Undermining the enemy's power: how NGOs can protect sunnis in Iraq from radicalism by looking at Colombia's war against the FARCS

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Abstract   The fight against ISIS in Iraq has weakened the terrorist group, which lost control of previously controlled stronghold areas. Despite the fact that ISIS is yet to be dismantled and defeated, the international community and the local government have now had the challenge of rebuilding a state in rubbles. Moreover, the authorities' challenges also include regaining trust among citizens, who had ISIS as a service provider during the period they took over entire regions in Iraq. This paper provides insights into policy practices NGOs have built in Colombia during the protracted civil war against the FARCS that could be adopted and implemented in Iraq. These practices serve multiple purposes. On the one hand, they can aid the government in restoring peace, building trust among traumatized citizens, and strengthening governance in post-conflict Iraq. On the other, they have the long-term objective of combating further societal radicalization through extremists' influences.

Contents

Introduction

In the Middle East, an American-led international coalition has been fighting the Islamic State (ISIS)[1] since it established its caliphate in Mosul, northern Iraq, in 2014. Since then, ISIS has taken control of many cities in Iraq and later in Syria, having the city of Raqqa as a main area of influence.[2] Even though ISIS has been shrinking in controlling areas: it lost about 14% of its territory in 2015, made almost 20,000 Iraqi civilians victims since the war broke out in 2014,[3] and has lost around 45,000 fighters.[4]

While ISIS's physical defeat is not a reality yet, their lost territories now under control of Iraqi and international military forces are in need of assistance, either from the local government or international missions and NGOs. This essay aims at the latter. The goal is to help peacekeeping non-governmental organizations to operate and empower citizens who live and can be (or have been) co-opted by extremist and radical movements in a poly-national environment. For that, lessons taken from NGOs working in the middle of the Colombian civil war between local governments and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, considered as a terrorist organization by the United States,[5] will be offered.

The main achievement of such experiments was to help ethnical minorities living in areas under influence of the guerrilla more likely to protect themselves against guerrilla members and other paramilitary organizations, and to pave the way for their reaching common goals and

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[1] "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps," *BBC News*, April 28, 2017, sec. Middle East, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034.

[2] "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps," *BBC News*, April 28, 2017, sec. Middle East, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034.

[3] "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps," *BBC News*, April 28, 2017, sec. Middle East, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034.

[4] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.

[5] "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *U.S. Department of State*, accessed May 21, 2017, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm.

interests as peace communities,[6] according to a study published in 2006, years before a deal between the FARC and the government was reached in 2016.[7]

It's out of the scope and the intentions of this article to recommend any sort of agreement or negotiations with ISIS. On the contrary, by implementing and helping minorities in Iraq to hold together, protect themselves, and alleviate their grievances with third-parties' help, NGOs will be undermining not only ISIS's power of influence and control, on one hand. Parallel to that, they will be establishing a bridge between these localities and the government by helping them address past differences towards goals shared by the nation regardless of ethnicities — such a higher rate of employment or better public services.

A rampant division

Understanding the roots of the problem and why they are considered by radical movements in Iraq is crucial for NGOs that either do fieldwork, offering services, or advocating for changes. According Robin Wright in an article published at *The New Yorker* It's good news that ISIS's territory is shrinking, but that doesn't mean that retaking control over ISIS's lost territories can eliminate the ultraconservative interpretation of Sunni Islam that the group claims to represent.[8] To sell the idea of the caliphate — with the use of a misrepresented interpretation of Islam — ISIS's has been taking advantage of the region's divisions between Sunnis and other ethnicities to grow larger, either by co-opting Sunnis to join their forces or

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[6] Gretchen Alther, "Colombian Peace Communities: The Role of NGOs in Supporting Resistance to Violence and Oppression," *Development in Practice* 16, no. 3–4 (June 2006): 278–91, doi:10.1080/09614520600694828.

[7] Nicholas Casey, "Colombia's Congress Approves Peace Accord With FARC," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/world/americas/colombia-farc-accord-juan-manuel-santos.html.

