# The Power of Narratives in Conflict and Peace: The Case of Contemporary Iraq

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## Introduction

The recent history of Iraq has been difficult. Since the regime of Saddam Hussein in particular, deep divisions in Iraqi society have been aggravated, culminating in the effective partition of the country into three separate and mutually hostile entities a decade after Hussein was ousted, in ٢٠١٤.[1] These three entities include areas controlled by the Iraqi government, territories controlled by the so-called Islamic State (IS), and the region controlled by the government of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region. Like in many conflicts around the world, in the Iraqi case the development of antagonistic narratives between in- and out-groups was crucial to fuelling and igniting the violence. As will be described, over a relatively short period historical events gave rise to three different kinds of narratives which defined the relationships between these

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[1] While Iraq doesn't represent an ethnic and religious mosaic as complicated as Lebanon or Syria, the country is divided into two major parts ethnically and religiously. The Shia majority forms about ٦٥٪ of the population against ٣٢٪ Sunnis. Kurds who are mostly Sunni form about ٢٠٪ of the population in ٢٠١٩ while the rest are Arabs.

groups; victimhood narratives, divisive narratives, and violent narratives. Together these narratives legitimated and promoted the violent conflict that would ensue. With a focus, therefore, on the population of Sunni confession, the first part of this paper will focus on how such narratives were expressed amongst ordinary Iraqi citizens during the period leading up to and during the culmination of violence in ٢٠١٤.

However, the paper will then also explore how these narratives among the Sunni confession evolved from inflammatory expressions and justifications of violence (and even terrorism), towards increasing self-reflection and expressions of reconciliation. Over time, and in response to the violence which occurred between the in- and out-groups, different forms of narrative emerged, first more nuanced narratives, then the first hints of reconciliatory narratives, and finally, unifying narratives. These alternative and pro-peace forms of narrative opened the door for attempts at conflict transformation from within and supported efforts by international actors to engage with and facilitate such attempts to deconstruct the in-group/out-group dichotomy. The paper, therefore, explores the complex interweaving of historical events and vocalized narratives in the construction of conflicting promoting in-group vs. out-group dynamics, as well as the central role narratives play both in

breaking down such dynamics and as an indicator of when international intervenors can have the most positive impact on conflict transformation. Excerpts of interviews taken over the course of one year, and mostly in Baghdad city and province, are used throughout the paper to illustrate these trends.

**"Othering": The Power of Collective Narratives**

Conflict Resolution (CR) is a field which has benefited enormously from the ability to incorporate and learn from a variety of disciplines such as political science, economics, law, social-psychology, and sociology. Such an eclectic mix, in turn, has given rise to a field divided among many sub-fields. In the case of CR that includes both scholars and practitioners who work in sub-fields such as arbitration, mediation, negotiation, track-II diplomacy, intergroup dialogue, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, conflict transformation and reconciliation. But while the field is obviously quite diverse, there are a handful of

central ideas which contribute to and provide foundation for most of these sub-fields and their related practices. Those ideas form, therefore, the central core of the field. One of those central ideas is that of the in-group/out-group dichotomy and the related notions of the "other" and the process of "othering". These concepts are foundational to a number of the practices (such as mediation or intergroup dialogue) noted above which make up the CR field

broadly. So what exactly is "othering", and why is it so important to the theory and practice of CR?

In the now classic The Functions of Social Conflict (١٩٥٦), Lewis A. Coser argues that conflict performs key required functions for social groups. First among these central functions is the reification of the boundaries between groups, which provides further strength and stability to the group. In reifying the boundaries between groups, for example, conflict serves to strengthen group control mechanisms, solidify group identity, and provide the "in-group" (the "we" or "us") with an "other", or an "out-group" (the "them"). This "other", therefore, is the group against which the in-group compares itself, and it is this "other" which serves as the target for aggression in conflict, whether violent or otherwise. While there are other concepts which have become central to the field – Galtung's idea of the "Positive Peace", for example (١٩٦٩), or Lederach's more recent "elicitive" approach (١٩٩٧) – few ideas have affected more areas of the field of conflict resolution than this idea of the "in-group" and the "out-group". But explaining how conflict contributes to this formation and reification relies on further theory. What occurs before, during, or as a result of conflict which leads to the formation and reification of in- and out-groups? This brings us to the role of "narrative" and Vamik Volkan's now famous idea of the "Chosen Trauma" (٢٠٠١). Volkan argued that

collective or shared traumas are transmitted, even across generations, through simple processes of storytelling and myth-making, and that the memories of such traumas form the foundations by which identity groups then define themselves in opposition to the "other". In Volkan's example narratives shared around the campfire or the dinner table transmit traumas between individuals and allow them to percolate up from the household, to the community, to the group as a whole, forming a historically rooted sense of "us" versus "them" based on the narratives shared across these scales. Such collective narratives of trauma and pain are then appropriated by political elites who use these narratives of trauma (of past invasions, massacres, defeats), as well as shared heroic myths (of military victories, visionary leaders, etc.) to galvanize the in-group and foment violent action against the "other" identified in the narrative as the cause of the trauma (Mertus ١٩٩٩).

