



## WORKSHOP REPORT

### **Sectarianism, New Media and Conflict in Syria:** *A dialogue among policymakers, experts and religious actors*

*Prepared by:*

Abbas Barzegar<sup>1</sup> & Shawn Powers<sup>2</sup>

**June 2014**

---

<sup>1</sup> Abbas Barzegar (PhD, Emory University) is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University where he researches Islamic narratives of community and collective identity. His areas of interest include Sunni/Shiite polemics in the late antiquity, African American Islam in the 1970s, and the aesthetics of Islamism. His written and on-air commentary and analysis can be seen on CNN, Al Jazeera, Fox News, The Guardian, Huffington Post, and other outlets.

<sup>2</sup> Shawn Powers (PhD, University of Southern California) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Georgia State University. His research specializes in global media with particular attention to the geopolitics of information and technology policy. Dr. Powers is an associate director at the Center for International Media Education and serves on the Board of Advisors for the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy.

## **Executive Summary**

The two day workshop on sectarianism, new media, and conflict in Syria hosted at the Carter Center on May 7-9, 2014 interfaced policy makers, academics, and NGO practitioners in closed door dialogue aimed to build the capacity of participants and their respective institutions. Key points of consensus recognized that:

- Framing the conflict in sectarian and religious terms was inaccurate due to the complex history of colonial, Ba'athist, and minority dominated governance structures.
- Sectarian and religious narratives were conflict drivers but not root causes.
- Social media has made the conflict the most thoroughly documented one in history, providing policy makers and practitioners unprecedented capabilities of observation.
- The abundance of evidence documenting atrocities committed by both sides of the conflict also obfuscates the possibility for restorative justice in the future.
- Stakeholders need to focus less on what an ideal political agreement would look like and more on how to support and build the capacity of local groups solving immediate challenges so that, when there is a political solution, civil society is able and ready to scale up and lead Syria's re-development.

Workshop participants were eager to build upon some of the conclusions arrived upon during the two-day session through the implementation of specific programs and activities. Among the most immediate and achievable projects include:

- The creation of a consultative working group tasked with advising the Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program on matters related to religion and conflict/resolution in the Muslim world with a specific focus on the Syrian crisis.
- The creation of a peace-asset mapping project that can help identify local-level actors and civil society leaders who have facilitated cease-fires, humanitarian assistance, and otherwise been involved in conflict mitigation.
- A focused consultative workshop on Islamic law, constitutionalism, and religious pluralism aimed at strengthening the Carter Center's capacity in assisting political transition in Syria.
- A collaborative research project which analyzes the religious narratives of various actors involved in the conflict. The aim of this endeavor is to gain a higher level understanding of the nuances of sectarian division and extremism in order to then strengthen reconciliation and peace building efforts in the future.
- Research is needed to identify possible paths to constraining how geo-strategic interests shape regional affairs, including the identification of case studies whereby countries implemented step-by-step measures to create collective security agreements, increasing mutual interdependence and reducing regional tensions.

## **Introduction and Context**

This two-day workshop, hosted at The Carter Center, provided a closed-door forum for a small group of experts to think critically about the challenges posed to the international community by the sectarian dimensions of Syrian civil war, its ensuing humanitarian crisis, and the role of new media therein. The workshop interfaced practitioners from the NGO, policy, media, and academic sectors and envisioned the program as a capacity building opportunity for the participants and their respective institutions. Participants were asked to identify best practices, cases studies, and underutilized resources that can be leveraged for the long-term efforts of reconciliation and redevelopment. While the Syrian crisis raises a number of immediate political problems that deserve attention, the workshop attempted to identify solutions to medium and long-term problems such as ongoing sectarian strife, political reconciliation, refugee management, and nation-(re)building. In the words of one participant, “multiple vectors of transition” must be pursued simultaneously in order to generate the conditions and opportunities for sustainable peace. The workshop’s output should be considered in these terms: understanding the unfolding crisis in terms of opportunities for engagement and change. The following summary provides consensus and concluding points arrived upon by participants as well as follow-up projects that can implement such findings.

