

Preventing Radicalization among Internally Displaced People in Syria and Iraq

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Abstract

There are tremendous numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Syria and Iraq as a consequence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The IDPs are a mix of people; men, women, children and those who are radicalized into ISIS ideology and those who are not. The potential for spreading radicalization into ISIS ideology is high given the conditions most IDPs in Syria and Iraq live under. This study argues that the most important ingredients for radicalization are the presence of human needs, networks of trusted others who are radicalized, and a narrative that seems to resonate with the potentially radicalizing individual (the 3N model). The most important need in radicalizing an individual is the need for significance. This is the need to feel that one matters, that one has purpose in life, and others care about them. While physical conditions in the camps are very poor as well, with shortages of food, water, security, etc., these conditions reinforce the sense among camp residents that they are not cared for and they do not matter to those who run the camps. This study employs interview data collected at Al Hawl camp in Syria on behalf of Special Ops Joint Task Force/Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF/OIR) to determine what needs are most salient among the IDPs. Conditions in Al Hawl camp are rife with significance-diminishing factors for the inhabitants. There are also many individuals who are already radicalized in the camp who can appeal to those suffering from significance loss. The primary recommendation offered here is that the most effective immediate strategy to reduce the likelihood of spreading radicalization in the IDP camps is to give the residents a sense of voice and empowerment in their lives. This means establishing representative bodies for camp residents, creating outreach to the community outside of the camps, and giving camp residents educational and other types of opportunities that give them a sense of agency in their lives.

Key Questions Motivating Study

- How do you protect an at-risk population from extremism in an IDP camp?
- How do you build community resilience to help prevent radicalization?
- How do you triage and segregate persons in IDP/refugee camps that have varying degrees of radicalization?

The three questions listed above motivate the research for this study. The UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are approximately 6.2 million internally displaced persons in Syria and 2 million internally displaced persons in Iraq (UNHCR Humanitarian Response Plan: Syria 2019; UNHCR Humanitarian Response Plan: Iraq 2019). That body of IDPs is an immense challenge for local governments and international partners to handle. The US government is rightly concerned that there is

considerable risk that IDPs in Syria and Iraq, in particular, either remain radicalized, become radicalized, or start down the path toward eventual radicalization in the camps. Based on this study's conceptualization of what drives radicalization, it is posited that the building blocks of radicalization are very definitely present in the camps and there must be steps taken to counter the radicalization process or new cohorts of ISIS fighters will emerge from the camps, being a possible battlefield risk into the future. Our analysis of survey data from Al Hawl camp in Syria shows a pattern of factors that are furthering the radicalization of camp residents.

The 3Ns of Radicalization

Before discussing the factors involved in radicalization, it is important to illustrate what is meant by radicalization into violent extremism. Radicalization is used here to mean the internalization of values that are considered extreme by society. Extreme values are those values that are considered outside of the mainstream by the vast majority in society and are generally considered unacceptable by most people because of this. This means an individual is radicalized when s/he believes in the inherent correctness of the extremist body of values and thinking in question that most others reject. Radicalization into violent extremism refers to internalizing values that condone the use of violence on behalf of the cause. While radicalization into violent extremism may lead to engagement in violence, it does not have to.

Radicalized individuals who are violent are obviously the most worrisome for those tasked with preventing and countering such violence. But non-violent radicalized individuals are a threat as well. Non-violent radicalized individuals may radicalize others, offer passive support for the cause, and otherwise facilitate the violent operations carried out by others.

The 3Ns of radicalization are needs, networks, and narratives (Kruglanski et al 2014; Kruglanski et al 2018; Kruglanski et al 2019). These three factors work in combination to move an individual toward radicalization into violent extremism. All three of these variables must be present in order for an individual to move from a non-radicalized state into a radicalized state of being.

The first N refers to needs. Human have psychological and physical needs that arise in life from time to time, but the most important need in the radicalization process is the psychological need for significance. Significance refers to the need for a person to feel that they matter, their life has meaning, and that others respect them. While needs for safety or sustenance may make an individual support a violent extremist group for utilitarian reasons, those needs will not lead to the individuals becoming radicalized into the values of the group.

Why does violent extremist ideology serve as a way, sometimes, to meet a person's need for significance? The extremist ideology offers a cause, a sense of purpose, that may be absent in the person's life at the time of exposure to that ideology. Working on behalf of that ideology may give a person with a need for significance the sense of life's mission and importance that they need. Also, adhering to an ideology can give a person a sense of belonging to a group of fellow travelers that makes them feel appreciated and respected. Adhering to an extremist ideology creates a clear sense of in-group and out-group that can actually help the significance-seeking individual have a stronger sense of belonging than one would have in a group that has a less pronounced sense of threat to it. It creates a sense of solidarity and strength through numbers that comes from being part of a movement.

