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## *The Jihadist Discourse of the Islamic Community of Kosovo: the Case of Syria*

### **Abstract**

*This article aims at analyzing the discourse used by the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK) to invoke involvement in “the sacred war” in Syria. As the Arab Spring was spreading, an armed conflict began in Syria; amongst the fighting participants were to be found jihadist groups that managed to convince many young Muslims to join their cause through a religious discourse. The discourse of summons for jihad was structured by references to the sacred Islamic texts, the Qur’an and the Hadith, while a special emphasis was put on the comparison of the sufferings of Kosovars and Syrians in order to make the discourse more convincing and emotional for the audience. This type of jihadist discourse became part of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, which managed to convince a considerable number of young people to join these jihadist groups in Syria. This article focuses on the analysis of the circular of July 2012 released by the Islamic Community of Kosovo, which was read simultaneously in over eight-hundred mosques in the country. Through the methodology of discourse analysis, this paper aims at detecting the linguistic strategy used in the discourse of these clerics, which will be analyzed at three levels: coherence, cohesion, and speech acts. It aims at revealing specific forms of religious discourse within which are to*

*be found linguistic nuances of audience persuasion for involvement in Syria's armed conflict.*

**Keywords:** *persuasive language; discourse analysis; coherence; cohesion; speech acts; ideology.*

### *1. Introduction*

The protests that are also called The Arab Spring which began in Tunisia and later continued in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, in 2011 spread to Syria, which was governed by president Bashar Al Asad. Syrian protesters belonged to heterogeneous ideologies and groups, starting from the Muslim Brotherhood of Islamist tendency, nationalists, liberalists, to democrats and radical Islamists, who later on created the armed groups that fought against the official Syrian army. Islamist-jihadist movements were separated into groups such as ISIS (Daesh), Al Nusra, and Jaysh al-Islam. Apart from having other devices, these groups also had their propagandist and recruitment apparatus; in order to assemble as many militants and supporters as possible, they had devised a discourse based on religious Islamic ideology. Through this discourse they affected young Muslims in a worldwide basis and in this way they persuaded them to join their groups. The propagandists and spokespeople of these groups formulated lectures and statements (whether virtual or at religious buildings) with Quranic verses and prophetic hadiths. More specifically, they had actualized and contextualized prophetic hadiths which appealed for direct involvement in the war in Syria (Sham). This type of rhetoric's was applied by radical Muslim clerics in many places "including European states" (Berube 2018) and those of the Balkans. Many of these clerics that followed a Wahhabist-Salafist ideology, used a

jihadist rhetoric's through which they persuaded young people to join terrorist groups fighting in Syria.

Some Albanian clerics and Muslim followers also joined the call for involvement in Syria's war. Through social media and through some mosques, they used a discourse that invoked calls for jihad, as a result of which around 300 Kosovars joined Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq. Among these, the Friday religious lecture (Khutbah) which was distributed as a circular and read at the same time in eight-hundred (800) mosques across Kosovo must be singled out. This lecture which was devised and distributed by the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK) as the highest religious authority in Kosovo, was read in the July of 2012, at the time when radical Islamic groups were being established. Hence, this article analyzes the lecture of ICK through the methodology of discourse analysis. This lecture has been selected for analysis because it has been signed and distributed by the highest religious Muslim institution in Kosovo and contains the signature of the Grand Imam of Kosovo, Sabri Bajgora. Another reason for selecting this lecture is the fact that it was read simultaneously at over eight-hundred mosques of the country where most of the religious practitioners had the chance to listen to it. Additionally, this lecture was read during Friday's prayer (Jumu'ah), as the most important prayer time for Muslims, in which all male individuals are religiously obligated to attend. Therefore, the number of participants at this lecture was great and too diverse. Hence, it is deduced that the analysis of this lecture may create a general representation for one of the main persuasion mechanisms of young Kosovars to participate in the war in Syria.