## **Sectarianism and Political Islam in a Historical Context**

Although many policy makers, media analysts, and participants in the conflict have come to frame the conflict in Syria as a fundamentally sectarian one, workshop attendees largely rejected this assumption. From a historical perspective, the role of the Alawite community as being disproportionately represented in governance can be traced to French colonial policies, which patronized religiously and politically marginalized groups as way to anchor European interests in the colonies. However, given that the Alawite community represents a small proportion of the overall population, workshop participants also urged one another to recognize the way in which the Baath regime has been supported by a broad multi-confessional constituency, including powerful Sunni educated and business classes. Thus, there was a consistent rejection amongst workshop participants of both an understanding of the conflict in confessional terms and envisioning models of power sharing based upon confessional representation.

The relationship between secular law and political Islam, according to workshop discussants, also deserved more nuanced and complex understanding on the part of policy makers, media producers, and NGO practitioners. The twentieth century goal of many “Islamist” movements to implement a codified version of Islamic law (Shariah) through modern state institutions radically breaks with the historical relationship between Shariah and governance in the pre-colonial Muslim world. Attempts by Islamist actors throughout the last century to monopolize this discourse have largely been rejected by Muslim populations, leading many to refer to the current moment of Islamic political thought as post-Islamist. Such rejections have come not only from secular liberal quarters of the political and intellectual elite of the Muslim world, but also from the

traditional centers of Islamic learning and the clerical classes that represent them.<sup>3</sup> Like the problem of sectarianism however, a recurring obstacle practitioners face has been weak civil society and political actors capable of offering viable alternatives to Islamist demands of politicized religion. Discussants also urged greater recognition of the identity politics underlying many Islamist demands for “Shariah.” That is, experts should recognize the ways in which Islamic symbols and concepts often represent demands of the heretofore politically excluded and not necessarily ideological support for Islamist models of governance.

Whereas many in the policy community may consider religious identities and demands as entrenched and unyielding, workshop participants consistently argued that the fluid nature of identity formation and Islamic politics provides opportunities for conflict resolution practitioners that may not be fully realized by policy practitioners. In anticipation of power-sharing and constitutional negotiations, practitioners are urged to draw upon the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq in order to better determine elements of success and failure in managing the double challenge of sectarianism and political Islam within a democratic framework. This is all the more relevant given the urgent need to address the rights of religious minorities in the Syrian political transition.

The forum called for the formation of a consultative group tasked with providing suggested solutions to the complicated design of provisions concerning Islamic law and the rights of religious minorities in the drafting of the new Syrian constitution. It is recommended that this group include the expertise of scholars such as Nathan Brown (George Washington University), Mohammad Fadel (University of Toronto), Abdullahi An-Naim (Emory University), and Noah Feldman (Harvard), all of whom have direct experience in these areas. The group may also consider identifying and including the policy and legal personnel from governments in Tunisia, Turkey, USA, UK, and others who have been involved in drafting the constitutional clauses on religious minorities and religious law.

## **New Media and Syria**

Information technologies and media are a central component to understanding the ongoing Syrian conflict. Traditional global media institutions shape what the outside world “knows” about what occurs on the ground, and who is to blame. New media technologies and platforms enable actors to re-shape narratives and recruit support in powerful ways. The rapid adoption of mobile media technologies, combined with global connectivity mean that “we know more about the Syrian conflict than any other conflict in history.”<sup>4</sup>

Such access to information from an active conflict zone has amazing potential. For example, the Carter Center and others, including Syria Tracker, are mapping the

---

<sup>3</sup> Abdullahi An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shariah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Abbas Barzegar and Richard Martin (eds.), *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> “New Media & Syria” panel, *Sectarianism, New Media and Conflict in Syria*, The Carter Center, May 8-9, 2014.

Syrian conflict and humanitarian crisis in close to real time.<sup>5</sup> These data aggregation projects have proven resourceful for policy makers operating in this sector, and help to ensure accurate and timely information about the conflict is accessible to journalists and publics around the world.

At the same time, only certain types of information are being properly mapped. A consensus emerged around the need for greater attention to “peace asset mapping,” whereby researchers would closely monitor, track and document the various variables contributing to peaceful settlements in the Syrian conflict, including the negotiation of ceasefires and humanitarian access. However, due diligence requires strict security arrangements in order not to expose these assets to undue risks. This research could be especially helpful in developing models indicating under what conditions productive, peaceful negotiations can result in decreased violence and, possibly, conflict resolution. Such research is of obvious interest not only to policy makers working towards conflict resolution and stabilization where there are no straightforward political solutions, but also academics eager to utilize growing access to data from conflict zones for productive, peaceful purposes.

