

BUILDING PEACE IN IRAQ: A PROPOSAL FOR PEACEBUILDING WORKSHOPS

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Abstract

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the relationship between Sunni and Shia populations has been deeply damaged. To improve these relationships and establish peace between these two communities, we suggest implementing peace workshops throughout the country. Our proposed workshops aim for grassroots level communication that would identify the needs and concerns of both communities while increasing dialogue and collaboration and providing avenues for conflict management. The purpose of these workshops would be to provide opportunities for communication, which we hope will increase understanding and empathy between these groups, help to improve perceptions within these divided communities, and provide peaceful mechanisms for resolving conflicts.

Introduction

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq has struggled to maintain peace and security. The historical context of this conflict provides an important backdrop that frames the peace process in Iraq. Within this historical context, this paper outlines a process for implementing peace workshops for Sunni and Shia communities in Iraq. While international organizations have implemented some workshops in Iraq, these events have been very limited in length, scope, geography and inclusion. We propose a more comprehensive peace workshop program that provides extensive opportunities for communication between groups, which we believe will increase understanding and collaboration between Sunni and Shia communities, help to improve perceptions within these divided communities, and provide peaceful mechanisms for resolving conflicts.

Historical and Current Context

The historical and current context of Iraq must be considered before any type of peace workshop can be implemented. The ‘divide-and-rule’ tactics used by colonial powers helped create sectarian tensions in Iraq, particularly as the majority Shia group became a marginalized

majority and the minority Sunni became advantaged, dominating the political and economic system of Iraq, particularly during Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime (Haklai 2000: 20; Harzing & Ruysseveldt 2004: 224; Brancati 2004; O'Leary 2002).

The complex sectarian situation in Iraq was complicated further by the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States. Two problems were paramount, the lack of security and the exclusion of the Sunni population from the decision-making process, which further politicized religious identities and increased tension and disunity between the two groups (Diamond 2004; Dodge 2006; Baram 2005; Nore & Ghani 2009 Paris & Sisk 2009). Overall, the de-Ba'athification effort was too wide, excluding Iraqi professionals whose skills would have been essential in transforming the future state and creating security during the transition, as well as increasing dissatisfaction and discontent among the population (Diamond 2004; Nore & Ghani 2009).

Since the removal of Saddam Hussein, the political process has been either slow or insufficient, with military and police training lacking organization and planning and new officers lacking sufficient equipment (Nore & Ghani 2009: 106; Diamond 2004: 38). Moreover, the US government also failed to provide law and order; daily crimes increased after the invasion and a general lack of basic needs frustrated the Iraqi population and decreased their trust in the US government (Kimmel & Stout 2006). The situation continues to intensify as the Sunni population increasingly protests against the Maliki government and police violence against protesters has increased (Katzman 2013).

The current conflict with Daesh has intensified the potential for further conflict between Sunnis and Shiites within Iraq. Most Sunnis do not support Daesh, nor played any role in their rise, and their lives have been most negatively impacted by the actions of this group. The conflicts in Iraq have resulted in millions of displaced people, the vast majority of these are Sunnis, as Daesh has predominantly taken over traditionally Sunni areas. Further, while Daesh has been forced out of some of the territory they seized, this territory was historically Sunni but has now been liberated largely by Shiite and Kurds. In places like Salman Beg, Shiite militias have pushed out Daesh, but have also been suspicious of the Sunnis that originally resided there and have even denied them access to their homes. In addition, previous Sunni and Shia tensions have resurfaced in some areas, like the predominantly Sunni province of Diyala. Overall, the situation has become critical, and there is an ever-increasing likelihood of escalated violence and revenge killings between Shia and Sunni groups.

On-going Responses for Peacebuilding and Development in Iraq

Several international organizations, such as the United Nations, USAID, World Vision, Relief International, the World Food Programme, the International Rescue Committee, and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent have played an important role in peacebuilding in Iraq, but the vast majority of these organizations primarily provide humanitarian aid for displaced people in Iraq (Internally displaced children in Iraq are at high risk of Polio and Measles outbreak 2014; IRC 2014). Some international organizations have worked to empower civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq to aid in efforts such as monitoring government transparency and accountability, improving the functioning of government, and improving economic conditions (UNDP 2014; The World Bank 2013). Even

though inclusion of CSOs is critical, these groups still lack any real power over policies. Furthermore, international organizations often select and control the trajectory of development projects and are selective in the CSOs they choose to work with, potentially creating additional bias in the process.

