



**NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE  
VERSUS THE ISLAMIC STATE:  
A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE**

Alia Braley / Srdja Popovic

07 August 2015

## 1 Introduction

Suad Nofel, a woman living in the Islamic State's "capital" of Raqqa, has gained notoriety for her so-called "one-woman rally." For three months she protested alone outside of IS headquarters holding up signs with slogans like "Don't tell me about your religion, but show it in your behavior!" or "No for oppression, no for unjust rulers, no for atonement, and yes for thinking!"<sup>1</sup> Nofel remains unmolested by IS, and continues to act as a voice of dissent in its stronghold.<sup>2</sup> Her story is but one of many in which Syrian and Iraqi civilians have nonviolently confronted IS and lived to tell the tale. These underreported stories are a testament to the fact that despite its murderous image, IS is actually dependent upon maintaining goodwill and real support among Sunnis.<sup>3</sup> Like any governing body, the power of IS is primarily dependent on the cooperation of those it seeks to govern.<sup>4</sup>

It is time for the international community to rethink its assumptions about how to fight groups like IS. The new promise from Washington is to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the group through bombing and support for military counter-insurgency.<sup>5</sup> Yet there is considerable doubt among analysts that military intervention will be effective against a group like IS. Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies speaks to the misgivings of many analysts writing: "You can't destroy an ideology — or even an organization — through bombing."<sup>6</sup> She points to the military efforts against al-Qaeda, noting that, "lots of members [were] killed in Afghanistan, but the organization took root in a bunch of other countries."<sup>7</sup> There is a strong case to be made that IS exists, as we know it today, largely because of the U.S. military strategy against al-Qaeda in Iraq. IS came to notable strength while fighting the U.S. invasion of 2003, and then formed indispensable alliances with the organizationally-savvy Ba'athists and ideologically powerful Islamists in U.S. prison camps.<sup>8</sup> Killing IS leadership may buy time, but if recent history is any indication, such time may only result in the formation of a newly aligned and more deeply embittered terrorist movement.<sup>9</sup> Military opposition strengthens terrorist groups, and removing the underlying causes of their emergence is a better approach to counter terrorism.

Attacking terrorism at its root, through slow and incremental cultural change, will pay off in the end, but this process is a difficult sell to those facing IS now. Such a long-term view neither benefits the people struggling to survive each day under IS's murderous and authoritarian reign, nor does it equip the international security community concerned about IS's immediate threat to regional stability.

There is another solution. If what is needed is a relatively rapid rearrangement of social

---

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Daher, "The Roots and Grassroots of the Syrian Revolution," *Open Democracy*, April 4, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/joseph-daher/roots-and-grassroots-of-syrian-revolution-part-3-of-4>.

<sup>2</sup>Most recent interview August, 2014: Julia Taleb, "From Assad to ISIS, a Tale of Syrian Resistance," *Waging Nonviolence*, August 22, 2014, <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/assad-isis-tale-resistance/>.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, November 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Part One*. (Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973).

<sup>5</sup>David Hudson, "President Obama: 'We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL,'" *The White House Blog*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>.

<sup>6</sup>Phyllis Bennis, "Six Steps Short of War to Beat ISIS," *The Progressive*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.progressive.org/news/2014/09/187851/six-steps-short-war-beat-isis>.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Chulov, "ISIS: The Inside Story," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story>.

<sup>9</sup>Alex Kingsbury, "Why the 2007 Surge in Iraq Actually Failed," *The Boston Globe: Opinion*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/11/17/why-surge-iraq-actually-failed-and-what-that-means-today/0NaI9JrbtSs1pAZvgzGtaL/story.html>.

conditions that would cut off IS's critical sources of power, then there may be no better route than collective nonviolent action undertaken by Iraqi and Syrian civilians. Collective nonviolent movements have been shown to be more effective than violent movements, *even against highly violent or authoritarian opponents*.<sup>10</sup> Such a movement might take a page from IS's own book, and tap into the same sources of power that have been indispensable to its success. After all, IS did not attract an army of nearly 30,000 fighters and capture a cumulative swathe of land larger than the United Kingdom merely because it had weapons.<sup>11</sup> IS has flourished by successfully filling at least two critical power vacuums within Iraqi and Syrian society. It has seized upon a powerful narrative during a time of turbulence and confusion, and it has delivered necessary human services in places where the state has proved incompetent. However, a nonviolent collective movement of Syrian and Iraqi citizens could fill these power vacuums much more convincingly than IS, and in so doing, cripple IS's power in the short term and impede the growth of new terrorist movements in the long term.