Persuasion has been defined as human communication designed to influence the autonomous judgments and actions of

others (Simons, Morreale, Gronbeck 2001:7). Thus, it has a purpose and aim. Language is the tool for achieving this aim. A persuasive language aims at convincing people to accept a point of view or an idea. Yet, it is not easy to detect the difference between an informative text and a persuasive text. The most common definition is usually based on the purpose of the author. (O'Keefe 1990) But, even the purpose of the author is not easily identified. Thus, there are no clearly defined techniques to measure the persuasion of a text, although ever since Antiquity, Aristotle (4th cen. BC) has dealt with three types (logos, ethos, and pathos) of the persuasive text. Even in modern times, persuasive language and the ideology it expresses have been studied by various researchers; for instance, Fairclough (2001) assumes that ideology is placed at the structure of discourse, while as a social practice it is formed by the world around us but it also forms it. Language as a social practice can be manipulated to express the beliefs and ideologies of the speakers. That is why he assumes that every linguistic signifier has experimental value and that ideology in a text is revealed through the method of using linguistic elements (Fairclough 2001). Therefore, in this article focuses only on the analysis of the linguistic strategy used in this lecture (Khutbah – in religious terminology, a weekly lecture given on Fridays).

## *2. Scientific Methodology*

The most adequate methodology for the analysis of the action and implications of the calls for jihad in Syria by radical Muslim clerics is Discourse Analysis. “In contrast to classical analyses of linguistics, in discourse analysis the focus is not on morphologic and syntactic elements that constitute a sentence as the main category of a text, but we also observe other elements

and realities beyond the text, i.e. the temporal, cultural, social context.” (Fairclough 2001:8). Discourse Analysis is important due to the fact that through this methodology, particular social groups or perhaps all of society is acquainted to the interrelatedness between knowledge and power, and in this way people may be able to grasp the function of language and its effect in the creation of realities as well as beliefs and attitudes to such realities. When discussing discourse analysis, Chourliaraki and Fairclough assume that “knowledge (from the point of view of Discourse Analysis) has the mission of making available all types of knowledge which are not usually produced by random people or cannot reach them in their daily lives”, (Chourliaraki & Fairclough 1999:3), “to help the improvement and substantial disregard of people towards the importance of language in producing, storing and changing social rapports, as well as to contribute in enhancing vigilance with regards to how language performs a function in changing powers. That is why vigilance is the first step towards freedom.” (Fairclough 1996:2)

Through this methodology, we’ll emphasize the dimension of the functions of the language of the Muslim cleric in Kosovo, as a result of which certain knowledge was created, through which a considerable number of Kosovars joined the war in Syria. (Kursani 2015:7)

The aim of this research is to discover linguistic strategies through linguistic mechanisms used in this Khutbah for which there is evidence that a section of the audience was persuaded to join the war in Syria.

The linguistic strategy used in this lecture is analyzed at three levels: coherence, cohesion, and speech acts. Since there is no defined method to measure persuasion, this text is analyzed by using Van Dijk’s method (1980) in order to evaluate macro-

proposals in the text, Barbara Johnston (1991) for the cohesion level, and Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) for speech acts.

In order to discover macro-proposals in the text this paper makes use of macro-rules (Van Dijk's terminology) at the level of coherence. According to Van Dijk, macro-proposals can be revealed through four rules: 1) deletion, which focuses on eliminating proposals that are not relevant for the interpretation of other proposals in the discourse, 2) generalization, through which a series of different proposals are summarized in a more general proposal, 3) construction, according to which a macro-proposal can be created out of some proposals, and 4) rule-zero, which assumes that all proposals are relevant during analysis.

Cohesion as the other element has been selected as a linguistic mechanism in order to explore the persuasive language in this text due to the fact that cohesion is not only a linguistic quality within the text, but it also guides readers to perform other specific mental activities. So, apart from its grammatical function, cohesion also serves other functions and purposes. Barbara Johnstone (1991) proposes that repetition as a cohesive device may have persuasive and emotional influence to the audience. She has studied persuasion strategies in Arab texts and has reached the conclusion that repetition plays a fundamental role in convincing the audience.

Although this textual analysis involves other cohesion devices apart from repetition, such as hyponymy, substitution, reference, etc., the main focus is on repetition which functions as a cohesion device in 60% of the text.

With regards to speech acts, this research firstly detects verbs of an illocutive nature, after which, based on the type of performative verbs, types of illocutive acts such as declarative, assertive, directive, commissive and expressive were found in

the text, due to the fact that most of performative verbs of an illocutive force also reveal the perlocutionary act within the sentence of persuasion effects in the audience.