While local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play a key role in mediating between the Iraqi government and local people, during negotiation, coordination, and advising, they are often left out either by the government or by the Political Department of the United Nations Assistance Mission of Iraq (UNAMI) (Ali 2014). Moreover, local or international NGOs are not well protected, which has led to increased assassinations of local and international NGO members (Ali 2014). This demonstrates that security is a big issue and violence against these organizations decreases NGO members' ability to serve.

The NGOs, Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East and St. George Church, provide some reconciliation methods for these communities in Iraq. Since 2007, they have organized the High Council for Religious Leaders (HCRLI) in Iraq. The HCRLI gathers quarterly for a roundtable discussion and meeting. These meetings facilitate cooperation and allow discussion regarding how religious leaders can use their influence to discourage violence and encourage respect for the rule of law and political participation. They also discuss potential spoilers to peace and how to overcome such challenges. Successful meetings lead to an agreement that is signed by the council members outlining strategies for religious reconciliation and an action plan for implementation (FRRME 2012). While these programs have successfully brought religious leaders together to discuss non-violence, they lack broader sectarian integration.

International Relief & Development (IRD) has a program called Cultural Bridges to Reconciliation in Iraq (CBRI) which uses theatre, dance, poetry, and town hall meetings with tribal, civil, and religious leaders to provide opportunities to speak about problems. In addition, people in the audience actively participate, give their opinions and recommendations for the problems. CBRI uses these suggestions and works with the local stakeholders to mitigate conflict. The first year of the project, over 13,000 people contributed in 60 plays and debates, which had a positive impact in the community and helped local stakeholders to mitigate conflict (IRD 2014). In 2013, Christian Peacemaker teams also conducted 12 non-violent workshops in five high schools in the city of Suleimani in Iraqi Kurdistan. About 184 students, from grades 10th to 12th, participated in the workshops. Additional workshops were held in local cafes within Suleimani and in the village of Daraban, near Ranya and Halabja, where about 81 people participated. All of these workshops aimed to demonstrate and teach non-violent tactics based on the experience of Kurdish activists and other nations. The participants emphasized that they found the non-violent workshops are very useful fighting against violence in their community. While these workshops have been crucial, they have been short-term and limited in geographic scope.

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has been one of the most active actors in building peace in Iraq. They have coordinated and conducted dozens of various workshops in Iraq, focusing on a variety of actors and issues. For example, they have conducted training workshops on reconciliation and human rights issues for Iraqi officials, workshops to revise the education system with Iraqi education officials, workshops to educate Iraqi professors how to effectively

teach human rights in their classrooms, and training programs aimed to train participants about conflict mitigation and reconciliation for the Provincial Councils around Iraq. They have also pursued programs for youth and women. Some of their most extensive work has been working on interethnic reconciliation - the focus area of our peace workshop recommendation. For example, in Kirkuk, three workshops were implemented regarding interethnic reconciliation. These workshops aimed to bring together community leaders, major ethnic groups, and professional sectors to work to resolve their problems.

Iraq has a long history of communal conflict therefore USIP's work has been crucial. For example, in 2014, Daesh was responsible for a massacre at the Camp Speicher military base, close to Tikrit. This event could have increased tension and revenge killings, but USIP worked with the Network of Iraqi Facilitators to create dialogue between Sunni and Shia, which prevented further violence. In addition, USIP's workshop with the Sunni and Shia tribal leaders in the city of Mahmoudiya, called the "Triangle of Death," helped the community restore peace, security, and rule of law. Moreover, USIP workshops have helped to build the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, which has led Iraqi people to advocate for the rights of Christians, Yazidies and other minorities. Their work also led the Iraqi Education Ministry to acknowledge minorities in school textbooks. The Alliance of Iraqi Minorities helped United Nations workers protect minorities during Daesh's invasion of Mosul in 2014. The alliance also helped the Kurdish parliament in the north draft a constitution that recognized minority rights. USIP's work has persuaded community leaders and security services in Baghdad, Basra, Karbala, and Kirkuk to create dialogue, overcome fear and misunderstandings, and establish a community that works to help each other and solve issues. Overall, USIP's work has helped Iraqis to overcome security issues and increase dialogue between community leaders and people.