Acting on behalf of the extremist ideology can lead to the person believing others see them as heroic and noble for sacrificing for the cause. While the tangible, physical costs of engaging in violence or other high-cost behavior on behalf of the extremist ideology may be viewed as high, the psychological reward of significance may be high.

The second N in the model is network. A network refers to the trusted others a person has in his/her life. The type of people one has in one's social network is crucial for whether one is likely to be radicalized. The simplest way to think about it is that if one has radicalized individuals in one's social network, the probability of radicalization increases substantially. For a person to become radicalized, s/he must have a need that is met by radicalization, the need for significance, but must also be introduced to the extremist ideas and values to become internalized. The role of trusted others as radicalizers is key to the process.

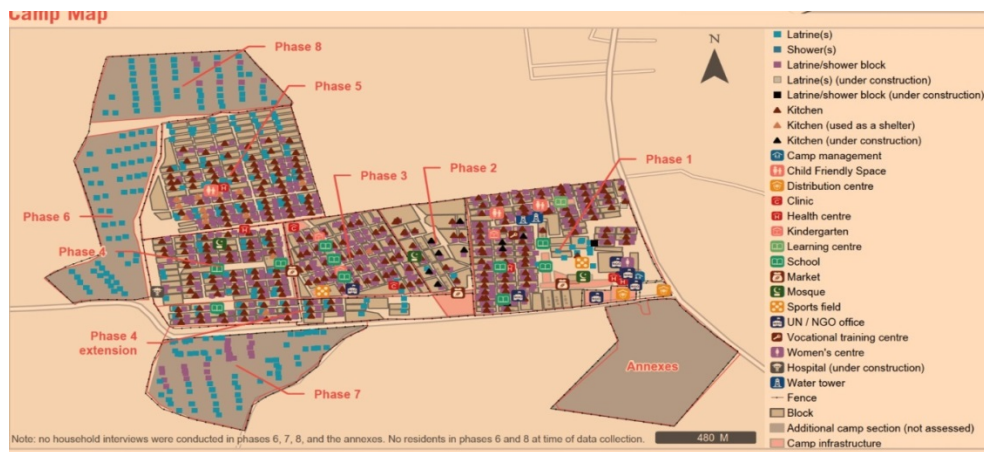
The final N in the framework for understanding radicalization is narrative. The narrative is the set of extremist values and ideas that the radicalizing individual internalizes. The narrative is most likely conveyed by the social network to the person with the need for significance. This can be done face-to-face or virtually, through social media, for example. The narrative most likely is an explanation of who is the cause of the problems the individual's in-group faces, an explanation of the malign motives the out-group has, the laudable attributes of the in-group, and a way to vanquish the out-group and create a "just" outcome for the in-group. The narrative is very important because it lays out the rationale for radicalization and the way to achieve significance.

A Case Study of Al Hawl Camp

The Al Hawl camp in north-east Syria is likely the most famous IDP camp in the world at this time. It is famous, or perhaps, more accurately, infamous, because it is so large and beset by well-known humanitarian needs (Yee, 2019). It is a camp of more than 70,000 inhabitants, a mix of nationalities, genders, and relationships to ISIS that is administered by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF, a largely Kurdish force, is trying to guard, feed, and otherwise care for a camp population that has various degrees of hostility toward them.

Approximately 75% of the camp IDP population is made up of women and children. The sections of the camp are divided by nationality, Syrian, Iraqi, and foreigners, and men and women and children. The population is also divided by those deemed to be ISIS fighters and those not thought to be. The map below shows the areas of Al Hawl camp where interviews were performed. The areas shaded in grey did not have interviews in them as they were considered too dangerous for enumerators to perform interviews.

Figure 1

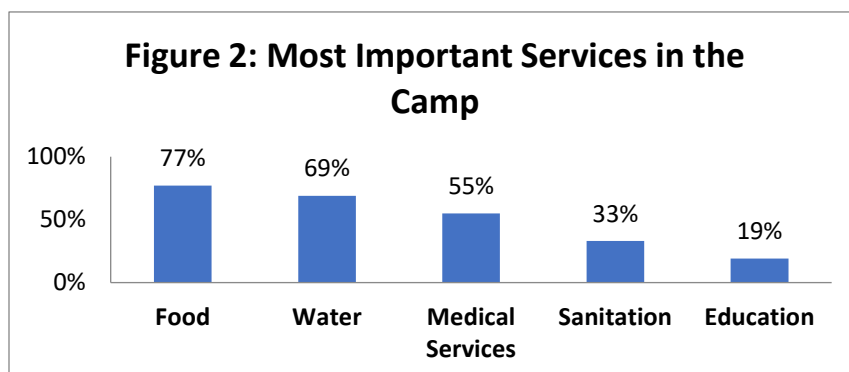


The research used in this study was carried out by a Syrian sub-contractor for the UK public opinion firm, ORB International. The data was collected for the Special Operations Joint Task Force/Operation Inherent Resolve.