Many classic cases within the CR literature evidence such dynamics of identify formed via shared narratives, indicating further how conflict occurs and serves only to further reify pertinent in-group/out-group divisions. In Northern Ireland, for example, one of the pivotal cases of the past half century, the Catholic and Protestant groups are not only defnied by alternative historical narratives, but the division is itself reified by the process

of conflict; the manner in which the groups live in divided neighbourhoods, and how those neighbourhoods are divided by the prominent use of "symbols of local community identity" (Sluka ١٩٩٦: ٣٨٥), such as "flags, anthems, murals, badges, bunting and graffiti" (ibid: ٣٨١). Such symbols act as "public manifestations of group identity" (Brown and Mac Ginty ٢٠٠٣: ٨٤) and, when combined with the actual physical separation, they add to the othering effect of the conflict (Leonard ٢٠١٠: ٣٣٣). Similar phenomena are evident in cases around the world, from the influential cases of Israel, South Africa, Israel/Palestine, Cyprus, South Africa, Rwanda, or the former Yugoslavia (Saunders ٢٠٠٣; Halperin ٢٠٠٨), right through to cases that few in CR commonly engage with, such as within Indian cities (Mehta and Chatterji ٢٠٠١).

This perspective, of course, is quite pessimistic. But while the establishment or reification of groups via conflict narratives is concerning, the underlying and more pivotal theoretical contribution of this literature is hopeful. It suggests to us that narrative can play a central role both in creating and then in recreating identity groups. If in- and out-groups can be constructed, then they can be deconstructed, if they can be reified, then they can be tempered. Indeed, the goal of many CR practices has largely been to break down or deconstruct the in-group/out-

group dichotomies which have been reified in conflict between groups. Classic approaches clearly evidence this focus, with Allport's early development of "intergroup contact theory" (١٩٥٤), for example, forming the foundation of many practices which would later become central in the field and which work to break down inter-group animosities (Schofield ١٩٧٩; Pettigrew ١٩٩٨; Saunders ١٩٩٩; Miller ٢٠٠٢; Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami ٢٠٠٣), and Osgood's description of a process for "Graduated Reciprocation in Tension Reduction" (GRIT) designed to lessen the tensions between two opposing groups in conflict (١٩٦٢).

This issue is of much more interest to certain sub-fields of conflict resolution than it is to others. Theorists or practitioners of inter-group dialogue (Burton ١٩٨٧; Saunders ١٩٩٩), conflict transformation (Lederach ١٩٩٧), or reconciliation (Fisher ٢٠٠١; Nadler and Schnabel ٢٠٠٨) are clearly interested in deconstructing such dichotomies, but this is much less of a concern in arbitration, peacekeeping, or negotiation. Whether reconciliation, for example, it is considered an individual psychological process which might have wider group effects (Kelman ٢٠٠٤; Moaz ٢٠٠٠; Fisher ٢٠٠١; Saunders ٢٠٠١), or as a psychological process which helps to realign cognitive and emotional understandings of the relationship between groups (Bar-Tal & Benink ٢٠٠٤: ٣٤), or as a

collective psychological process "removing conflict-related emotional barriers that block the way to ending intergroup conflict" (Nadler & Schnabel, ٢٠٠٨: ٣٩), in all of these theories we can see reflections of Coser's formulation of social conflict as centrally about the in-group/out-group dichotomy and of reconciliation as about the deconstruction of that dichotomy.

Further, the active engagement of or reconstruction of narratives is key to such theories. Again, we see this clearly in reconciliation practices, which, at least in their largest scale in the form of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs), have come to focus evermore on the public-performance of truth through presentations which might serve to reframe the existing narrative. To those scholars who see conflict as always occurring between an in-group and an out-group, this process of "truth-telling" is "a collective storytelling therapy" (Millar ٢٠١٥: ٢٤٥) which creates a new nationally shared narrative above the level of either parties to the conflict, a meta-narrative or a "collective memory (Chapman and Ball ٢٠٠٤: ١٥; Sooka ٢٠٠٦: ٣١٩) which, because it is shared by the whole population of the nation (by those in both groups) provides a new way to minimize "the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse" (Ignatieff ١٩٩٦: ١١٣) and starts to provide a foundation for more peaceful coexistence

between the groups. The foundation of the new shared nation, in this sense, is necessarily dependent on a new shared narrative.

But such processes, have in recent years, come in for extensive critique. TRCs have been attacked, in many cases quite rightly, for their politicization (Wilson ٢٠٠١), for sometimes re-traumatizing victims of past violence (Millar ٢٠١٥), for their focus on the national as opposed to the local histories and dynamics of conflict (Robins ٢٠١١), for their foundations on largely Western or European traditions of psychological healing (Pupavac ٢٠٠٤). Similarly, other practices implemented to deconstruct identity groups, such as inter-group dialogue processes, have been critiqued for inappropriately psychologizing and individualizing conflict dynamics (Erasmus ٢٠١٠), for their inability to overcome the broader structural conditions of conflict, and for the failure of positive impacts to generalize to wider populations at conflict. Such critiques, therefore, call for a very sensitive and responsive approach to interventions seeking to influence narratives, whether those which inspire conflict or those which promote peace. In the paper that follows we therefore trace the emergence of a number of forms of narrative in order to identify both how and why new narratives emerge, and when exactly interventions to shift such narrative might be more useful.