*3. Syria (Sham) in the discourse of the Muslim cleric in Kosovo*

With the establishment of fighting groups in Syria began the call for Muslims across the world to become part of these groups. Jihadist groups like Al Nusra Front and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) were able to expand their discourse in the entire world through social media and satellite programs. This discourse mostly consisted of religious Islamic references, especially some selected Quranic verses and prophetic hadiths, which suited their ideology. What must be emphasized here is that in “the Islamic orthodox theology, the Qur’an and Hadith as the two basic references, surpass the concept of the text’s historicity and, as a result, are permanent and applicable at all times and places” (Daher 2008:15). Hence, according to this theology, they can and must be applied in the exact way as they were applied at the time in which they first appeared 14 centuries ago in the Arabian Peninsula. Historic Islamic studies inform us that before being occupied by Muslims, Sham (Syria and a part of Iraq) had a pivotal role for the Prophet Muhammad and his people, whether for its geographic and economic position or for the culture it had in those times. (Alkhateeb 2014:84). Thus, obtaining Syria had become a central ideal for Prophet Muhammad and his army. That is why before it was occupied, Muhammad had articulated great and epic words about Syria, with the purpose of boosting the motivation and morale of his soldiers in order to obtain the land. These words which were stated 1400 years ago in an entirely different spatial

context from the one today were used by Muslim clerics around the world and the ones in Kosovo in order to structure their persuasive discourse with the purpose of convincing Muslims to join the war in Syria.

Thus, Sham (Syria) has been one of the central subjects of the discourse of the Albanian Muslim cleric in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia throughout the years 2012-2014. Even in the lecture of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, a community known for its traditional Albanian-Turkish interpretation of Islam, a more open-minded and peaceful interpretation, exist similar references and premises of summons to Jihad resembling the summons of Wahhabist-Salafist Islamic groups. This influence lasted until the moment in which key groups such as Al Nusra and ISIS became part of the black list of the US and Europe as terrorist groups. As a result of these invocations, around 300 young Kosovar Muslims joined these radical Islamic groups in Syria, thus becoming “a serious concern for national security in Kosovo” (Demjaha & Peci 2016:5). In the following lecture will be noticed many references and linguistic premises which, either directly or indirectly, aim at influencing the Kosovar Muslim adherent religiously and emotionally so that he becomes part of the war in Syria.

#### *4. The social context of the Kosovar youth indoctrinated by radical islamic ideas*

For a long period of time (1389-1912), Kosovo was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire which had expanded its cultural influence in the Ballkans through mosques, tekkes, schools, administration and army. Islamization of a considerable number of Albanians of the region of the Ballkans came as a result of this Ottoman administrative and cultural expansion. Hence,

these Islamicized Albanians lived and worked within the paradigms of the epistemology and cosmogology of this Oriental-Islamic culture for centuries.

This situation lasted until the installment of communist systems in Albania and in ex-Yugoslavia, in which Kosovo was included. The communist regime produced an educational anti-religious system which prohibited the normal development of religious institutions by declaring Islam as the religion and culture of the enemy. Thus, muslim clerics, educated and established in half-illegal institutions, isolated from the developments of knowledge and science in the world, began to be insufficient in the spiritual guide of Kosovar muslims. In such context, a theological emptiness surfaced, which was detected from the year 1980 and onwards by clerics that were getting an education in Arabic places of a tradition and culture that differed from the Albanian tradition and culture.

The theological references and as a result, the rhetorics of these young Kosovar clerics, were more islamic (i.e. they targeted the political dimension of religion), and in this way, they were approachable to Kosovar youth that was detaching from the communist idealist system. Additionally, the chaotic condition in Kosovar society of the years after the war of 1998-1999 offered the opportunity for many organisations of Islamic tendencies camouflaged as humanitarian organizations to settle in Kosovo. By using the poverty of many families as well as the spiritual emptiness created because of the communist system, these organizations in collaboration with clerics educated in Arabic places, managed to recrute a great number of young Albanian Kosovars, who would later be used for the interests of their states and donors (See: Kursani 2015:36). Therefore, young Kosovars were and continue to be object of jihadist

discourses, and may belong to different social classes; they can be either uneducated or they can belong to a superior education, and, at times, one of them might be born and educated in a European country.

