



## INTERVIEW WITH GARETH DAVIS

### GRADUATE OF TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE, UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

#### 1. *Hello Gareth. Can you please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about you.*

I am a recent graduate of the University of St. Andrew's Terrorism and Political Violence Masters program. Before completing my Masters, I was an undergraduate student at the University of Glasgow, where I graduated in 2015 with a Joint-Honours degree in English Literature and Political Science. Academically, I have focussed on a range of subjects within these fields. I am particularly interested in the ways in which political violence intersects with wider cultural and social issues. As part of my undergraduate thesis, I analysed pieces of literature from the Romantic era (1780s-1820s) that depicted the revolutionary and political violence of the period. This immersion into the historiography and discourse of historical political violence as part of my research proved invaluable in giving me a strong grounding in the historical origins of non-state actor violence, and how these manifestations influenced future politically violent movements. Furthermore, this research also fostered my interest in present day terrorism and political violence and my desire to understand such movements fully and comprehensively. From this, I decided to pursue an MLitt in Terrorism and Political Violence at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at St. Andrew's.

#### 1. *Can you tell us a little bit about your background in CVE, terrorism and political violence?*

I have always had a passionate interest in politics and world affairs. With the emergence of terrorism as one of the defining security threats in the West over the last decade or so, I became interested in understanding the origins, causes and justifications for these forms of political violence in all their manifestations. While initially interested in Islamic extremist groups, I have since broadened these areas of interest to encompass a wide range of research topics. Having studied the subject of terrorism in depth and graduated in December 2016, I have since taught a course for Oxbridge Academy's St. Andrew's summer school entitled "Terrorism in the Modern World". This was a program for 15-18 year olds which explored the fundamental questions surrounding terrorism in the modern day, such as the origins of the phenomenon, how groups justify their violence, why individuals join terror organisations, as well as how states and security services have attempted to fight terrorism and the success and failures of various methods.

#### 2. *Predominantly, what has been your research focus/interest?*





My predominant research interest has been religious-inspired and sectarian violence committed by terrorist groups. My Master's thesis focussed on the justifications outlined by Islamic State (a Sunni group) for their anti-Shia violence, utilising their propaganda and leadership statements to understand the deeply historical, political and religious roots to this profound anti-Shia hatred. This sectarian dimension is one of the defining features of Islamic State (the Shia constituting their biggest target in Iraq and Syria) yet is often neglected in Western-centric analyses of the group. By understanding the sectarian aspects, I have also sought to recognise its importance to the group's overall ideological makeup and the role it plays in the configuration of Islamic State's apocalyptic worldview and belief system. On top of this, I have also examined the rise of Shia militias and terrorist groups in Iraq that have or currently still are engaged in anti-Sunni sectarian violence. This development in Iraq post-2003 was one of the key events in placing Iraq on the course to civil war, and such groups remain a major obstacle to any self-sustaining stability or peace in Iraq. As part of this research I have looked at wider geopolitical sectarianism within the region involving Iran (Shia) and Saudi Arabia (Sunni), and the role each nation has played in sponsoring sectarian terrorist groups throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. Outside of Islamic contexts, I have also studied the role sectarian violence played in The Troubles conflict in Northern Ireland between Catholic and Protestant communities. I have sought to apply some of the lessons learned there to the situations within parts of the Middle East to see if cross-national and cross-cultural experiences share certain similarities or if the lessons from one sectarian conflict can be applied to others in different contexts.

**3. *Within the realm of CVE and terrorism, what do you think is the greatest challenge globally and regionally (in Europe)?***

Globally, I believe the biggest challenge in the realm of terrorism remains the conflict situations in places such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and parts of North Africa that continue to be wracked by intense violence and political struggles. The conflicts in those nations and regions have in turn helped exacerbate wider geopolitical crises such as the migrant crisis and the terrorist violence recently seen throughout Europe. Until stability and genuine long-lasting peace is brought to these areas, these crises are likely to get worse. Furthermore, these areas also provide havens for terrorist groups to operate and plan future attacks. Regionally within Europe, the threat of home-grown terrorists who have either travelled to these areas of conflict or returned or who have decided to attack parts of Europe on their own remains a serious issue. Learning how to prevent these attacks while respecting the norms and principles of liberal democratic nations is perhaps the biggest challenge facing European countries currently.





- 4. Speaking of geography and regions, since you are based in the UK, you have unfortunately had the chance to see the impact of terrorism in your local community (London & Manchester attacks). In your opinion, what is the reason for this type of behavior, how can it be better prevented and countered?**

The reason for the recent attacks in the UK stem from a complex nexus of personal individual motivation and wider political events. A shared sense of personal grievance (such as anger at the West's actions in the Middle East for example), together with individual attraction to the message propagated by Islamic State or other extremist groups may be one of the factors in the process that entails a journey towards political violence. Preventing and countering these events requires cooperation between the police/security services and society at large, aimed at contesting and impugning the message of terrorist groups such as Islamic State and ensuring that individuals who may be vulnerable to such messages are presented with other viewpoints and guided away from the lure of these groups.

- 5. Does your work focus on a particular region (Africa, Middle East, Balkans, UK, USA, EU) and the security threats in that particular region? In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges in that particular region?**

My work focuses primarily on the Middle East. The biggest challenge here I feel is the regional tensions and proxy wars currently being fought by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Each nation seeks to gain hegemony over the Middle East and as a result both have sponsored violent groups throughout the region to attack and destroy the power structures put in place by the other and extend their spheres of influence. This has seen the region become consumed once again by major sectarian violence. From this context, long-lasting sectarian and political hostility is the long-term result. The implications of this also stretch beyond the Middle East. Securing serious and sustained peace agreements in nations affected by violence and convincing Saudi Arabia and Iran to stop sponsoring militia groups and terrorist organisations of influence remains the key to securing regional stability. Addressing this regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia properly would see a genuine reduction in the amount of violence throughout the region.

- 6. What are the crucial zones of CVE? (Shift in the focus from the Middle East and Iraq/Syria, but to where exactly)?**

A coherent CVE strategy should be all-encompassing and comprehensive. A piecemeal approach will not work. It also must be adaptable to different contexts and individuals, as every individual's journey into





extremism and potentially violence will be different. Similarities may emerge between cases, but the process will be highly specific to each individual. I believe the most important feature of CVE is the need to counter the power of extremist narratives. These narratives offer a coherent explanation of the world, articulating stories of injustice and revenge and legitimising the use of violence in ways that have a deep appeal on an intense personal level. Before individuals become directly involved in violence, they will have been continuously exposed to these narratives and absorbed much of their content. For instance, countering Islamic State narratives may involve illustrating how their narrative is based on a false reading of history that distorts and fabricates stories in order to demonise their enemies and elevate themselves. Counter-narratives must also offer a coherent explanation of the world and tackle these issues of injustice but do so in a way that emphasises the moral bankruptcy of extremist ideologies and how they fail to offer any solution to political grievances.

**Prepared by: Jovana Perovska**