## The Power of Narrative

In the period leading up to the dramatic events of ٢٠١٤ power was dominated by the Shia majority of the country and, more precisely, was in the hands of Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki. Finally, after many years under Sunni control, power was finally with them (and only with them after the exit of US Forces in ٢٠١١) and this allowed the Shia majority to largely ignore the Sunni population and their concerns. However, this majoritarian governance led to a struggle for power and resources which turned into violence and resentment amongst the two main confessions; Sunni and Shia. Adherence to one of these sects was used either to claim power and benefits if you were Shia or to call for resistance if you were Sunni. Historic imbalances between the two sects were readily exploited by politicians to strengthen their power base through polarisation, supported by partisan media. The sectarian violence between the Shia and Sunni populations around ٢٠٠٦-٢٠٠٧ further increased this gap. As if nothing

had been learned from this brutal period, the country´s leaders continued their polarising policies until the next disaster in ٢٠١٤, when the Sunni population rose again, this time exclusively against the Iraqi

government and accompanied by a brutality and inhumanity rarely witnessed before against Shia citizens. As is true in most conflicts

in the world, the experience of violence and the toxic political discourse fed from popular narratives, by now deeply engrained in the population. In an effort to escape the complexities of the situation, and due to a lack of any practical solutions, the Sunni population resorted to generalisations and simplifications, mostly directed against the Shia population, the central government controlled by Shia politicians, and Sunni politicians who had aligned themselves in such a way as to support the Shia dominance.

**Victimhood Narratives**

By ٢٠١٣ this had translated itself mostly into a deep feeling of victimhood amongst the Sunni populations in Western and Northern Iraq. A study of the narratives emanating from such feelings is indeed important in explaining their uprising that followed soon after. The gap had become so deep and the image of the other as an adversary, was so common that violence seemed a logical solution.

Indeed, listening to Sunni citizens in Baghdad province and border areas of Anbar province, it seemed almost as if many amongst them didn´t feel like part of the same country or society anymore and they presented narratives that framed the two confessional groups as antagonistic. Parts of the Sunni population, for example, had clearly started to equate the Shia population as a whole with

the US-supported Shia-dominated central government. "The invaders promised democracy and freedom before destroying our country, only to give all power to the damned confessional dictatorship"[2]. Such extremely simplistic narratives, whether rooted in malice, ignorance, or some semblance of reality, nonetheless completely ignored the fact that large parts of the Shia population in the South of the country were also at odds with the central government and actively fought against US-troops as well as government security forces.

Others, perhaps in an effort to attribute the responsibility for this internal societal division to more or less abstract foreign powers, rather than their neighbours and fellow citizens, preferred to places most, or even all, of their grievances on neighbouring Iran. In this spirit, curious theories like "The US only attacked Iraq in order to pass the power over to Iran"[3] were quite commonly voiced. It is quite likely though that none of the people giving voice such theories had ever seen an Iranian in their country, but a narrative need not be rooted in truth. There was, of course, some tenuous truth behind such ideas, since Iran was certainly trying its best to influence Iraqi affairs for the benefit of their own foreign and security policies and certainly not for the benefit of the Sunni

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[2] Interview with a local tribal leader in Al Rasheed district, Baghdad province, October ٢٠١٣

[3] Interview with a resident of Al Tarmiya district, Baghdad province, October ٢٠١٣

population which had been the main support for former president Saddam Hussein, Iran´s arch-enemy.

As is often the case, the Sunni population started recalling the seemingly better times during the past regime under president Saddam Hussein compared to the current prime minister Nouri Al Maliki. As one interviewee stated, "the Shia now have all the power. Under Saddam there weren't such differences between Sunni and Shia. Al Maliki is worse than Saddam"[٤]. Or another, who argued:

"By God, Saddam was a tyrant. But at least he repressed everyone the same. One knew what to expect. At least there was some sort of equal system. Saddam once came here. In two cars, no security convoy, no army, nothing. Al Maliki wouldn't even dare to come here with half of his army. Because this confessional government of today doesn't do anything else than oppress the Sunnis"[°].

The concentration of power among the Shia, of course, also translated to a domination of the security forces, who often behaved like foreign occupants, harassing local Sunni populations. A vicious cycle became apparent, whereby of a growing number of attacks against security forces in Sunni majority areas was answered by random mass arrests of young Sunni men. Meanwhile

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Interview with a resident of Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, November ٢٠١٣[٤]

Interview with a local public representative in Al Yusifiya district, Baghdad province, November[°] ٢٠١٣

Sunni extremist forces like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (greater Syria) grew in force again, soon to be more powerful than ever. Its attacks were increasingly directed against the civilian population: car bombs in popular places in Baghdad were frequent, and the victims mostly Shia.

**Divisive Narratives**

Following in this trend, the security forces also became the subject of divisive narratives among the Sunni population, and the narratives went so far as to portray retributive attacks on the security forces as justified. Indeed, even acts of terrorism were downplayed in such narratives. All that seemed to matter to many was that someone was defending them, or at least taking revenge on their perceived oppressors. That this "revenge" was often carried out by a brutal terrorist organisation indiscriminately targeting Shia men, women and children seemed almost secondary, even though the collateral damage on the Sunni citizens done by ISIS´ attacks was also significant.

The following exclamation, for example, is from a community leader in the provincial Abu Ghraib district in Baghdad province. It was collected in December ٢٠١٣, just a few days before a bigger clash was to happen: "This army is not Iraqi, it´s a confessional army. The army of Al Maliki, not the army of the Iraqis. And everyone always talks about terrorism! Which terrorism?! There is

no terrorism, that´s all just politics!"[6] It is of course arguable that the geographic distance contributed to such a blunt statement. The indiscriminate ISIS terrorist attacks took place almost exclusively in the more urban areas of Baghdad. Such statements, however, do portray a division in Iraqi society, ever widening as the enemy became the entirety of the "other" segment of society. This "other" was de-humanised in order to justify such gruesome attacks on innocent people, happening so frequently in the months before ٢٠١٤.