Moving from a macro to a micro perspective, greater understanding of why specific religious narratives have been effective at soliciting support for certain groups operating within Syria. Specifically, drawing from data already amassed by the Carter Center, researchers could conduct systematic content and discourse analysis to analyze how shifts in discursive strategies compare or relate to the shifting alignment of militant networks. Such deep, discursive analysis would lend insight into the degree to which religious ideology is actually operative in the behavior of militants. In addition, tracing which actors drive particular networks may create the potential for information interventions, possibly to reason with these opinion leaders, or to delegitimize especially ideological actors.

The centrality of media and information technologies to the Syrian conflict also opens up additional possibilities as, hopefully, groups move towards political negotiations and reconciliation. For example, using social media, a controlled crowdsourcing process may assist as political actors move from drafting to finalizing a new Syrian constitution. Framed as an effort to “consult” with Syria’s citizenry, such an approach could help to ensure the final output’s legitimacy with both Syrians and Muslim opinion leaders.

Concerns were expressed about the possible downsides of having crimes perpetrated in a conflict zone so rigorously documented. Specifically, questions emerged regarding how the abundance of images and evidence of brutality on all sides would affect the possibility of a truth and reconciliation process. For example, the fact that there is such clear and robust documentation of human rights violations may prevent groups from participating in any political negotiations that are connected to a truth and reconciliation commission. Moreover, the abundance of detailed information may slow the process towards forgiveness, a crucial element for any hope of a stable and healthy Syrian nation-state. Given this reality, what are the consequences for Syria’s future post-political reconciliation? Are there other ways to help heal the wounds of conflict that are feasible? Are there other countries that have gone survived a brutal

---

<sup>5</sup> For additional details, see: [Syria Conflict Mapping Project](#) and [Syria Tracker](#).

civil conflict and recovered without a truth and reconciliation process? What can be learned from these other examples? Additional research is needed to study the importance of truth and reconciliation process in this specific context, what variations may be possible, and how the tremendous capacity to capture and archive evidence of war crimes will affect the possibility of moving towards reconciliation.

### **The Role of NGOs and Informal Religious Networks**

A consistent problem facing conflict mediators and negotiators in the Syrian conflict has been the lack of reliable and representative partners on the ground. Assessments suggest that the political opposition leadership outside of the country nodes not have influence or control over the political and armed opposition within. Furthermore, the armed opposition has fragmented to an extent that it has lost representational support from the larger Syrian population. Hence, there is an urgent need to identify organic and accountable civil society leaders that can play a role in the reconciliation and redevelopment initiatives. Such leaders may arise from networks around grass-roots level humanitarian projects, local cease-fire efforts, and cooperative councils. Incidentally, it seems, faith-based NGOs repeatedly rest at the nexus of such networks and enjoy the support of local populations far more than regime representatives or opposition members. The enormous task of providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced peoples and refugees may in fact present the opportunity to identify civil society leaders and other partners invested in transforming the conflict. Therefore, more research is needed about the Muslim NGO sector in operating in the Syrian context. To start, a basic mapping of Muslim NGO's operating in Syria, their known origins, affiliations and track records as well as their capacities is needed.

The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), a Turkish Muslim relief organization, is among the groups leading the Humanitarian effort in Syria.<sup>6</sup> In addition to managing nearly 100,000 refugees in container camps on both sides of the Turkish/Syrian border, the organization oversees the delivery of aid throughout opposition held territories. This has caused alarm for many in the policy and aid communities who question whether the organization is not in fact a front for the transfer of weapons, fighters, and military aid into Syria.<sup>7</sup> Western governments, nonetheless, have indicated that they may work with the organization to deliver aid if the Syrian regime continues to deny access to areas in need. A more robust understanding of the organization, and others similar to it, is needed in order to better inform policy makers and practitioners on the ideological and political networks of such organizations.

---

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of IHH's activities, see: Şenay Özden (2013) *Syrian Refugees in Turkey*. Migration Policy Centre Research Report 2013/5, co-funded by the European Union; Jutsin Vela, "Turkey's Men in Syria: How the Gaza flotilla organizers became the best hope of Syrian refugees abandoned by the world." *Foreign Policy*, Sept 18, 2012; Osman Atalay, Murat Kavakdan, Güliden Sönmez (2013) *Syrian Crisis in its Third Year Field Report*. IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see: Serpil Cevikcan, "Is Turkey sending weapons to Syria under guise of aid?" *Al-Monitor*, Jan 5, 2014.

