

Through a Different Lens

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INTRODUCTION

The recent reality shift in the Middle East exposes the prevalent sectarian politics shaping the future of the region and its prospects for democracy and peace.¹ The geopolitics, lack of security and struggle for power ignite the never-ending violence and victimization of people. Iraq is an example of this shift and struggle. People in this society create and change their narrative as the political, economic and security situation changes. Analyzing this conflict at face value might be problematic as there is a necessity to conduct “comprehensive, multi approach...not just for understanding but also for dealing with complex conflicts: where, again, everything is related to everything else.”²

The conflict in Iraq for instance seems to be a recurring phenomenon as there is an increase in ideological conflict, especially when it comes to religion. People fight because of their ideologies along the side other elements that constitute their turf or territory. To understand the complexity of this conflict, it is necessary to analyze its causes based on a “holistic approach” for relating the immediate issues within a conflict to the larger systemic aspects as particular issues arise within relationships, which exist within the larger context of the social fabric. Taking this approach would provide an analysis and a framework for building the blocks for a sustainable peace strategy. The critical question here is how can we define the priorities for peace and in it what order they should be implemented? Probably, the priorities and the order can be formulated through creative ways of thinking of building peace draw upon new lines of theorizing the causes of conflict and the implications of managing violence. One should acknowledge that understanding and changing attitudes, systems and structures, to include humanization processes and social engagements, will lead to restoring social fabric and preventing violence. This paper argues that considering the human ingredient is very critical to analyze causes and design appropriate intervention for conflicts. It does not argue that a specific framework or model would be the best way to providing a conceptual understanding of conflict, it only offers few ideas for consideration by

¹ Hadji, F., 2008. Review of Vali Nasr book: The Shia Revival: How Conflict Within Islam Will Shape the Future. *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 45 (3), pp. 437-446.

² Sandole, D. J. D., 1998. “A Comprehensive Mapping of Conflict and Conflict Resolution: A Three Pillar Approach.” *Peace and Conflict Studies*, V.5 (2), p.1-30.

narrowly looking at Iraq as a case where religion and power continue to complicate human relations.

Since conflict is a recurring phenomenon within and among societies; it is possible to actually accumulate a “definitive body of knowledge” of a conflict.³ Understanding the complexity of conflict requires a holistic understanding of possible factors behind human motivation. Based on this assumption, understanding why people are willing to kill in the name of a group or religion, for instance, embodies elements that see beyond the superficial causes of conflict and violence. A myriad of mediating factors are to be considered in order to investigate the mechanisms within which individual moves his/her position⁴. The *mélange* between various examinations (social and psychological...etc) of human relations (in conflict situations) constitutes a multi-layered process that recognizes the complexity of conflict and the entangled human social relations. Therefore, a holistic framework of conflict analysis is preferred because they appreciate the complex mix within which conflict is manifested and grievances are externalized.

A GLANCE AT IRAQ

The situation in Iraq is a puzzling one, many questions come to mind as violence and sectarian politics unfold everyday. The conflict in Iraq is marked “by the complex interplay within the historical development of theological, legal and social affinities and differences which have come down to the present day.”⁵ The conflict in Iraq is not a new concept it always has been a product of history and of competing ideologies within and among the religious sects (Shii’a and Sunni). The reason why it is so difficult to pinpoint to a particular or a specific cause of this conflict is because the reality is messy and complex to understand and because the human ingredient is not accurately accounted for. The danger sets when we take the conflict causes at face value that jeopardize the prospects for appropriate intervention for peace. The reality shift in Iraq creates a blurry lens through which one can see the truth of the matter. The shift continues to take place because the Iraqi personality, as many claim, underwent certain ideological and behavioral transformations and because of the crystallization of what is called “Wahdat El Hakeeka” (the unity of righteousness) or to use Mallat’s words following “Minhaj as-Salihin” (the path of the righteous).⁶

This ideology of righteousness is what dims the light on “the other”; that is, denying the existence and the legitimacy of the other party or group. This attitude whether adopted by the Shii’a or Sunni, does create the notion of “us vs. them.” The concept of righteousness gets molded into different categorizations. For instance, during Saddam’s regime, the conflict was all about being a “Ba’thist” or not, the lines of the divide between Shii’a and Sunni were not accentuated however, recently the conflict between the two religious sects: the “Shii’a” and “Sunni” is clear and apparent. It is arguable that this shift on labeling has led to increasing attitudes of extremism and the rejection of the other. The violence between the Shii’a and the Sunni is not only a violence based on societal ideologies, but also on political ideologies. Nasr (2007) contends that the provocative factors of this violence are underpinned

³ Daugherty, J. E. and R. L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., 2001. *Contending theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*. 5th Ed. New York and London: Addison Wesley Longman.

⁴ Harre, R., Gillet, G., 1994. *The Discursive Mind*. Safe Publication.

⁵ Mallat, C., April 1988. Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq. Muhammad Baqer as Sadr and the Sunni-Shia Paradigm. *Third World Quarterly*. Islam and Politics Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 699-729.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 710.

by the re-enactment of meaning of struggle for both parties and the historical grievances of the Shii'a⁷. The Shii'a and the Sunni are shaping their future with a different approach, which is that of violence. The fueling factors of this violence can be analyzed and understood in the context of ideology, identity, politics and Islamic identity (that is the significance of the interpretation of the Modern Islamic thought)⁸.