Also Supporting this finding are the many instances of verbal attacks against the way of life of the "other". The traditions of the Shia population, for example, started to be viewed with suspicion and were even ridiculed by members of the Sunni population. Traditions which had been essential elements of Iraqi society and its cultural heritage, became something alien, illogical and unintelligible in the 'otherizing' narratives of the Sunni minority. One example regards the Arbaeeniya, the mourning period for the death of the Shia-Imam Hussein. As one Sunni interviewee stated, assuming in his accusation that these Sunni boys were offending the Shia traditions:

"A few days ago my cousin and his friend went to Baladiyat )a Shia-majority neighbourhood in Baghdad). They started joking

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Interview with a resident of Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, December ٢٠١٣[6]

and laughing about something and a man with a black beard came, shouting whether they were laughing because Imam Hussein had died."[7]

By the second half of ٢٠١٣ protest camps had been erected in Sunni strongholds in Western Iraq. Now, only a spark was needed to light the fire. At the same time the narratives voiced by Sunni interviewees evidence a feeling that some kind of violent change was about to come to this situation. It is not hard to understand that many welcomed this thought. As one interviewee stated:

"While oil is bringing money without end to the government, there are no services for the people here. Every year there are inundations but not enough drinking water. No functioning security apparatus and yet they lock up our sons for years without reason. The State says it´s fighting terrorists, but lets the militias do whatever they want. By God, this will not always stay like this. Something will have to change or else this country will break apart and we will fall back to the days of darkness".[8]

The last sentence of this statement expresses very well the idea that even change with an uncertain outcome was apparently viewed as a better option than the status quo. Paradoxically, of course, the exact opposite happened and the change to the situation

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Interview with a resident of Baghdad City, October ٢٠١٣[7]

Interview with a tribal community leader in Al Rasheed district, Baghdad province, October ٢٠١٣[8]

that was soon to come was even worse than the status quote of ٢٠١٣. Indeed, the violence that emerged split the country into three and threw it into times of darkness never seen before.

## Violent Narratives

There were, of course, others amongst the Sunni population who were worried about the growing movement; concerned about the cult of violence. Such personalities like a Sahwa militia leader in one of the hot-spots of Al Qaeda activity in the country-side near Baghdad, who expressed his dread of what was indeed going to come:

"These God-less people of Al Qaeda are destroying our societies. They come with customs not related to ours, not even to Islam. They only know death, they only want to fight and kill. More and more of our sons join them, thanks to the damned government. My nephew is with them. Once we managed to persuade them to a meeting. Me and the other Elders. We tried to explain

them that a destroyed checkpoint will only be rebuilt and that three new soldiers will follow one dead one. Death will only be followed by death. But they didn't care. They said their day would be coming soon."[9]

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Interview with a local Sahwa militia leader in Al Rasheed district, Baghdad province, November [9] ٢٠١٣. Sahwa is a Sunni militia initially organised by the US Forces to fight Al Qaeda forces.

And indeed, in the last days of ٢٠١٣ a dynamic started to emerge which, while wished for by many, would actually turn out quite differently to how many expected. In the last days of ٢٠١٣, security forces attacked the home of an influential Sunni parliamentarian in Ramadi, arresting him and killing his brother. Soon after, they moved to dismantle a protest camp in nearby Fallujah. It is arguable that the Al Maliki government was seeking to take advantage of the holiday season in the Western world to crack down on its opponents. However, it was quite obvious that others had been waiting for this, the last provocation. Obviously well organised violent attacks quickly spread to most of Iraq´s western province of Anbar, where tribes united in the Tribal Revolutionary Council rose openly against the government. The army replied in force and soon frontlines were established, just thirty kilometres West of Baghdad.

When interacting with the Sunni population in areas close to this frontline a sense of relief was recognizable. Finally the longed-for change had come, their "brothers" in the West had stood up against the oppressors. A sense of genuine pride started rising amongst the Sunni population. And yet this pride most likely blinded people from the fact that the terrorist fighters of Al Qaeda were certainly amongst the rebel forces, if they were not in the lead from the beginning. In their narratives, however, interviewees tried to point

out, and even over-emphasized, the fact that the uprising was led by the tribal population of Anbar. The formulation "sons of the tribes" was commonly used in this context and became a strong part of the narrative of this first chapter of the ٢٠١٤ uprising. Interviewees even went so far as to equate Al Qaeda/ISIS/Daesh with the Shia militias (Maesh, as an abbreviation of "militias of Iran in Iraq and the Sham"). As one interviewees stated, "Daesh! Which Daesh? All of them sons of the tribes. Sunni tribes. They are only in their right! Which Daesh – you mean Maesh!"[١٠]

It is not completely clear when and how the then local branch of Al Qaeda/ISIS actually gained complete control of what mostly started as a popular Sunni uprising in reply to the actions of a repressive Shia-dominated government. But by June ٢٠١٤ at the latest, when a few hundred ISIS fighters drove tens of thousands of Iraqi security forces out of Mosul and soon after swept through all of northern Iraq and right up to the borders of Baghdad, it was obvious that the tribes, and thus by extension the Iraqi Sunni population, were no longer in control. All measurement was lost. The sense of the "other" and of its dehumanisation, in effect, reached its culmination. Hundreds of captured Shia soldiers were massacred in cold blood and in triumph.