This research could be one component of the peace-resource mapping project called for above.

Participants noted the role of medical aid missions and workers as being among the most trusted and respected parties on the ground. Many medical missions and the transfer of volunteer medical personnel are in fact provided by faith based organizations. The role of non-official and informal religious networks was also raised as a resource for facilitating reconciliation and cease-fire efforts on the ground. Multiple participants commented on the effective role played by Catholic sisters in contexts of conflict diffusion and resolution in Palestine and elsewhere. The Carter Center's long-standing ties with such networks may be leveraged positively in the Syrian crisis. Other instances of local cross-confessional cooperation were noted. Specifically, Ismaili communities which exist as threatened religious minorities in many part of the world, have a long-standing track record of preempting conflict scenarios by spearheading collaborative projects which benefit entire local communities. Such projects often include educational services and infrastructure development, and always aim to create a sense of "ownership" over the problem among local actors. Identifying successful cases where such collaboration has prevented social discord and fostered the civil society sector can also be included in the peace mapping project.

In the area of long-term refugee population management, participants noted a range of conventional problems that needed to be addressed in the current conflict. Among the most pressing were the educational needs of children and young adults, specifically in terms of vocational training. It is significant to note that Turkish authorities and NGOs are currently addressing this problem through a series of programs, but little is known about the types of curriculum offered or how effective it is with Syrian youth. A more thorough investigation of such programs is needed, especially in the undocumented and transient refugee populations, in order to assess factors of scalability, resource needs, and absorptive capacity.

Transnational Muslim NGOs can also play a critical role in mitigating sectarian tension and extremist rhetoric. Finding solutions to counter extremist narratives and to stop the flow of voluntary fighters to battle zones remains a top priority for policy makers and practitioners in the region. A range of different approaches have been sought by regional and western governments to address these problems including amnesty programs, de-radicalization pedagogy, and even public messaging through popular entertainment media. Networks of religious leadership have also contributed to coordinating high-profile ecumenical declarations denouncing extremist ideology. The most notable example of this activity being the Amman Declaration in 2004 and affiliated conferences in 2005-6. Current measures are underway in different quarters of the Muslim world to mobilize religious leadership in a campaign against extremism. While such efforts have received praise from inside and outside of the Muslim world, there has been little assessment of the efficacy and impact of such programs. A thorough review of these programs is needed to better inform policy makers, practitioners, and stakeholders as they address the coupled problems of extremism and sectarianism in the Syrian context.

## Sectarianism & Conflict Resolution

As is noted above, participants were skeptical of describing the war in Syria as a “sectarian conflict.” While tensions are certainly placed within a broader narrative of religion, and religious discourse is utilized to mobilize, recruit and placate constituencies, the roots of the war are not religious.<sup>8</sup> The foundations of the conflict stem from questions of governance, justice and equality among Syrians, many of whom challenge the legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad’s authority. This is not to diminish the importance of religion and religious actors in mobilizing and, hopefully, resolving the conflict; rather, we need to put the question of sectarianism in the broader context of factors driving the conflict.

Thus, while the conflict is technically a “civil war,” its geopolitical dimensions are significant and drive many of the decisions made on the ground. As one participant noted, “This conflict has to be solved by acknowledging and accommodating regional actors needs and demands.” The Middle East’s long and catastrophic history of conflict has left large parts of the region economically depraved, politically unaccountable and socially unjust. The recent spilling-over of violence from Syria into Iraq<sup>9</sup> demonstrates why a broad, region-wide perspective on conflict resolution is needed. Long-term solutions to the conflict in Syria must also begin the process of establishing structures to limit the possibility for similar violent outbreaks in other parts of the region. Along these lines, one participant highlighted Jordan’s efforts to establish a treaty on respecting religious diversity for the purpose of peacebuilding.

Though it is impossible to wish away realpolitik, there are ways to minimize geo-strategic factors in regional affairs. Collective security agreements, as well as regional trade agreements can increase mutual interdependence, constraining other factors that may otherwise shape policy making. Additional research is needed to identify possible paths to constraining the centrality of geo-strategic interests in regional affairs, including the identification of case studies whereby countries implemented step-by-step measures to reduce regional tensions.