### *5. The Content of ICK's Delivery*

The delivery<sup>1</sup> of the Islamic Community of Kosovo devised by Grand Imam Sabri Bajgora begins by describing the situation in Syria, which is represented as “extraordinary”, while the people of Syria are described as “miserable”. The lecture states: “By the permission of Allah, today we are going to present before you a Khutbah formulated and unified by ICK across Kosovo. It refers to an extraordinary war condition of a miserable people in one of the blessed lands of the Islamic world. Syria is a neighboring country of Turkey in which, for a year and a half, horrible massacres are taking place. Allow me to speak on the importance of this land which is also known as Sham or the Lands of Sham.”

Further, the discourse is built on the Quranic verse: “for We saved him and Lot, [his brother's son, by guiding them] to the land which We have blessed for all times to come” (Quran, 21/71), and according to the creator of this delivery, the “blessed land” mentioned here is Sham. Once Syria is considered the “blessed land”, the delivery counts the six “privileges of this land”, which other lands of the world do not have, and a prophetic hadith is provided for each of these privileges. The privileges enumerated in ICK's lecture are: 1. “The Land of Sham is a blessed land”, 2. “Shame is the chosen land of Allah”,

<sup>1</sup>“Hytybe kushtuar refugjatëve dhe të zhvendosurve në Siri”. (Prishtinë, 3 korrik 2012) <https://bislame.net/hytbesiri/> Accessed on: 03/08/2012. All further references are retrieved from this source.

3. “The angels of Allah have spread their wings over Sham”, 4. “The Pillar of Religion has been placed in Sham”, 5. “The believers of Sham stand stoically in Religion”, and 6. “Damascus will be the fortification of believers in the last days”. Thus, each of these ‘privileges’ is accompanied by prophetic hadiths, some of which will be part of this analysis.

Afterwards, the lecture focuses on other parts such as “The actual state in Syria” and “Our obligation towards Muslims in Syria”, all of which are pivotal for the mobilization and orientation of the convictions of Muslim believers towards Syria. Besides giving the Syrian president Bashar al Asad qualities such as “a dictator”, “cruel”, “bloodthirsty”, the first part also incited hate against the Alawis community by calling it a “deviated sect”. Here, it must be emphasized that a great number of Balkan’s Albanians belong to this sect. In the second part, which is also the last one, there is a direct appeal for help and solidarity with the Syrians, but the form and method of help and solidarity is not defined. More specifically, the text is: “In this humanitarian initiative initiated by the Islamic Community of our Republic, it is our obligation, brothers, to react as much as we can, i.e. even the smallest form of contribution must not be underestimated, because unity is strength, and all cents go to Allah as do thousands and millions.”

### *6. Analyses and Findings*

The discourse that is the object of this paper takes place in religious buildings of Kosovo, at a time in which they are filled with religious believers. The environments in mosques is spiritual and “through the words and prayers of clerics (imams), the believers aim to create a connection with their god. In such an environment, the possibility for creating convictions and

giving in to them is great.” (Abu Zayd 2004:214) Yet, the discourse of the clerics in the Friday of the 6th of June 2012 had another effect, and served a different cause which was not religious or spiritual. This section analyzes ICK’s lecture and explores the ways in which language (as discourse) produces knowledge which is disregarded by the masses and, as a result, a number of religious believers are convinced to join Islamic extremist groups in Syria.

Coherence as a linguistic mechanism has been selected with the purpose of observing the strategy used at the macro level, in which cases macro-proposals for each paragraph have been emphasized.

In the first paragraph of the circular, it can be formulated that the macro-proposal is familiarizing the audience to the current situation in Sham; this macro-proposal is expanded in the second paragraph by denoting the states that belong to the land of Sham, such as: Palestine, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, by calling them the most blessed lands of the earth. Additionally, attitudes about these being the most blessed lands on Earth are expressed by including Qur’anic verse and prophetic hadiths as they are reliable resources for the masses; Bettinghaus and Cody (1994) declare that statements from competent/reliable source are usually referred to in order to change the listeners’ point of view. The persuasion strategy used here is based on citing the name that has power over the masses by emphasizing the content proposed by the message. This persuasion strategy is used consistently from the fourth paragraph to the fourteenth, i.e. by using hadiths, the text includes names of authority for the audience in order to enhance the emphasis on the content and to introduce the credibility of the argument.