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[١٠] Interview with a tribal leader in Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, a couple kilometres from the front line, January ٢٠١٤

## Nuanced Narratives

At the same time, not all parts of the Sunni population that had until then fully participated in the aggressive and antagonistic narratives so far described were able to understand these developments. For example, in a conversation between several tribal leaders in Abu Ghraib district in Baghdad province, no more than a kilometre from the front line of the Euphrates river, many participants expressed confusion, which was apparently widely spread during that situation in immediate reaction to the first news of the fall of Mosul in June ٢٠١٤. Sprinkled throughout that conversation, for example, was confusion about the identity of the fighters perpetrating these acts of violence: "Where are tribes? Has anyone said anything about tribes? Those are all foreigners with Daesh" said one participant.[11] "Nonsense, without the tribes Daesh can´t do anything. Everyone knows that! The tribes control everything. Daesh is only on TV", said another.[12] "In reality this is all orchestrated by Al Maliki himself. So that he can incite the Shia against us. From the beginning this was planned by him!" said a third.[13] "Better Daesh and the tribes than the Maliki-army!"

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Interview with a community leader, Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, June ٢٠١٤ [11]

Interview with a tribal community leader, Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, June ٢٠١٤ [12]

Interview with a tribal community leader, Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, June ٢٠١٤ [13]

In this confusion we can identify different perspectives on the violence, on those responsible, and on the fundamental reasons for its emergence. In their immediate reaction to the violence, the population in the northern Sunni provinces welcomed the invaders, taking them at first for tribal fighters coming to liberate them from the Shia occupation. By the time they realized who had actually come, it was too late. Triumph changed to disillusionment and the narratives, in turn, started to change from triumphant to criticism, or even regret. An excerpt from an interview with a local journalist and Internally Displaced Person (IDP) from Tikrit, Salahuddin province in Kirkuk, in July ٢٠١٤ (a month after the invasion of ISIS), expresses this quick change of narratives that evidences the shock and confusion among the Sunni population.

"Yes, most people welcomed the fighters. They thought Daesh were tribal fighters coming to save us from the Shia repressors. They were actually doing just that, only that they were in fact Daesh. I could see that soon. Many of them I knew. Some since I was young. With some of them you already knew back then that they were going to become Al Qaeda. And after they became Al Qaeda they of course became Daesh. Soon we realised they were all just criminals."[14]

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Interview with a local journalist from Tikrit, Kirkuk City, July ٢٠١٤[14]

It seems, therefore, to have been a slow process for the Sunni population; the realization that the invaders were not led by tribal heroes fighting for a just cause, but by brutal terrorists fighting for absolute power, and power alone. On ٢٩ July ٢٠١٤, ISIS´s leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared a worldwide caliphate from the city of Mosul and renamed the movement Islamic State (IS), thus leaving no doubt who was in charge, where this "uprising" had led, and what it was now about. This realisation obviously had an effect on the popular narratives, although differences in timing were visible, depending on who you talked to.

It was this announcement that made the situation to the urban population now under the rule of IS and they therefore soon came to a realisation similar to that expressed by the journalist above from the city of Tikrit, particularly as their more liberal ways of life immediately clashed with the ultra-conservative rule of the IS. As one interviewee stated, "There [Mosul and Tikrit] people are not used to this style of life that they are forcing upon us. A friend of mine had a DJ-shop in Tikrit. He had to run away like me when Daesh came"[١٥].

On the other hand, the more conservative population in rural areas had an easier time accommodating themselves with the new rulers

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[١٥] Interview with an IDP from Tikrit in Baghdad City, August ٢٠١٤

and their own narratives seemed rarely affected in the first period of the invasion. As one interviewee said:

"What problem should I have with them [the IS]. All they want from me is that I live like a good Muslim. I have been doing that all my life, so they are definitely better than these oppressors from Baghdad!"[16]

Others, who were not under IS rule but exposed to the actions of Shia militias, and despite all the brutality and cruelty displayed by IS that was by then plainly obvious to anyone in the country, still wished for their presence. It seems that this brutality was not enough to deter a desire for their presence until it was witnessed directly. For example, a tribal leader in the Abu Ghraib district bordering IS-territory in August ٢٠١٤, argued that:

"Most people would prefer to have Daesh, like in Mosul. Now with these militias it´s even worse here. They are like the devil. Completely unpredictable, doing whatever they want and no one can tell them anything, not even the army."[17]

**Reconciliatory Narratives**

However, amongst the Sunni population perceptions and narratives did broadly change in most places when the brutality became too hard to conceal and the scope of it was no longer

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Interview by telephone with a resident of Anbar province, August ٢٠١٤[16]

Interview with a tribal leader, Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, August ٢٠١٤[17]

justifiable for ordinary citizens. A few months after the invasion of IS, at the latest during the last months of ٢٠١٤, it became apparent that many amongst the Sunni population started to be disillusioned by the violence and narratives started to grow increasingly self-reflective. For example, one interviewee stated, "Many say that others are responsible for the mess. Some say Iran, some Saudi Arabia, some Qatar. But I believe in fact us Iraqis are responsible."[١٨]

