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Political Violence in the Middle East

Interview with **Erik Skare**, Sciences Po, Center for International Studies (CERI), CNRS, Paris, France

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Erik Skare is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for International Studies (CERI), Sciences Po, and will be part of the PREVEX project (Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environments). Before joining CERI, Skare was a doctoral research fellow at the University of Oslo where he wrote his PhD thesis on the history of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). His forthcoming books are *A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press) and *Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Islamist Writings on Resistance and Religion* (I.B. Tauris). He answers our questions on his research and on PREVEX, the EU-funded programme he works with here at the CERI.

Can you tell us a bit about your academic background: What was the subject of your PhD and which were your thematic and geographic areas of focus?

My disciplinary background is Arabic, before focusing on the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation. My first book, *Digital Jihad*, which was based on my master's thesis, explored the rapidly evolving and still little understood role of Palestinian hackers—what they did, why they did it, and whether Palestinian hacking constituted a continuation or a rupture with the traditional Palestinian resistance.

I then did my PhD in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oslo, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages. In my thesis, I investigated the history of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and its premise is quite simple: Today, we may take for granted that Islamist groups take part in the Palestinian armed struggle for the liberation of their homeland. Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, is perhaps the foremost representative of this trend. It was not always so, however. On the contrary, Palestinian Islamists were initially reluctant to take up arms. When a group of Palestinian students returned from Egypt in 1981 and proposed that Hamas' precursor, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, should engage violently against the Israeli occupation, the latter refused. Unable to convince the leaders and followers of the Brotherhood, these students set out to form their own project, to create an Islamic militant organization to liberate Palestine through the barrel of a gun. We now know this project by the name Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

While PIJ spent its first years building its base in Gaza, the movement undertook its first military operations in 1984. At the time, violence was what distinguished PIJ from the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Yet, this difference disappeared when Hamas took up arms, only five years after PIJ. From 1989, the two movements were, in principle, almost identical. This raises the question of why PIJ survived as a separate organization with a justification for its existence. In short, my PhD thesis aimed to answer the following question: why PIJ?

You have joined the CERI to work with a EU-funded project called PREVEX (“Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environments”). Can you quickly describe and explain the aims and scope of this project?

The European Union (EU) has developed and refined its counter-terrorism approaches and policies numerous since 2001. Yet, violent extremism continues to take its toll; and “foreign fighters” have gained considerable attention in Europe and its neighborhood, having been linked to several large-scale terrorist attacks—including the attacks in Paris in 2015; in Brussels, Berlin, and Nice in 2016; and in Manchester, London, and Barcelona in 2017.

The overarching objective of the PREVEX project is to contribute to more effective and fine-tuned approaches in order to prevent violent extremism. One of the main objects is to provide an analysis of “enabling environments” and drivers for violent extremism in the Balkans and Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Doing so, at the CERJ we intend to assess the different approaches initiated by the EU and local stakeholders in the Middle East and to analyze whether they are effective and legitimate; irrelevant; or even counterproductive. We will thus attempt to identify lessons learnt and assess how the EU can have a greater impact in its preventive measures in the region.

Your forthcoming book, to be published in a few months, is entitled *A History of Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press). With this work, you provide “a history of PIJ from its inception until today”. Can you present the genesis of this project and the main argument? What makes PIJ different from Hamas?

As mentioned, the premise of the book is the question of how PIJ could survive, and grow to the extent that it did, given the emergence of the far larger sister-movement Hamas. The central argument is that PIJ was established and subsequently evolved due to Palestinian historical processes and because of dynamics specific to PIJ. As the majority of PIJ’s founding fathers were affiliated with the secular-nationalist currents, they were swayed by the belief in religion’s transformative potential in the 1960s and 1970s. More importantly, when doing so, they preserved their secular, activist political ethos, and logic, although it was now framed through religious symbolism. The establishment of PIJ did thus not entail the formation of a characteristically new ideology, but rather the re-articulation of already-existing ones. There are consequently direct lines from the Palestinian secular-nationalist currents of the late 1960s to contemporary PIJ. Because this was an ethos distinctively different from that of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, the latter was unable to absorb these activists into its ranks. PIJ and Hamas thus derive their practices from two different political traditions with consequences for the movements’ ~~contemporary~~ practices. In effect, PIJ and Hamas developed into two specific and divergent Palestinian currents in the debate on how, and how much of, Palestine is to be liberated.

Interview by Miriam Perier, CERJ