The macro-proposal for the third and fourth paragraph is the migration of two prophets to Sham and their salvation as a consequence of this migration: (citation) Allah tells us how he saved Abraham and Lut and made them migrate to the blessed land, the aim of this passage is to create a positive attitude in the audience about the migration to the land of Sham, by manipulating through comparisons such as prophets/believers. Thus, up to the eighth paragraph, information is provided through positive attributes that refer to this land.

The macro-proposal for stirring up involvement at the war of Sham has been detected in the fifth paragraph in the citation of a hadith: (citation) The Prophet has said: “Pursue-Aspire towards Sham because it is the chosen Land of Allah; there he places His best people-believers. Also, the sixth paragraph continues insisting that the people that move there are the best people of the earth: (citation) The Prophet also says: “There will be hijrah after hijrah, and the best people of the earth are those that follow best the migration spot of Abraham, i.e. Sham”.

Paragraphs 13 to 22 in the circular incite feelings of pity. The war in Syria is explained by comparing it to the war in Kosovo in such a way that it makes the receiver of the message indignant, thus emotionally manipulated: (citation) Dear adherents, television footage shows the same scenes we have experienced by Serbs 12-13 years ago.

Paragraphs 23 to 31 of this circular invoke people to contribute to the war in Syria, making their contribution obligatory: (citation) It is a strict obligation for all believers to help their religious brothers according to their current possibility and respective competence. Yet, there are some general things for all believers regardless of position and situation they are in.

All these comparative and descriptive strategies used here serve to convince the receiver through logic.

Cohesion. Of all types of cohesion in this text, the most frequent is the use of repetition as a type of lexical cohesion, although at times some of the elements that are repeated are not entirely identical. As a tool, repetition only joins two or more sentences, but it also joins paragraphs. One case is the following:

Citation: Sham is the chosen land of Allah. – Pursue-Aspire towards Sham because it is the chosen Land.

By repeating the nominal phrase chosen land, the nominal syntagm Sham and the verbal syntagms pursue-aspire, the aim of the text is to convince the masses that this is indeed a sacred land, thus it should be pursued.

Citation: There's no doubt that believers are brothers in Religion and that they are bound by the strongest connection that exists, the connection of faith and of religion. Allah the Almighty says: "Truly, believers are brothers". As such, believers have reciprocal feelings for one-another in mirth as well as in sorrow. The Prophet p.b.u.h. used to say: "Believers are one body: if a part of it complains, the rest of it is alarmed..." Thus, it is a strict obligation for all believers to help their believer brothers according to their current possibility and respective competence. Yet, there are some general things for all believers regardless of the position and situation they are in.

In the section above, the frequent repetition of syntagms believers, brothers, religion, reflects a call for unification of all believers as they are brothers in religion and it's their obligation to help one-another.

Citation: Charity (Alb. sadaka) is a devotion continually required from Muslims, and especially in those special cases in

which the need is urgent and immediate as in this case, because in the day of judgment all of us will seek shelter under the shade of our charity (sadakë) and the bigger the charity the bigger the shade.

In the paragraph above, through the repetition of the syntagm charity (sadaka) the text aims to motivate and call the audience for all forms of contribution for the war in Syria.

According to Johnston (1991), repetition creates linguistic cohesion by evoking linguistic units; it creates a persuasion force, and by performing all of the above, it creates a convincing language.

The other linguistic mechanism selected in the research of the persuasion strategy of ICK's circular is speech act, which attempts to find the meaning of statements in the context of the speaker based on the illocutive force of the sentence in order to detect the prelocutive effect of the statement. Based on the illocutive force of the verbs in this corpus, 62% of the verbs have illocutive force (for instance, allow, am, speak, know, prove, complain, alarm, accept, make familiar, present, do, order, express, pray, ask, leave, insist, torture, etc.), while 38% of these verbs do not have illocutive force as they simply express a particular action. The cases presented below contain some verbs of illocutive force which show the illocutive type of the statement and the prelocutive effect it might have on its listener:

Citation: Pursue/Aspire towards Sham because it is the chosen Land of Allah.