The firm interviewed 221 residents of the camp in a random, probability sample among the camp's non-ISIS residents. The interviews were carried out between 16 and 21 September 2019 by female and male Syrian enumerators. Females interviewed females and males interviewed males.

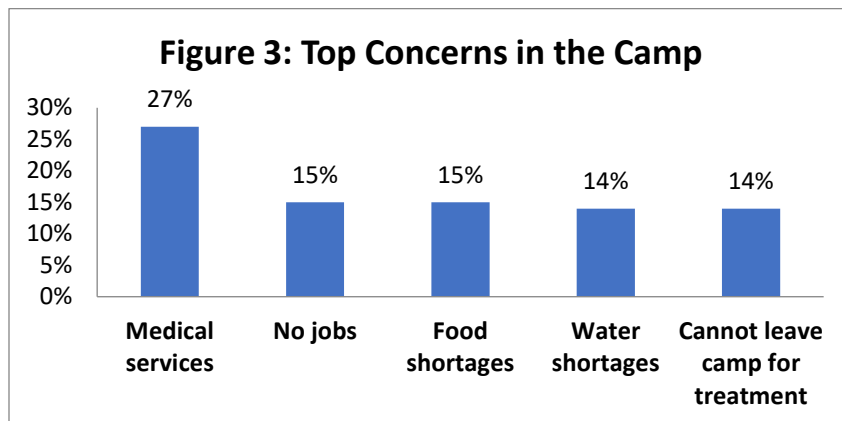
Questions in the survey focused on the experiences of camp residents before they entered the camp, what forms of communication they have with the outside world, how they assess the conditions in the camp, and what the residents would like to do to improve things for themselves.

While security is an issue in the camp, with many reports of violence among residents, it is not one of the most important services considered crucial to resident and family well-being. The top services cited by respondents are shown in Figure 2.



As one would expect, the major inputs necessary for survival, food, water, and medicine are noted by camp residents as their primary needs from the authorities who run the camp.

The greatest concerns about unmet needs in the camp are shown in Figure 3 below.



The figure shows, out of a list of many concerns noted, that medical services, jobs, and food were the most pressing unmet needs. The lack of jobs was considered important for residents not only because of the lack of jobs meant insufficient income to procure food and medicine at the levels needed, but also because the lack of jobs brought complaints of boredom and feeling useless.

The data show a clear set of unmet physical needs. They also show real pessimism among camp residents about the situation in the camp. When asked by enumerators if things in the camp had gotten better or worse in the last six months, 52% of respondents said they had gotten worse and 21% responded that they had gotten better. The vast majority of the camp residents have been displaced before and Al Hawl has been another stop in their journey to seek safety and some form of aid.

These dire physical conditions clearly raise questions as to what camp residents think about their own sense of significance. As has been stated earlier, those who have unmet physical needs may believe that those needs are not being met because others do not care enough about them to provide for those needs. Given the squalid conditions in the camp, it is not difficult to imagine that camp residents do not believe those running the camp or the outside world really cares much about them.

While there are no direct questions related to residents' sense of personal significance, there are questions in the survey that point to a fairly strong desire among camp residents to gain more of a sense of control over their lives. One possible way that respondents could possibly gain more control over their lives, and thus increase their sense of personal significance, is to participate in the decision-making inside the camp.

There are meetings that take place between camp residents and the people who run the camp and aid groups from the outside to provide assistance. But it is a minority of camp residents that participate in such meetings. When asked about the meetings, 32% of camp residents said that they were aware of the meetings and attended them. Another 22% of camp residents were aware of the meetings and did not attend them and 46% of camp residents were unaware that such meetings occurred.

One question asks the respondent if s/he would like to help others in the camp and improve life there in general. Of the responses to this question, 82% said they would like to help to improve others' life in the camp, with just 11% disagreeing with this sentiment.

Another question asked the respondents if they wanted to meet with those who run the camp and have more say in how it was run. Among the responses to this question, 67% answered that they would like to have a voice in running the camp, whereas 25% would not like to have such a voice. While it is possible that the thought of taking on responsibility for helping to run the camp is more than some of the respondents focused on survival can bear, it is also possible that some respondents interpreted the question as a possible criticism of those running the camp, something some respondents may fear doing given their concern with possible retribution. The concern with possible retribution is real given the large number of “don’t know” responses seen with sensitive questions.