USIP's workshops and trainings have addressed some of the shortcomings of others, which often included only certain groups of people in Iraq, like religious leaders. However, while the USIP has conducted many workshops and trainings in Iraq and has had great success, their workshops are often half-day or single day events. Further, while some workshops may take place over multiple days, they have few, if any, workshops that attempt to bring together the same people repeatedly in an effort to build trust through repeated interactions. In addition, while USIP has worked throughout many areas in Iraq, they do not always offer each of their workshops in a wide variety of locations - particularly in places where both Sunni and Shia live or places with larger Sunni populations.

Our workshop proposal has three key elements that are missing from previous attempts at peace workshops. First, we promote longer workshops that allow participants more time to interact with one another and build relationships. Second, we suggest having workshop attendees regroup for additional meetings and workshops following the initial workshop. Third, we propose have workshops across the country in a variety of communities and areas, some of which might often be overlooked, to increase the reach of the peace workshop effort. Overall, our proposal and activities aim for grassroots level communication that would identify the needs and concerns of both Sunni and Shia communities while increasing dialogue and empathy and helping to improve perceptions and collaboration and provide avenues for conflict management.

Peace Workshops for Iraqi Communities

A variety of methods have been recommended to address the conflicts and disputes between the two parties, including diplomacy, negotiation, mediation, and workshops (Malhotra & Liyanage 2005). In order to increase communication and dialogue, some scholars and non-governmental organizations have turned to 'peace workshops' or 'peace camps' (Malhotra & Liyanage, 2005). Such workshops use controlled communication, as discussed by John Burton, which is a social-psychological tool for changing the thoughts and views of individuals while reducing hostility and tension between the two representative parties. There were a number of peace workshops in Sri Lanka and Cyprus to increase understanding within these divided communities. These workshops demonstrated that the people who chose to attend the workshops tended to have a more positive view and were more empathetic, which are crucial attributes during negotiation (Fisher, 1994; Malhotra & Liyanage 2005). In addition, such workshops have been shown to be effective in preventing the reoccurrence of conflict in places like Liberia (Blair, Blattman, & Hartman 2011).

We find the success of these previous workshops promising and believe that such workshops would be particularly useful in the Iraqi context, where there is a strong need to improve the relationship and establish peace between Sunni and Shia communities.

Goals for Peacebuilding Workshops

We utilize an integrated framework, created by Lederach, Neufeldt, & Culbertson (2007), to create our peacebuilding workshop recommendations. Based on this framework, our overall goals for these proposed Iraqi peacebuilding workshops are increased dialogue, trust, and capacity to prevent violence between Shias and Sunnis. Our peace workshops will achieve these goals in several ways. First of all, peace workshops can help these groups confront their problems through direct interaction. Second, if both communities develop better relationships and communication, there will be a lower likelihood that these individuals will join or support insurgent activities. Third, these increased interactions, communication, and cooperation will create avenues for earlier responses to potential violence, thus increasing violence prevention. And finally, these connections can help create mediation groups and more broadly help in mediating the conflict and lowering violence.

The outcomes of these peacebuilding workshops will ideally be focused in four key areas: personal, relational, structural, and cultural (Lederach et al. 2007). Intergroup dialogue has been shown to have a variety of positive effects, including understanding group inequalities, discrimination, prejudice, and the causes of conflict (Schoem & Hurtado 2001; Walter Stephan & Cookie Stephan 1996). In addition, dialogue helps participants to decrease concerns and anxiety regarding intergroup contact, to increase communication, to learn to how respond to and collaborate against violence and conflict, and to play the role of facilitator and become involved in activities to decrease violence and bring social justice.