Research is needed to bridge the gap between the reality of what’s driving the conflict and the religious narratives that are used to draw in and broaden support for particular sides. How can sectarian messaging be better delegitimized among the actual combatants involved in the conflict? Are there case studies addressing similar questions that can be aggregated and analyzed for solutions in the context of Syria? What types of moderate, anti-sectarian messages have been effective in the past? What can we learn from previous failures at combatting sectarianism in the region?

Participants highlighted how the fragility of international legal norms relating to international conflict and humanitarian access is making international solutions to the Syrian conflict especially difficult. Recent abuse and disregard of international legal norms, including using the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) UN resolution as a

---

<sup>8</sup> Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur (2013) “The Struggle for Syria’s Regions,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* 43.

<sup>9</sup> Henri J. Barkley, “The Meaning of Mosul,” *The American Interest*, June 12, 2014.



justification for whole-scale intervention into Libya, have left international institutions weakened, lacking the legitimacy needed to challenge Bashar al-Assad's violent tactics.<sup>10</sup>

This fragility has had real, tangible consequences in Syria. Fearful of violating Syria's sovereignty, the international community, has contributed over \$2 billion in humanitarian aid to official, governmental channels, giving Bashar al-Assad full control over its distribution. Given the scarcity of food and medical supplies in Syria, control over the vast majority of humanitarian aid props up Assad and his supporters.

Confidence in international institutions and norms must be restored, both to effectively intervene in the Syrian conflict, but also to manage (and, hopefully, prevent) future conflicts in this volatile region. One place to start is to quickly establish a consensus around the need for cross-border humanitarian relief, removing Assad's control over all the aid entering into Syria in order to support Syrians in need regardless of their political or religious affiliation. Importantly, if a consensus can be forged, it will be important that governments do not use the resolution as a means of scaling up their direct military support for opposition groups. Renewed international norms require trust building around issues where a consensus can be forged. Abuse of that trust for geo-strategic purposes not only would erode any confidence gained, but could also further shake the already fragile international legal system.

## Conclusion

Syria's future depends on building the capacity, reliability and accountability of local and regional civil society institutions and actors. While political actors continue to define the day to day dynamics of ongoing conflict, civil society groups will be responsible for rebuilding the country's educational system, infrastructure, local governance structures, social support systems and more. The two day workshop aimed at identifying strategies and programs that can assist in meeting these goals. Workshop participants focused less on the what an ideal political agreement would look like and more on how to support and build the capacity of local groups solving immediate challenges so that, when there is a political solution, civil society is able and ready to scale up and lead Syria's re-development.

While the Carter Center has started this process, academic institutions could support and help to scale up the outreach, working with displaced Syrians in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Such efforts will be crucial in building institutions and a culture capable of supporting a sustainable peace in Syria. In fact, it is likely the case that the most reliable civil society leaders will emerge from these networks, making more research into this sector an even higher priority. Moreover, foreign governments need to be careful in their efforts to rebuild Syria. In addition to skepticism regarding their intentions, governments are typically the least capable of embracing the agility needed to work with foreign civil society, especially in the Middle East. Thus, non-government

---

<sup>10</sup> See: David Rieff, "R2P, R.I.P." *The New York Times*, November 7, 2011; Mohammed Nuruzzman, "Revisiting 'Responsibility to Protect' after Libya and Syria." *E-International Relations*, March 8, 2014.

networks, including religious and academic institutions, may be best suited for leading these projects.

Moving forward participants suggested a few principles for guiding such efforts. First, questions of corruption and accountability need to be addressed now, so that civil society institutions develop protocols to ensure systematic transparency. This is crucial not only for the efficacy of our efforts, but also to ensure that civil society groups are capable of establishing trust with local populations and political actors in post-war Syria. Second, collaborative endeavors need to prioritize creating a sense of ownership among civil society actors for solving local problems. Foreign aid and assistance most often fail when they support projects and goals that are not seen as essential by local populations, overburden local organizations, or are perceived as mechanisms of foreign policy. Only when local groups participate in the efforts of reconstruction as their own will they become sustainable.

The collaboration between GSU and the Carter Center aims to continue through the development of a consultative working group tasked with bringing intellectual and human resources to the Carter Center's Department of Conflict Resolution on the subject of religion and conflict in the Muslim world in general and in Syria in particular. With the continued participation of the wide-network of stakeholders brought together for this workshop, the working group will begin to implement some of the aforementioned projects immediately.