

# Why it's Easier to Create an Extremist Group in Iraq than a Moderate One

I remember going to the first Iraqi elections with my dad in 2005. I went partly for the fun of it (I was too young to vote) and partly because I wanted to challenge Al Qaeda and their minions, neither of whom wanted the elections to happen in the first place. But most importantly, I went to observe how Iraqis—my family, friends, and neighbors—voted.

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, it became much easier to start a political party in Iraq. The lists of parties one could choose from was very long, and it remains that way today. But while the list is long, you can easily place most of the parties into five categories: Shia Islamist parties, Sunni Islamist parties, Secular Arab parties, Kurdish parties, and other religious minorities like Assyrians and Yazidis, etc.

While there are distinctions among the Islamist parties within the Shia and Sunni categories, the differences are minimal in the same way there is a distinction between ISIS and Al Qaeda (i.e. do they opt to throw gay persons from the 14th floor or 12th floor?).

Even as a child, I knew who I didn't want to win. I was very worried that Shia Islamist parties would win for several reasons:

#1 Shias make up the majority of the Iraqi population.

#2 Shias have faced lots of discrimination especially those in the south during the Saddam regime.

#3 Shia Islamist parties are strongly ideological; many are

ready to die for the cause.

#4 They are well-organized. Meetings often occur in mosques.

#5 They have the backing of highly influential religious leaders like the Ayatollahs.

#6 Shia thinking had been shaped by years of “faith campaigns” by Saddam Hussein, not to mention the Iranian Revolution in 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Because of this, the mixing of religion, politics, and organizing seemed (and seems) natural to most Shias.

There are of course additional nuances one could add to show why Iraq’s politics are intertwined with Islam, but I believe the answers all come back to two things: political organizing and funding.

When it comes to the first, Islamists are highly organized because they have been doing it for a very long time; they have a foundation that they can build on and learn from.

Regarding the latter, consider that the Iraq conflict turned virtually into an unwinnable proxy war, with Iran on one side and Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the other.

If you are a Shia-Islamist-party militia, you can ask funding from Iran. If you are a Sunni militia, you go to the Saudis or Qatar. Neither of these sides are palatable to a secular liberal.

In order to break this cycle, those of us who believe in bringing liberal solutions to the Muslim world must invest time and money in creating a credible liberal alternative.

Does such a movement exist? Yes. But it lacks training, media skills, political venues and outlets. Most importantly, it lacks organization and funding.

On the eve of every terrorist attack, there are always the

same questions from Western media sources.

*“Where are the moderate Muslims?”*

*“Why are countries in the Middle East not cracking down harder on Islamist terrorism?”*

*“Are there existing moderate organizations we can support?”*

The answer to these questions are complicated—more complicated than most people realize.

But as a former Iraqi who grew up in the Middle East and remains committed to fighting religious extremism—both online and offline—I can confidently say the solution starts by creating a credible liberal alternative, one built on the ideas of human rights, religious pluralism, free speech and anti-corruption.

This is a long-term solution and it may take a long time to implement, but we have to start somewhere. We don't have the luxury to wait because Iraq is being destroyed more every single day.

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