Workshop Locations

Due to security issues, it would be difficult to facilitate workshops in areas that are currently

under the threat of Daesh. As such, we suggest conducting peace workshops in every city and town that the Iraqi government has full control over, with additional cities to be added once security is less of a concern. Thus, the location of these workshops would be such to avoid overt interaction with Daesh. Specifically, we suggest beginning these workshops in the Diyala region, which contains Sunni and Shia and has seen increased tensions between these groups in recent years. In particular, major cities like Baqubah and Miqdadiyah would be useful places to begin, as workshops in these cities would reach many individuals. However, workshops should not be limited to large cities, and ideally, should be conducted in as many different cities and towns as feasible.

The workshops need to be widespread and have strong attendance to have greater effects on attitudes and policy. It is important, particularly in larger cities, that multiple workshops be held in different areas of the city and in places that are seen as fairly neutral by all parties involved. This, of course, might pose a challenge in cities where populations are geographically divided. Some potential locations for these workshops include town centers, government office buildings, or schools. Leaders from the various communities within each city should be brought together to discuss and negotiate potential locations for these workshops.

Workshop Attendees

We propose workshops that would take place at a community level. Everyone in the community should be invited to these workshops, as individuals from different backgrounds and groups have different perspectives that need to be addressed and bring different strengths to the table. It is very important that religious leaders and tribal leaders attend these meetings, as they have influence in their communities and can use this influence toward effecting changes in attitudes. It is also essential to include youth, who are an at-risk population, but also have a great potential to contribute to peacebuilding efforts (Hubner, Morgan, & Apia 2016; Schwartz 2010).

Further, it is important that both men and women are included in these peacebuilding workshops. Recent works have highlighted the importance of women in peacebuilding efforts (see, for example, Flaherty, Byrne, Tuso, and Matyók 2015; Schnabel and Tabyshaliev 2012). For example, Liberian women used nonviolent and conflict resolution strategies to recruit people and mobilize grassroots organizations, relying on their identity as women to build bridges between religious and ethnic communities (Snyder & Stobbe 2011). Because men and women often experience the effects of conflict in different ways, it is essential that the experiences of both of these groups are fully incorporated into the discussion.

It is ideal to encourage the same participants to attend more than one workshop, which aids in measuring the growth in relationships and learning among the same group. In order to increase the number of attendees, it is imperative that workshops are heavily advertised by community leaders, religious leaders, and local and international NGOs. In addition, transportation should be arranged and made available for people in need of these services. While funding is always an issue with any peacebuilding effort, if larger funds are not available for the project, it may be possible to arrange transportation on a grassroots level. Any incentives, such as providing food during the meetings and perhaps a small stipend for participation, would greatly improve participation. Major agencies with experience in Iraq, such as USAID and USIP may be willing

to provide modest grants to help offset costs for transportation and food and help provide some of the logistical support for these workshops.

Workshop Organizers and Leaders

These peace workshops should be organized and facilitated by a neutral third party, but one that is seen as legitimate at the community level. Given that perceived legitimate parties might vary from community to community, it is imperative that many actors join together at a larger level to help facilitate these workshops broadly, while individual actors and NGOs may be responsible for the implementation of these workshops on a community level. While the national government's involvement may provide some legitimacy for these workshops, and may be necessary to a certain extent, we would caution against over-involvement by the central government. Since non-profit grassroots organizations may be less biased and partial, it would be ideal to work with these types of local organizations. As scholars have noted, sub-state groups and local movements often have greater legitimacy and are more viable than governments, which may be seen as corrupt and part of the problem (Reno, 2008).

As such, we suggest the best actors to institute these workshops would be local governments, local NGOs, and other local leaders or groups that may be seen as most legitimate in their communities. However, to ensure that there is some continuity in these workshops, we would also suggest that there be some collaboration and networking between these localized entities. We would not expect all workshops to be mirror images of one another, but discussion between communities is very important, and will help facilitate the continuation of these workshops.