Locutive act: Pursue Sham because it is the chosen Land of Allah.

Illocutive act: directive

Prelocutive act: persuasion effect

One may say that according to speech acts this statement belongs to the directive type which aims at inviting the addressee to carry an action.

Citation: This is one of the most blessed lands of the earth.

Locutive act: This is one of the most blessed lands of the earth.

Illocutive act: representative

Prelocutive act: persuasion effect

Based on the illocutive force expressed by the verb, it can be concluded that this sentence pertains to representative speech acts, the aim of which is for the indicated proposal to be considered as being true by the listener.

Citation: The President of Syria and the supreme general of armed forces, this dictator, the son of a dictator, this cruel man, the son of a cruel man, a bloodthirsty man, the son of a bloodthirsty man, with his elite have installed a complete system of terror and violence over civilians.

Locutive act: The President of Syria and the supreme general of armed forces, this dictator, the son of a dictator, this cruel man, the son of a cruel man, a bloodthirsty man, the son of a bloodthirsty man, with his elite have installed a complete system of terror and violence over civilians.

Illocutive act: declarative

Akti prelokutiv: persuasive/influential effect

This sentence pertains to the declarative type of speech acts, the aim of which is to change and incite a certain issue in the mind of the listener. The character of this communication of a persuasive nature is determined through some steps: at first the ideology is presented, then the credibility of this ideology enhances for the audience, after which the audience is convinced.

The strategy of persuasive language is understood through these elements:

In this text, information about the land of Sham is given by referring to its value through positive attributes, for instance: The Land of Sham is a blessed land; This land is one of the most blessed land on earth; Because the angels of Allah have spread their wings over Sham; There will be hijrah after hijrah, and the best people of the earth are those that follow best the migration spot of Abraham, i.e. Sham; these positive attributes directly influence the minds of the people present that practice Islam, by envisioning that land as an extraordinary land.

After positive attributes are stated, the call for war is done indirectly through a hadith: Abdullah ibn Havaleh transmits that the Prophet p.b.u.h. has said: “Pursue-Aspire towards Sham because it is the chosen Land of Allah; there he places His best people-believers”, which suggests that whoever goes to that land will be promised the epithet of the best person.

This persuasion strategy also expands when the war in Kosovo is compared to the one in Syria, so that the audience is manipulated emotionally. Furthermore, the persuasion power enhances through linguistic expressions such as: it is our obligation to help; brothers, it is our obligation to respond as much as we can; unity is power and to Allah, etc. (i.e. through the linguistic expression our obligation, the public sees offering help or migrating to Syria as a moral task, while the national phraseology unity is power directly manipulates the Kosovar audience).

The persuasive strategy is also strengthened with the use of declarative acts (decide, give, support, etc.), representative acts (do, dedicate, express, etc.) and directives (aspire, pursue, ask, etc.) of a persuasive prelocutive effect and of intertextual

characteristics as tools for the support of facts of various types, whether presented as statistics or as other sources such as names, dates, hadiths, all of which ensure a solid basis for the credibility of the message, to which are added other lexical tools such as repetition (through repetition there is a call for unity, for contribution to Syria and for evoking love for that land).

### *7. Conclusion*

As the war in Syria began, many Muslim clerics around the World, including those in Kosovo, became part of the propaganda and appeals to join fighting groups in Syria, including groups of extremist and terrorist tendencies. Part of this activity became a Delivery (Khutbah) released as a circular by the Islamic Community of Kosova (ICK) in the July of 2012, which was read at the Friday prayer (Jumu'ah) in all mosques of Kosovo. The analysis of this delivery/lecture through the methodology of discourse analysis concludes that the delivery contains powerful premises of summoning for war involvement, as a result of which around 300 Kosovars joined fighting groups in Syria. By referring to Qur'anic verse and prophetic hadiths, this delivery builds a discourse through which it incites the feelings of Kosovar Muslims for any form of solidarity or participation in the war of Syria. In order to enhance its effect, this discourse also compares the suffering of the Kosovar people to the suffering of Syrians. The results of this analysis indicate that through this delivery the Islamic Community of Kosovo, either consciously or unconsciously, placed itself alongside groups and individuals that openly summoned people to join extremist groups in Syria.

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