Indeed, already at that time narratives started to focus the more fundamental problems Iraq faced, and the antagonistic sense of the "other" seemed to have moved to the background. One interviewee lamented, for example, how:

"The country is full of oil. But the people are not benefitting from that. That´s the real problem of the country. If all had a small part of that and a few greedy [individuals] wouldn´t eat up everything then no one would care about who is Sunni or Shia. Then there wouldn't be any Daesh and Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi would be sitting somewhere alone in a cave like Usama bin Laden back then."[١٩]

Interview with a resident of Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, October ٢٠١٤[١٨]
Interview with a tribal leader, Abu Ghraib district, Baghdad province, August ٢٠١٤[١٩]

Other interviewees followed suite. One arguing, for „example, that "I believe most people are good, but the issue is like with a glass of water. One drop of poison and everything is poisoned."[20]

As if the last months of such excessive violence had finally woken people up, narratives started to even turn reconciliatory. Coincidentally the same local tribal leader quoted earlier (footnote ٣) stated almost one year later that "in our culture we say when the Sunni is in peace, the Shia is also in peace."[21] As the disaster that was the uprising of early ٢٠١٤, which led to the brutal rule of IS over a third of the country´s territory, became more and more obvious in people´s minds, so did their narratives continue to evolve in this more reconciliatory direction. It had become clear that violence and antagonism had let nowhere good. Even worse from the perspective of Iraq´s Sunni citizens, it had become obvious that the forces controlling the initial uprising did not have their interests in mind.

It seemed that the combination of the extreme brutality of the events in ٢٠١٤, and the realisation that their uprising had been hijacked for a completely different purpose, had finally tipped the balance for Sunni citizens. In addition, the triumph of the rapid and vast military victories over the "Shia oppressors" in the form of

[20] Interview with Colonel of the Iraqi Armed Forces of Sunni confession, Al Tarmiya district, Baghdad province, October ٢٠١٤

[21] Interview with a local tribal leader in Al Rasheed district, Baghdad province, September ٢٠١٤

the Iraqi army during the first half of ٢٠١٤, soon ceded to a stalemate and later to defeat and retreat. The military fate indeed turned during the second half of ٢٠١٤ after the call to arms by the Grand Ayatollah of the Shia Marjaiya to defend the country following the fall of Mosul in June ٢٠١٤. Even though the call was mostly answered by Shia citizens of Iraq´s southern provinces, it was unmistakably directed at all Iraqi citizens, an effort that was definitely an important step in influencing narratives away from antagonism between the Sunni and Shia confessions and towards a more reconciliatory tone.

In this call to arms, IS was itself narratively framed as a force that could, at least in terms of its ideology, be portrayed as an external enemy that targeted not only the Shia but also the Sunni populations of Iraq. As a result, the Marjaiya claimed that all Iraqis could and should fight against it. The real consequences of this call for unity were, of course, mixed.  The Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) where were soon formed, were in fact incorporated into the structures of different Shia militias. Highly motivated by the call from their religious leader to defend the country, these militias, together with their new recruits, were a match for the similarly zealous IS fighters and soon victory followed victory. One city occupied by the IS fell swiftly after the other, until finally

the ultimate battle for Mosul, Iraq´s second biggest city, was decided towards the end of ٢٠١٧.

At the same time, the fact that the dreaded Shia militias that had played a brutal role during the sectarian violence of ٢٠٠٦-٢٠٠٧ were so instrumental, or even indispensable, in the military operations was soon recognised as a problem. Even the Iraqi army themselves, who depended on these fresh and motivated fighters after they themselves had so miserably failed, were concerned. As one high-ranking Iraqi army commander noted in November ٢٠١٤:

"It´s true, without these volunteers who followed the call of the Marjaiya Baghdad would have probably fallen. But in the long run there is a problem. Some do come to join our structures [of the Iraqi army] but no one here knows what to do with so many unexperienced recruits. Therefore many of them go directly to the [Shia] militias, and what they are capable of doing everyone knows…"[٢٢]

Another high ranking Iraqi army commander expressed to the author, in November ٢٠١٤, that:

"All these young guys that are now taking arms, exactly in order to take revenge…how to control this? Where would this revenge stop? Where, if also the local farmer and worker [in the Sunni

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Interview with an Iraqi army commander, Al Yusifiya, Baghdad province, November ٢٠١٤[٢٢]

majority areas invaded by the IS] contributed, like apparently it was the case almost everywhere in the beginning [of the uprising]? One can´t hold the whole Sunni population of the country to account!"[23]

The Iraqi army soon tried to counter fears of retribution by the Sunni population by deploying the militias and other volunteer units in open combat situations as far away as possible from the local population, especially during the final efforts of retaking a city.

**Unifying Narratives**

The call by the Marjaiya, therefore, turned out to yield mostly positive results and even beyond this specific act the Marjaiya and its members seem to have adopted a reconciliatory role for themselves central to the efforts of the Iraqi society to move towards a common future. Considering the respect the institution of the Marjaiya holds with large parts of the Iraqi population, but also with the central government, this commitment is probably one that could tip the balance in a positive direction.