We would also suggest that these local communities and NGOs reach out to scholars and practitioners in international conflict management and consider including additional third-party facilitators from these communities in their workshops. While there could be some resistance from local populations to bringing in 'outsiders,' there are likely to be scholars and practitioners that many within a community can agree upon to be impartial. Adding these professionals can help provide an outside perspective that may be useful for identifying problems and concerns but can also add expertise and experience in facilitating these workshops, which will contribute to their ultimate success. Furthermore, many agencies, like USAID and USIP are currently working in Iraq and could be approached for help in coordinating these events and for potential funding opportunities. These groups are also likely to have many connections among the leaders in various areas of Iraq and can help facilitate the bargaining process between traditional and local authorities.

Format and Style of Workshops

For these workshops to have a lasting effect, we suggest holding at least three peace workshops (one about every 4 months) over a one-year period, creating more frequent interaction and, hopefully, a more positive long-term outcome. Each workshop should be at least three to four days long, if possible, so that there is time for attendees to reflect at the end of the day on what was discussed during the workshop before meeting again the following day. Such time for reflection will help facilitate more meaningful discussions on subsequent days. Further, longer

workshops provide time for a variety of collaborative activities among the attendees.

Several studies have demonstrated the usefulness of lecture-discussion sessions for intergroup dialogue (Nagda & Derr 2004; Schoem & Hurtado 2001; Stephan & Stephan 1996; Zúñiga 2003). We recommend peace workshops should include a series of roundtable discussions, which provide a more formal dialogue style designed to establish effective communication between opposing groups over specific topics relevant to the conflict in Iraq. Roundtable discussions would cover the specific topics that are of particular importance to the community, but we would recommend the following topics be considered for inclusion: peace and nonviolence; peace and social justice; peace and reconciliation; peace and political justice; the role of religion and Islam in peace; peace and crime prevention tactics. These discussion activities will help the attendees and facilitators identify problems and solutions and will guide and inform the Sunni and Shia communities about peace and violence prevention. One challenge is attempting to balance the imbalance of power between groups. We recommend having a moderator for each group who will be able to manage these power imbalances during the workshops.

During the workshop, it would be useful to have Sunni and Shia religious leaders in attendance to highlight the role of religion in peace and to have a session where Shia and Sunni attendees are assigned into groups together to discuss the political, social, and structural problems they face, as well as ideas for change that may produce sustainable justice and peace.

When culturally appropriate, men and women can participate in these workshops together; if preferred, communities may want to have separate groups for women and men. Separating men and women has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it is essential that all members of the community participate in these efforts together, and it is important that men recognize the issues facing women in their communities. On the other hand, it may be possible to have more honest discussions when men and women are able to talk only amongst themselves. As such, we would suggest that the ideal workshops would include space for both of these formats: they would allow separated discussions (with moderators) where women speak only with other women and men with only men, but then would also include larger group discussions where the needs of each of these communities are communicated more broadly (with the help of moderators if necessary).

The roundtable and dialogue portion of these peace workshops is likely to be emotionally intense. As such, it is important that peace workshops also include collaborative activities that provide the opportunity for Sunni and Shia attendees to work together in ways that are more creative or fun. For example, organizers could have Sunni and Shia children or adults work as a team to create an art exhibition; invite Sunni and Shia children or adults to play soccer with teams organized as co-religious; design joint peace prayers; or have Sunni and Shia women do a skills presentation. The specific types of activities would be flexible and would allow each community to exert their own creative influences; but the idea behind these activities is that they would provide an outlet for cooperation and communication on a more interpersonal level and help the Sunni and Shia communities to work together. As such, we would expect each group to gain an increased understanding and empathy for one another.

Security

Issues of security are obviously a major concern in Iraq, and this could impact the success of peace workshops. Avoiding areas currently controlled by Daesh is clearly an important part of maintaining security. However, in many other areas there are militias and armed groups present, many supported by the Iraqi government. In areas such as Salman Beg, a historically Sunni area, Shiite militias have taken the territory back from Daesh, but have continued to deny Sunnis access to their property. Situations like these create problematic scenarios, particularly since these types of cities would likely benefit greatly from the types of workshops we propose. However, we would recommend that in these areas, where Sunni attendees may not have free movement and/or would be under more severe threat, workshops be postponed until the situations is more stable.

