with violence and zealotry because of its involvement in the infamous 1982 Hama massacre.

This thesis uses Debord's concept of the 'Spectacle' to show that the Hama massacre has become a Spectacle of history, where the scale of the event created a mythology that made it difficult to separate fact from rumour, and led to the Brotherhood becoming indistinguishable from the memory of the event. This led the conventional narrative on the Brotherhood after 1982 to consistently depict the group as violent, undemocratic and dogmatic, regardless of the Brotherhood's pre- and post-1982 behaviour or its contemporary character. Thus, Hama became seen as the example *par excellence* of the Brotherhood's nature.

This thesis re-examines the history of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood by asking: 'to what extent does the Brotherhood's history influence the group's role in the 2011 uprising?' It investigates whether the 1982 Hama uprising has skewed interpretations of the movement, and examines the role that the group is playing in the current Syrian conflict. Using a conceptual framework based on the contentious politics literature, buttressed by the lessons of the political organisations and terrorism literature, as well as interviews with Brotherhood and opposition members, Arabic-language documents and archival research, it is shown that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is neither as violent nor as undemocratic as the Hama uprising implied.

A number of key observations are made in the thesis. First, the Brotherhood has been deeply scarred by its experience as an opposition group under the Syrian Ba'th authoritarian regime. Thus, while the Brotherhood's operating context has changed significantly since 2011, it in many ways still behaves as a group operating within an authoritarian environment. Second, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has acquired deep flaws throughout its history including a reputation for opportunism that has prevented it from achieving its much-anticipated political rehabilitation in the current conflict. Finally, although the Hama Spectacle bears little resemblance to reality, the Hama uprising itself remained a central influence. Indeed, the memory of 1982, including the large loss of civilian life, the deviation from the group's long-held goals and the decades of suffering that followed, continued to guide the Brotherhood's decision-making process through the Syrian uprising. In this regard, the Brotherhood remains shackled to the events of 1982 that have led to a stunting of its political abilities and an impediment to its ambitions for political rehabilitation through participation in the current crisis.