Members of the institution have indeed continued their calls for unity of the country, some actively working to show their personal commitment to national reconciliation. Through their direct influence on Iraq's Shia population, but also through their

Interview with an Iraqi army commander, Baghdad, November ٢٠١٤[23]

respected position within Iraqi society more broadly, they have directly affected and seemingly even targeted the antagonistic narratives of the past by trying to replace them with narratives of national unity. In their approach they seem self-reflective, as expressed by one influential representative of the Marjaiya in April ٢٠١٨:

"If my brother and father had been killed by our security forces, I myself would definitely also have joined Daesh…I don't like to say that, but apparently even the IS had a good side, since apparently it took this tragedy to finally make the population realise that we have to stand

together."[٢٤]

Beyond exerting influence on the narratives of their usual clientele some of their representatives were also willing to step far out of there comfort zones and even expose themselves to tangible security risks. An example of this was the visit by a delegation of important Marjaiya and other Najafi civil society representatives to Ramadi in January ٢٠١٩. Ramadi, as the capital of Anbar Province, was one of the first places where the uprising in ٢٠١٤ took hold. Before the trip, all representatives asked said that they had never been to Ramadi either ever before, or at least since ٢٠١٣. But the fact that the anti-Shia Sunni uprising had been initiated in

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Interview with a representative of the Marjaiya, Najaf, April ٢٠١٨[٢٤]

this province and that they might be targeted by extremist cells in that city did not deter them from their mission. Whether by coincidence or by design their messages were concrete, problem-oriented and seemed to thereby concur with the change in narratives amongst the Sunni population described earlier, which have started to focus on the dire economic situation and the failure of government to remedy this situation.

At the same time, the Marjaiya representatives seemed aware that narratives themselves needed to be tackled directly. Addressing an audience of university students and civil society representatives at Ramadi University during the event, one Marjaiya representative stated:

"Travelling around the country, all Iraqi people, from Erbil to Basra seem to have the same problems with the government… We all just want to live in security and we ask for a just government… We cannot count on the government to address this. We have to build up pressure together from civil society … Reconciliation is not only good will, it has to be a project! ... There is so much negativity on internet fora, it is up to us to balance this!"[25]

The Sunni side echoed almost all of these comments during the event, as was evident in the address by an influential civil society representative from Ramadi:

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From an address of a Marjaiya representative, Ramadi, January ٢٠١٩[25]

"There is no real problem between Iraqis, our problems are mainly economic… we need to be present in the media, the media depends on diverse inputs… Where the efforts of the government to strengthen reconciliation in our society?"[26]

It does indeed seem that years after the extreme events of ٢٠١٤ there is at least a willingness within Iraqi society and amongst both the Shia and Sunni populations to leave sectarian conflict behind and affect unified narratives by focusing on issues of concern for all Iraqi citizens. The awareness that this societal unity is an urgent matter seems to also be present. As one civil society representative in Ramadi stated; "We need compromise and we can´t only stay in our place. Otherwise sooner or later conflict between us will return"[27].

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the above analysis of six different kinds of narrative, heard among members of the Sunni

confession in Iraq, we clearly witness an evolving interpretation of the relationship between the Sunni and Shia communities. As described, beginning prior to ٢٠١٣ the Sunni community had already started to define itself as mistreated by the newly dominant Shia majority. They came to identify the Shia as empowered and

From an address of a civil society representative of Ramadi, Ramadi, January ٢٠١٩[26]
Interview with a civil society representative in Ramadi, April ٢٠١٨[27]

emboldened by the US intervention, and as using their newfound power specifically to undermine the Sunni community. These perspectives can quite easily be seen to be part of a victimhood narrative. Following this, however, came the worrying trend of quotes which not only described those of the Shia faith as the tormentors of the victimized Sunni community, but started to identify those of the Shia faith and the community more broadly as inherently dangerous, as violent, and even as terrorists. This form of divisive narrative serves to de-humanize the enemy and set the stage for outright violence to increase dramatically if and when it is sparked by a specific event.

This event, as described, came on the last few days of ٢٠١٣, when the Al Maliki government set to work dismantling Sunni protest camps which led immediately to the rise of a violent revolution in Iraq's western province of Anbar. This revolution was initially led by the Tribal Revolutionary Council, and, as described above, was seen by many Sunni as a rightful response to the violence and indignity forced on the Sunni community by the Shia majority government. As such, in the articulation of a violent narrative, the Sunni's interviewed defended this revolution as carried out by the "sons of the tribes" and defied the alternative narrative that this was an external intervention by Al Qaeda or its affiliates. The evolution of these narratives, from one focusing on the
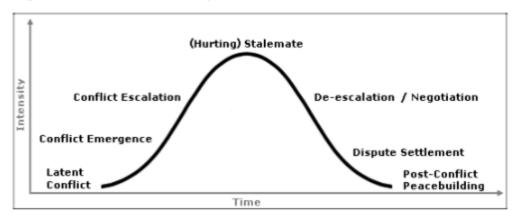
victimization of Sunnis, to then dissociating the Sunni from a de-humanized Shia, and eventually to one which openly supported a violent revolution against the Shia government, evidences both how such narratives relate to each other and evolve over time, and how they shift in response to historical political and economic events. These dynamics are evidenced further in the evolution towards more conciliatory narratives as well.