In other areas, such as the Diyala region, where there is some tension between groups, increased security for peace workshops may be necessary. However, this is a quite delicate situation. Any security forces need to be seen as neutral, which can be problematic when some attendees may feel police forces are not neutral bodies. First of all, both sides should be consulted about what type of security (if any) they feel is necessary. Grassroots organizers from each side are likely to have the best understanding of the security situation in their area and how that impacts their side. They may choose to have no additional security, as they may see this as a deterrent to participation. Or, they may feel increased security is necessary to ensure people feel safe to participate. One potential solution is to have joint security details created with members that are chosen from each side. These members could, themselves, attend a miniature peace workshop to obtain important training and socialization prior to assuming their duties. Whatever the solution, it is essential that the issue of security be addressed in each area individually with the specific context of the area and the attendees in mind.

Evaluating and Monitoring the Success of the Peace Workshops

It is ideal to encourage the same participants to attend more than one workshop, which will help in measuring the growth in relationships and learning. We would suggest that key actors, and particularly neutral third parties, begin collecting results after the first peace workshop. Since at least some of the goals for these workshops deal with changing attitudes toward each other, we recommend that workshop organizers conduct a survey of the participants' attitudes prior to the beginning of the first workshop and then again following the completion of this workshop. These 'pre' and 'post' attitudinal surveys will allow the workshop organizers to evaluate the impact that the workshop is having in changing these attitudes. The 'post' surveys should also include questions assessing the skills gained through the workshop, highlighting the key problems and issues that arose, and the attendee's overall optimism about the future of continued cooperation. Based on the findings from these initial reports, it will likely be necessary to make some changes to the activities before the second peace workshop. Following the second workshop, a similar evaluative process should be conducted prior to the third workshop. Community leaders should be part of this evaluation process and should be encouraged to consider the results and attempt to address problems and concerns at the local level. The final results, along with recommendations based on issues and problems raised by attendees during the

workshops, should be shared with state officials and policy makers, who can then work at a national level to also address the problems and concerns.

There are some clear measures that the workshops are successfully achieving their goals. Following the first peace workshop, we may expect to see return attendees and an increase in the number of attendees from each group in subsequent workshops; greater agreement on the agenda for these workshops; increased socializing during breaks and meetings; more active participation during workshops; greater willingness to express opinions and concerns; participant provided action plans; and greater attendance in community projects. The first two workshops aim to increase sectarian tolerance and awareness. The final indicators after the third peace workshop (after a full year of workshops) are: children from different groups increasingly playing together after the workshops are over; men and women meeting and socializing outside of the workshops; attending and celebrating each other's religious rituals, holidays, events together; sectarian marriages increasingly considered acceptable; community members reporting if there is any feeling of religious tolerance; and a decrease in sectarian violence. This third round of workshops aims to improve dialogue and relationships between Sunni and Shia community and, ideally, bring social change for the Iraqi society. From a larger national perspective, after the final workshop we would hope to see a variety of national-level changes, including, for example, more equal representation for Sunni and Shias in government; religious leaders continuing to engage in dialogue at the national level; the adoption anti-discrimination laws and the promotion of official holidays for Shia and Sunni population; the adoption of a national program for religious tolerance in schools; and support for TV programs that encourage peace and harmony.

Conclusion

The exclusion of the Sunni population from society and the government following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq has resulted in violence and insurgent activities throughout the country. Peace and peacebuilding between communities is hard to achieve, but the peace workshops we propose attempt to identify the root causes of conflict and increase the understanding and dialogue between Sunni and Shia populations. These peace workshops can serve as a tool to demonstrate to the reluctant Shia population that policy change is necessary and to convince the Sunni population to support peacebuilding and development projects. In addition, these workshops can help to inform and increase awareness about Sunni needs and grievances resulting from their weakened positions in the post-war power structure of Iraq. Our recommended peace workshops can help to achieve peaceful resolution and create harmony between Shia and Sunni population in Iraq and would, ideally, help prevent the reoccurrence of conflict in the future. Peace workshops in Sri Lanka, Greece, Liberia and other conflicted countries have led to positive political and social changes; therefore, we are hopeful that similar endeavors in Iraq could also lead to increased peace and positive national policy changes.

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