[8] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.

establishing their terrorist influence over Sunni regions.[9] Even though Sunnis represent about 90% of Arabs in the Middle East[10], in Iraq they are a minority of around 40% among the Muslims, against a Shia majority of 55% and 60%.[11]

The division between Sunnis and Shias has grown larger since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.[12] Prior to the invasion and under Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Arab himself,[13] Shias were already more aware of what held them together as a group — a quality missing in Sunni's communities.[14] With the fall of Saddam and the Ba'ath Party on the wake of the US invasion, a Shia majority took over the government and helped undermine Sunni representation in Iraq.[15] The fall of the Ba'ath was praised by Shias,[16] while the shrinking of Sunni representation in the government since then added to the consequences of foreign intervention in the country has led less moderate Sunnis to take up guns.[17]

Sunnis now believe that all the other ethnicities and even other Sunnis, with a different interpretation of the Islam, are against themselves, according to Robin Wright in the article

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[9] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.

[10] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.

[11] "The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency," accessed May 21, 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html.

[12] Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003 - by Fanar Haddad," accessed May 21, 2017, http://hudson.org/research/10544-a-sectarian-awakening-reinventing-sunni-identity-in-iraq-after-2003.

[13] Amatzia Baram, *Who Are the Insurgents?: Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq* (DIANE Publishing, 2008),

[14] Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003 - by Fanar Haddad," accessed May 21, 2017, http://hudson.org/research/10544-a-sectarian-awakening-reinventing-sunni-identity-in-iraq-after-2003.

[15] Amatzia Baram, *Who Are the Insurgents?: Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq* (DIANE Publishing, 2008),

[16] Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003 - by Fanar Haddad," accessed May 21, 2017, http://hudson.org/research/10544-a-sectarian-awakening-reinventing-sunni-identity-in-iraq-after-2003.

[17] Amatzia Baram, *Who Are the Insurgents?: Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq* (DIANE Publishing, 2008),

published at The New Yorker.[18] As long as the Middle East is unstable, claims the Wright's account, Sunnis can be an easy prey for radical movements such as ISIS or the Nusra Front — now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Liberation of Sham)—, the latter a former ISIS's cell, currently tied to al-Qaeda, that has already provided a Northern Syrian province with public services and parallel law institution, for Sunni delight.[19] It's a sign that whoever comes to listen to them may have the power to establish allegiances with them. In Colombia's conflict with the FARC, the establishment of allegiances was also true — with negative and positive outcomes.

Peace communities for the Sunnis

This essay now aims at drawing a comparison between Colombia's and Iraq's conflicts and how NGOs in Iraq can learn from Colombia's experience. The fight between the FARC and the government is the longest in the Western hemisphere (52 years).[20] Comparing the terror's magnitude between the FARC and ISIS may be unfair, but there are many other similarities other than death rates. Like in Iraq, Colombia's conflict involved the FARC co-opting minorities and mayor's in rural areas to join their goals.[21] Oil has driven American interest in the Middle East in the same way it did in Latin America, which intervened in both regions.[22] In the middle of the conflict, a study carried out by Gretchen Alther in 2006 showed

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[18] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.

[19] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.

[20] "Deadline Pressure for Colombia's Peace Agreement," *The Economist*, accessed May 21, 2017, http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21722244-delays-implementing-accord-are-worrying-not-fatal-deadline-pressure-colombias.

[21] Winifred Tate, "Paramilitary Forces in Colombia," *Latin American Research Review* 46, no. 3 (2011): 191–200.

[22] Gretchen Alther, "Colombian Peace Communities: The Role of NGOs in Supporting Resistance to Violence and Oppression," *Development in Practice* 16, no. 3–4 (June 2006): 278–91, doi:10.1080/09614520600694828.

how NGOs helped peace communities to establish their defense system against armed groups and hold their member together.[23]

The villages are inhabited by campesinos — poor farmers — and minority groups like black people and indigenous Colombians, both representing about 30% of the population, wrote Alther. According to the same author, the villages' citizens refused to take up arms, neglected food, logistic support or information to rebels and paramilitary groups, and did never choose sides (government or FARC), for which their existence was constantly under threat.