Considering the ever-changing dynamics and examining the divide between the actors, analysts has to understand how the picture is tented by hunger for political power, the role religious actors play (the role "*Ulema*"⁹ played and still play in shaping political life), and contextualize Iraq in the geopolitical map of the region. The Islamic resurgence in Iraq has also been encouraged partly by local culture, loyalties of sect networks as a way for the powerless individuals Vis-a Vis the political system. Both sects (Shii'a and the Sunni) have conflicting political positions that have been manifested by the recurring violence. Mallat (1988) argued that "the Sunni –Shii'a problem in Iraq, i.e., the way the formation of the Islamic Shii'a oppositional discourse has vacillated between a universalist -Islamic and a particularistic- Shii'a appeal, with the ultimate domination of particularism."¹⁰ Certainly, the dialectics of Islamic universalism and Shii'a (or Sunni) particularism is inevitably present at the heart of modern Islamic thought."¹¹

These elements of Islamic thought have also fashioned the new sense of identity, political and security issues that fueled the attitudes and behaviors of both groups (Shii'a, Sunni). It been noted that historically, Iraqis have shifted their investment of their identity. They identify as either Sunni or Shii'a; the notion of being Iraqi is not enough and therefore does not satisfy the needs of their identity as a nation. This shift in the investment contributes to issues identity becoming prominent. This also has contributed to reconstructing new narratives and new grievances. This can be viewed as a transgenerational suffering or a grievance inherited from past traumatic experiences (during the Saddam's era) are keep alive and sometimes amplified by current social and political dynamics, and which in turns, form large group identities that foster this protracted conflict.¹² Volkan (2006) argues that trauma is transmitted through stories that create repertoire of narratives that people use, sometimes, to demonstrate or feature a large group narrative. The aim of historically wounded groups is to attain power and self- determination (in this case, the Iraqi Shii'a). One can argue that the Shii'a refuse the idea of "second order" citizens that they held under Saddam's regime. They are seeking entry into "first order power relations"¹³ This has reshaped the violence between the Sunni and the Shii'a from a sectarian violence to a sectarian political violence. It is not about sects anymore, it is about how identity, power and politics are interwoven to form the reality of Iraq today.

⁷ Nasr, V., 2007. *The Shia Revival: How Conflict Within Islam Will Shape The Future*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

⁸ Mallat, C., April 1988. Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq. Muhammad Baqer as Sadr and the Sunni-Shia Paradigm. *Third World Quarterly. Islam and Politics* Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 699-729

⁹ Ulema is the Arabic translation of what is called in English religious scholars.

¹⁰ Mallat, C., April 1988. Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq. Muhammad Baqer as Sadr and the Sunni-Shia Paradigm. *Third World Quarterly. Islam and Politics* Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 699-729.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 705.

¹² Volkan, V., 2006. *Killing in The Name of Identity: A Study of Bloody Conflicts*. Charlottesville, Virginia: Pitchstone Publishing.

¹³ Osagahae, E. E., Mar, 1998. "Managing Multiple Minority Problems in a Divided Society: The Nigerian Experience." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36 (1), 1-24.

FINDING THE WAY

Recognizing these on-going shifts is important to understanding how to analyze the conflict and framed it in a manner that will not necessary be confined to a particular model or approach.

The constant change of the dynamics requires us (as practitioners or policy makers) to look for fresh opportunities and creative ways for analysis and appropriate strategies for peace. Considering a larger realm of possibilities for action and thoroughly accounting for the moral implications of an action is very critical. Understanding the messiness and the tensions of human affairs and clearly visualize the scope and the essence of a conflict requires moving beyond the rational thinking and beyond just applying frameworks because we have them. Therefore, a viable approach would include a comprehensive examination and willingness to embrace a hybrid of methods that open the door for all the nuances that should be accounted for. Nuances that deal with human instincts, social, environment interferences, and the shifts that happen within and among people in a blink of an eye.

With regards to obtaining knowledge (analysis and policy making) of some form in the arena of conflict, one has to address the question of the guiding norms and rules of human relations. Faced with this choice, one must claim that there are several responses to this question. A simple answer from Winch (2003) asserts that for any worthwhile study of society, one must consider the two fronts of philosophy and the nature of human society.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Generally, the study of violent conflict has been very controversial in terms of its analysis and path to resolution. The human ingredient always is the component that makes things more complex. When people feel the loss of identity, the result usually is an overestimation of religion as an alternative to fresh opportunities for change. In this case, parties are willing to pursue objectives that required delegitimization and dehumanization of the other and as a result people are ready to kill for religious motives.

Many social scientists study conflict from a broader perspective focusing on generic features while others limit themselves to analyzing a particular conflict as a separate entity of its own. With the consideration of the human ingredient, bringing these perspectives together may be the best way to provide a deeper analysis of conflict, which in turns, will inform policy making processes.

¹⁴ Winch, P., 1990. *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. Routledge: London