What the Al Hawl Survey Results Tell Us about the Potential for Radicalization

While it is impossible to determine who is radicalized and who is not from the sample collected at Al Hawl camp, the conditions the residents perceive there are troubling from what is already known about radicalization. Most respondents are clearly miserable and do not feel properly cared for. They believe things are getting worse and not better for them and their loved ones. Most importantly from the perspective of what drives radicalization, camp residents feel that they are largely powerless to affect the conditions of their life. The need for significance is in great abundance among camp residents.

Given that we know that radicalized individuals are mixed in with the general population of the camp, the networks are there to radicalize those who have the need for significance and radicalization may help meet that need. Think of a camp resident feeling like she has no agency over her life and an individual offers the opportunity to take up a cause of great importance, to be a hero for others. ISIS may offer just such an opportunity to someone who feels like nobody cares about them or thinks they matter. Even though ISIS may not offer the opportunity for an easier material life, at least being part of the cause creates a sense of empowerment and opportunity to fight back against humiliation.

It would not be difficult to convince a camp resident that the reason why conditions in the camp are so awful is because the Kurds or other enemies of “correct Islam” want to punish the righteous. The way out of the situation is to embrace Islamic righteousness and take up the fight against the oppressors. This is likely a compelling narrative to those who feel they have been brought down to an unbearable status in life.

Competing with these three factors in Al Hawl is a bit like swimming upstream against a strong current. It will take a concerted effort to build resiliency against radicalization in camps such as Al Hawl or the appeal of ISIS will spread. Needless to say, ISIS must be deprived of its ability to pose as the defender of those who feel disenfranchised and humiliated.

Recommendations

Based on the logic that underpins the 3N model of radicalization and the findings from the Al Hawl camp survey, the following set of recommendations are offered to those who can have some influence on the management and provision of services in Al Hawl and the many similar IDP camps in Syria and Iraq.

1. The focus should be on camp population resiliency to radicalization measures and not individually-focused counter-radicalization efforts. The needs plaguing Al Hawl are immense and obviously the resources available to meet those needs are limited. This is true throughout the patchwork of IDP camps in Syria and Iraq. There is neither the trained workforce nor the conditions to carry out individually-focused interventions in these camps.

2. The focus should be on trying to improve the sense of significance among camp residents, which is the most important human need that drives an individual toward radicalization toward extremism. **This does not mean ignoring the physical needs of the camp residents.** In fact, meeting these needs is of immediate importance in staving off death, disease, and a sense of abandonment among residents. Caring for basic physical human needs will create a much greater sense of significance among camp residents.

3. The most immediate way to achieve a sense of significance among camp residents is to give them a sense of control over their lives. Creating easy to access and understand avenues of camp representation are very important toward creating that sense of control. Better than simply creating questionnaires and ways for camp residents to express their concerns are physical forums where residents and camp staff and outside aid workers can meet and exchange ideas about how to best use the camp's resources to maximize the quality of life for camp residents.

4. Another very important way to improve a sense of significance among camp residents is to provide them opportunities for work. Work makes residents feel that they are doing something productive and are not worthless. It would be ideal if the job opportunities can provide income but they should, at a minimum, provide some tangible good to the camp resident so that s/he does not feel exploited.

5. Improving educational opportunities for children in the camp is very important, both for those children and their parents' sense of significance. Education improves optimism about the future and increases one's sense of control over one's life. Parents want to believe that their kids are going to grow up to be "somebody" and the children would like to feel better about themselves through education.

6. The rootlessness felt by people in the IDP camps is a significant issue that must be addressed. As mentioned, most of the camp residents in Al Hawl have had to move several times, usually due to fighting. Not feeling like one "belongs" where one resides creates a sense of being unwanted and not cared for. In light of this, it is important that efforts are made to connect camp residents to the local population where the camp is located, if possible. One way is to make it easier for camp residents to circulate in the community and return to the services of the camp during the evening. The camps should not feel like prisons or human dumping grounds if they are to avoid humiliating or angering their residents.

7. The interface between those trying to help develop community resiliency to radicalization plans in the IDP camps and their residents is very important to the success of those measures. Success or failure can rest on whether the community resilience plan facilitators are trusted or not. The mostly Sunni Arab residents in these camps are most likely to trust other Sunni Arabs, rather than Kurds or Shia Arabs. While the camp guards at Al Hawl are likely to stay the Kurdish SDF, the people who can work with the camp residents to develop the community resiliency plans should be Sunni Arabs, dressed in a way that reflects the conservative, rural mores of most of the camp's residents.

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