Before any deal was signed between the FARC and the government, Alther counted 50 peace communities in Colombia; San Jose de Apartado, the best-known received the help of the Catholic Church and international organizations. They helped them create Communal Action Councils to make decisions; operationally, they commute in groups, established food and security committees, they pray together, and along with NGO groups they also travel; whistles were used to alert neighbors of external incursion and a logistic establishment helped them avoid armed zones.[24] Leaders of these communities encouraged to review daily information among locals, the same goes with community work.[25] In the municipality of Mogotes, in the Andes region, Alther wrote that a peace community also established political councils in which decisions were taken in consensus towards their basic needs and goals. In all cases, non-violent attitudes were promoted.

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[23] Gretchen Alther, "Colombian Peace Communities: The Role of NGOs in Supporting Resistance to Violence and Oppression," *Development in Practice* 16, no. 3–4 (June 2006): 278–91, doi:10.1080/09614520600694828.
[24] Gretchen Alther, "Colombian Peace Communities: The Role of NGOs in Supporting Resistance to Violence and Oppression," *Development in Practice* 16, no. 3–4 (June 2006): 278–91, doi:10.1080/09614520600694828.
[25] Gretchen Alther, "Colombian Peace Communities: The Role of NGOs in Supporting Resistance to Violence and Oppression," *Development in Practice* 16, no. 3–4 (June 2006): 278–91, doi:10.1080/09614520600694828.

NGOs' staff that operate towards peacekeeping in Sunni areas that are either affected or under the influence of ISIS in Iraq, mainly in the northern area of Iraq,[26] should not only speak Arabic to be successful and build trust among local leaders. Setting up their limitations and being transparent are essential elements in building trust.

NGOs can thus help these Sunni communities to establish Community Councils to debate their goals and grievances and how and to whom they can advocate for. Food supply and legal support offered by NGOs can alleviate the state's absence in war affected regions. Security measures and social allegiance in the community may hold Sunnis together. NGOs also are empowered to denounce Human Rights abuses or attacks promoted by Shia militias[27] against Sunni communities to oversight bodies like the media. Such attention has a pressuring effect against the government, and may be an effective way to dismiss their impression that today's Iraq is Shia.[28]

Finally, by fostering their political goals, NGOs may help Sunnis achieve two long-lasting beneficial effects. The first is holding Sunnis together towards common national goals — such as pressuring Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi for their political insertion or economic goals[29]—, and then giving them the feeling of owning their communities and decisions. The second is empowering them from the influence of the radical discourse of Wahhabi or Salafi Islamists.

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[26] Reidar Visser, "Historical Myths of a Divided Iraq," *Survival* 50, no. 2 (May 2008): 95–106, doi:10.1080/00396330802034317.
[27] Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state.
[28] Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003 - by Fanar Haddad," accessed May 21, 2017, http://hudson.org/research/10544-a-sectarian-awakening-reinventing-sunni-identity-in-iraq-after-2003.
[29] "Counter-Terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and Al-Qaeda Should Avoid," *Crisis Group*, March 22, 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/003-counter-terrorism-pitfalls-what-us-fight-against-isis-and-al-qaeda-should-avoid.

Conclusion

The empowerment of grassroots movements among Sunnis is unlikely to defeat ISIS. But it can help build a bridge between the Sunni majority and Shias in their neighborhood and in the government in Iraq. As Christoph Reuter put it at the *Spiegel*, ignore Sunnis grievances or allow for an intra-Muslim conflict between Shias and Sunnis can eventually advance ISIS from a terror group to a main power.[30]

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[30] SPIEGEL ONLINE Germany Hamburg, "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State - SPIEGEL ONLINE - International," *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, accessed May 20, 2017, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html.

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