## 2 First Vacuum: Narrative

IS certainly communicates a compelling narrative: It tells its supporters that after millennia of humiliation, true Muslims can now establish a thriving caliphate.<sup>12</sup> This message has had tremendous power among beleaguered Sunnis in Iraq and Syria who are marginalized and thus searching for an empowering narrative. At last year's Oslo Freedom Forum, Jordanian social activist Suleiman Bakhit shared research he conducted by interviewing children from areas of Jordan and in Syrian refugee camps. He found that the only "heroes" that the children could name were high-profile terrorists such as Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. This realization led him to create comic books featuring Arab heroes and heroines that displayed the virtues of ethnic and religious tolerance. In his words, the war against terrorism in general and IS in particular is "at its core a war of mythologies" that can be fought "for a fraction of the cost of a drone strike."<sup>13</sup>

The Islamic State's success in marketing itself has gone a long way in promoting its authority to both friends and foes. This is most evident in IS's announcement of the Caliphate, but it is also present in the use of violence-as-spectacle. They have managed to kill far fewer than the Assad regime has, and yet their gruesome performances mixed with their apocalyptic sensibilities give them at least a theatrical appearance of having a special role in history.<sup>14</sup> Further, they have managed to package this narrative in a form that is not merely empowering to the downtrodden, but frankly cool to many young people throughout the world.<sup>15</sup> IS's

---

<sup>10</sup>Erica Chenoweth & Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Islamic State Numbers based on CIA estimates retrieved from: Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford and Chelsea J. Carter, "ISIS can 'muster' between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says," *CNN*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, November 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>Danny Hakim, "A Jordanian Spins Comic Book Tales to Counter Terrorist Ideologies," *New York Times*, November 28, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/world/middleeast/a-jordanian-spins-comic-book-tales-to-counter-terrorist-ideologies.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/world/middleeast/a-jordanian-spins-comic-book-tales-to-counter-terrorist-ideologies.html?_r=0)

<sup>14</sup>Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Death Toll for December 2014," January 2, 2015, [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/1851\\_people\\_were\\_killed\\_in\\_December.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/1851_people_were_killed_in_December.pdf).

Alessandra Masi, "In Syria's Civilian Death Toll, The Islamic State Group, or ISIS, Is a Far Smaller Threat Than Bashar Assad," *International Business Times*, January 7, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/syrias-civilian-death-toll-islamic-state-group-or-isis-far-smaller-threat-bashar-1775238>.

<sup>15</sup>Jethro Mullen, "What is ISIS' Appeal for Young People?" *CNN*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/25/middleeast/isis-kids-propaganda/>.

black, pirate-like flag has become a hip accessory for many Muslim youth from London to Lahore, and more than one Western news pundit has commented on the slick and image-savvy appearance of IS members in their videos.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, a nonviolent movement that hopes to counter IS must produce a different narrative, one that delivers as much excitement and as much hope. Such a narrative, in the field of nonviolent strategy, is known as a “Vision of Tomorrow.”<sup>17</sup> Such a vision would be a story about Syrian and Iraqi society that arises from the real concerns and hopes of people across genders, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. Ironically, forming a positive narrative about what is important to average citizens in the region may undercut IS’s power more than a blatant offensive would. IS seems to feed off of opposition, but it is difficult to imagine their narrative of “specialness” surviving if it is ignored.

