

Collective Cooperation Challenges in Iraq: Mistrust and Trauma between the Sunni, the Shia and the Kurds

The Republic of Iraq has been ruled for decades under authoritarian fascist governance, which has fuelled polarization between the Iraqi people. This has resulted in ethnic tension and mistrust, both at the grassroots -and the elite and governance-levels. For these reasons, it has been difficult to attain meaningful cooperation between the three main groups – the Sunni, the Shia and the Kurds – within the fragmented and hostile social-political landscape.¹ It is therefore argued that a holistic approach can stimulate cross-ethnic cooperation, reconciliation and peace in the long term; however, here the balance between coercive- government policies and grassroots initiatives and preconditions is crucial for the viability of cooperation. Here the broad concept of positive-peace – defined by friendship, harmony, and non-violent action – is arguably the collective good that may create mutual incentives for further cooperation and development, yet countered by challenges of collective action problems.²

The relationship between the three ‘communities’ in this paper are defined by conflicting features, e.g. no shared identity and contradicting norms and values.³ Therefore, they are unlikely to merge into one integral community. Historical injustices, e.g. the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, have consolidated the perceptions of distrust and fear of betrayal among the (minority) groups.⁴ According to Bornstein, “intergroup conflicts are more complex than any other form of social interdependence”.⁵ Parallel to the collective-action problem doctrine, social prejudices and intra-group pressure tend to disincentive individuals to establish relationships and cooperate with members of ‘the other community’, while generally, most individuals endeavour a collective goal (peace) that can be attained through cross-ethnic cooperation. An example may be that individuals within the three ethnic groups may want to create a secure environment and conduct social and economic exchange with individuals in other groups, but are countered by the perception that the ‘larger group’ to which they belong, does not approve this endeavour.⁶ This shows how intra-and inter-group incentives are fluid and can fluctuate between ‘fear of punishment’ and ‘advantageous rewards’, essentially guided by mistrust.⁷

Reasons for this rationale may be competition over territory, political and military power, which are detrimental to the attainment of ‘collective peace’. This illustrates the volatile interplay and tension between intergroup and intragroup conflict-processes, and more specifically, the individual and collective interests between and within these groups. In contrast to the initiative-taking individuals, other members of the group may opt for ‘free-riding’, because contributing to a larger (national) collective-objective requires a substantial sacrifice and commitment, e.g. time, money, and the chance of injury or death.⁸

¹ Dana, Sofi., Jens, Rydgren, “ Interethnic relations in northern Iraq: brokerage, social capital and the potential for reconciliation”, *International Sociology*, 2011: 25-29.

² Young, Nigel, “Peace: A Western European Perspective”, in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Peace Studies: A Cultural Perspective*, edited by Wolfgang Dietrich et al, U.K., Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011: 59-60.

³ Snyder, Madeleine, “Post-War Iraq: The Triangle of Ethnic Tensions”, *Harvard International Review*, 35(4), 2014: 11-12.

⁴ Ahmed, M.A. Mohammed, “*Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building*” Basingstoke, U.K: Palgrave Macmillan; 2012: 144-146.

⁵ Bornstein, Gary, “ Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group and Collective Interests”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, (7)2003: 141.

⁶ Bornstein, Gary, “ Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group and Collective Interests”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, (7)2003: 129-131.

⁷ Jano, Dorian, “Ethnic conflicts in the Balkans as a collective action problem: does rational solutions need normative evaluations?”, *Analytical*, (2), 2009: 6-7.

⁸ Bornstein, Gary, “ Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group and Collective Interests”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, (7)2003: 130-133.

One effective policy – as part of a holistic approach – may be that the government stimulates cross-ethnic exchange by constructing mixed social-work environments. Here the government must also provide incentives for individuals of all groups to make this commitment, despite the mixed conflicting incentives mentioned. Initial small exchanges between the individuals of these groups can plant a seed of good-will, create social capital, and grow towards a trustful relationship.

In the long-term, this intergroup-cooperation, scrutinized by the government, can facilitate harmonious co-existence between the different groups. This process may also contribute to the wider democratisation and reconciliation process.⁹ However, since the central government may not mirror the diversity of peoples or lack the support from certain groups, it is crucial that inclusive cooperation committees will be incorporated in the government bodies, and that the government itself must be reformed in harmony with the 'ethnic' balance within the country. This emphasis on ethnicity is not ideal, but in the preliminary stages it provides the essential legitimacy, and the assurance of grassroots-representation.¹⁰

As is illustrated, the contradicting incentives and fear of stigmas and punishment in inter- and intra-group relations creates challenges for effective cooperation and provision of collective goods. However, in this case, the stimulation of cross-ethnic exchange in work and social places, can make a substantial contribution towards trust between groups, and therefore, overcome some of the crucial elements of collective action problems and contradicting incentives.

⁹ Dana, Sofi., Jens, Rydgren, "Interethnic relations in northern Iraq: brokerage, social capital and the potential for reconciliation", *International Sociology*, 2011: 40-44.

¹⁰ Penn, Maggie, Elizabeth, "Citizenship versus Ethnicity: The Role of Institutions in Shaping Identity Choice", *The Journal of Politics*, 70(4), 2008: 956-958.