As described, as the nature of the ٢٠١٤ violence and the role of external actors in the form of Daesh fighters became more apparent, a new set of more nuanced narratives started to emerge. These narratives started, in essence to deconstruct the clear "us" versus "them" binary that had been developed in the victimhood, divisive and violent narratives, and instead started to evidence recognition that there was some diversity within the Sunni perspective of or position regarding the revolution. It was the declaration of the IS caliphate from the city of Mosul by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi on ٢٩ July ٢٠١٤ which seems to have been a turning point, a moment when it became clear exactly who would be governing this new political establishment and how. Many members of the Sunni confession at this point started to question this movement. While some rule by IS was still better than by the Shia, it was at this point that more reconciliatory narratives started to emerge, with some now turning to recognize Daesh as the

"other" and both Sunni and Shia as Iraqi victims of this externally driven movement. The extreme brutality of IS throughout ٢٠١٤ had already led to a call to arms issued by the Grand Ayatollah of the Shia Marjaiya in June ٢٠١٤, which was heard by both Shia and Sunni as a call to defend Iraq as itself against this "other" which threatened them all. This, in turn, evolved into the more unifying narratives described in the final section.

The evolution of these narratives follows, perhaps unsurprisingly, the classic model of the conflict cycle (see Figure ١), with the first three forms of narrative (victimhood, divisive and violent) on the left or conflict escalation side of the curve and the second three forms of narrative (nuanced, reconciliatory and unifying) on the right or conflict de-escalation side. The top of the classic model is represented by the "(Hurting) Stalemate" which is a classic trop in the tangential area of CR related to negotiation processes. As usually articulated, the "mutually hurting stalemate" is simply the point in time when all parties to the conflict realize that they are locked in a conflict from which they cannot benefit more than they might if they simply end the conflict (Zartman ٢٠٠١). This the moment when both parties are more likely to be open to being drawn into the process of engagement, brought to the negotiating table, and to make concessions which might bring an end to violence. While the mutually hurting stalemate is too simple a

frame by which to analyse the de-escalation witnessed in the Iraqi narratives, it does nonetheless highlight the importance of a crux point, a critical moment of change.

**Figure ١: The Conflict Cycle**



In the Iraqi case this critical moment appears to have been two-fold; first, the call to arms issued by the Grand Ayatollah of the Shia Marjaiya, and second, the declaration of the IS Caliphate under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. These two moments served to drive home the pivotal realization among many Sunnis that the violence was not in their favour, was not defending the "us" against the "other", and was, in fact, undermining a more general Iraqi identity and sovereignty. They were the first cracks in the foundation of the older conflict promoting narratives, and, at the same time, the first steps towards the more conciliatory narratives that would replace them. The case is extremely informative, therefore, in identifying the importance of these pivotal moments as it both evidences the manner in which such turning points

emerge from the conflict dynamics themselves, and highlights how critical it is that intervenors be ready to support the transition to more pro-peace narratives if and when they do emerge. Key questions, for example, that must be asked as a result of this analysis include: ١) how can external actors assess if and when such critical moments will occur? ٢) If a critical moment appears to be occurring, can external actors encourage parties to take advantage of them? ٣) If such a moment is not occurring, is it ethical for external actors to promote them?

Each of these questions requires deep reflection and consideration of more data from more cases before substantive answers can be provided. But this case seems to hint at some answers. First, as with so many areas of international intervention in conflict affected states, it is very difficult for international actors to assess such subtle conflict dynamics in real time. Scholars are very good at assessing historical narratives post hoc, but in the moment analysis is an entirely different story. You cannot know what actions will give rise to a critical moment until the moment has passed, either having resulted in substantive change or not. It is also very dangerous, therefore, for external actors to try to force parties in conflict to respond in a particular way to an event which the external actor believes should be a pivotal turning point but may not be. For the same reason, it seems highly unethical for

external actors to try to engineer such moments; particularly if such engineering carries the risk of aggravating the conflict itself and of reifying further the conflictual promoting narratives. Instead, this seems another case where external actors are best placed to serve as facilitators and assistants as opposed to drivers of peace.

If and when shifts in the nature of narratives as observed in this case emerge, international actors can certainly play a key role in providing the necessary skills, capacities, and resources to help local actors take advantage of and build on the foundations for reconciliation and unity that pivotal moments provide. In order to be available, to be trusted, and to be there when they are needed, of course, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, or reconciliation organizations must already be engaged, they must have built up some level of rapport and trust with local communities, and they must understand the on-the-ground realities of the conflict enough to play a positive and supportive role in taking advantage of such moments. This requires, therefore, a long-term commitment to support the parties to the conflict, and particularly actors within the setting who are interested in and capable of supporting peace and of identifying the right moments to act, whether these be civil, religious, business, government, or from other sectors of society. In short,

identifying and acting on these pivotal moments must be locally driven and externally supported.

In conclusion, the data described above both provides new and interesting insights into the subtle development and evolution of conflict and peace related narratives within a particular context, while also reaffirming some of the central theoretical insights in the field regarding othering, the importance of narrative, and the more recent focus on bottom-up or locally driven CR processes. It also serves to highlight a more subtle or complicated issue for international CR actors, and this is the balance that must be struck between hands-on and hands-off engagement or between being proactive and being reserved. It also indicates worryingly bureaucratic issues regarding funding and impact assessment. How exactly can external actors acquire the funds and support to stay engaged and prepared on the ground while ostensibly waiting? Will funders require activity that requires more directly hands-on or proactive approaches that can be assessed as impactful, or are they prepared to support CR institutions simply to be ready to facilitate activity from the bottom-up when it becomes possible? These are further questions for research and analysis to be carried out at a later time.