The expression of such a vision should not take the form of some stodgy mission statement. A movement could draw attention by claiming its own initiative, using the kinds of striking imagery and media techniques that work equally well for IS as they do for companies like Google. One way this is already being done is through the use of the pre-Ba’athist Syrian Flag of 1932 as a symbol of ongoing protest against the Assad regime and increasingly against marauding insurgents such as IS.<sup>18</sup> From graffiti emblazoned on concrete walls, painted on hands, or flying above certain towns, the striking dash of green and black has become a clear visual message for those unwilling to simply trade in one violent autocracy for another.

Although IS has gathered much of their authority through the power of their narrative, in many ways theirs is a costume narrative that is filled with inconsistencies, untruths and hypocrisies. It elevates an obsession with ideology and land-grabs over the real interests of its would-be citizenry whose most pressing needs remain unmet. Whatever image IS has managed to concoct is likely to be short-lived as increasingly foreign fighters are attempting to return home to the comfort and stimulation of their former lives. Moreover, the ultimately puritanical prohibition on freedom of thought and expression - the ban on music and the arts, and even absence of vocational pathways - is unlikely to continue to capture the hearts of youth. Against IS’s stunted vision, it is not difficult to imagine the generation of a more powerful narrative and aesthetic that would be far more attractive, empowering, and generative of widespread support.

### 3 Second Vacuum: Delivery of Community Services

Once activists begin to tell stories that are more evocative and appealing than those peddled by extremists, they must also fill the vacuum left by the regime’s inability to deliver community services. Complaints from the Syrian activists that visit or contact the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) in Belgrade are often the same: Terrorists win hearts and minds by imposing law and order where none existed before, for instance by making sure that traffic runs smoothly or that crime subsides. While lack of service delivery and corruption are trademarks of authoritarian regimes, they have been es-

---

<sup>16</sup>Marshall Sella, “The Making of the World’s Scariest Terrorist Brand,” *Matter*, October 19, 2014, <https://medium.com/matter/the-making-of-the-worlds-most-effective-terrorist-brand-92620f91bc9d>.

<sup>17</sup>For more information about forming a Vision of Tomorrow see: Srdja Popovic & Matthew Miller, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, February 3, 2015), 55.

<sup>18</sup>Joseph Daher, “The Roots and Grassroots of the Syrian Revolution,” *Open Democracy*, April 4, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/joseph-daher/roots-and-grassroots-of-syrian-revolution-part-3-of-4>.

pecially extreme in post-invasion Iraq and in Assad's Syria, both of which have proven to be fertile soil for IS's "new order." The distorted interpretation of Sharia Law they enforce is appalling, but it is often more effective than the inept government courts, which are seen as "partial, sporadic, and subject to corruption."<sup>19</sup> IS's transition from insurgency to a ruling body has necessitated that they form a parallel "army of administrators."<sup>20</sup> Yet while many have expressed initial surprise at IS's ability to capitalize on the vacuum of delivery of services, there may be trouble on the horizon. In a recent report for the British intelligence service, MI6, the former head of the United Nations Monitoring Team concerning the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Richard Barrett, diagnosed administrative delivery as IS's greatest long-term weakness.<sup>21</sup> Many technocrats and skilled workers of all kinds have fled IS controlled areas, and those who remain may simply have had no other place to go.<sup>22</sup> Further, despite the seeming legitimacy of their courts, IS is severely taxing and demanding exorbitant bribes from all sectors of the business and working community.<sup>23</sup> Although their largest source of revenue currently comes from oil production, it is entirely unclear how they will maintain this administrative and technical capacity in the future.<sup>24</sup> Finally, although many IS controlled areas originally found themselves with greater access to bread after the Islamic State took control of 40 percent of wheat production in Iraq in late 2014, Barrett points out that farmers have largely fled and the crop for next year remains dangerously unplanted.<sup>25</sup>

Here, too, a movement of Iraqi and Syrian civilians has an opportunity for meaningful victory. The ranks of administrators, technocrats, workers, tribal leaders, and business people are ripe for defections and acts of noncooperation with IS. Disaffection with IS will grow as their initial attempts at delivering governance falter. Citizens operating within, and especially outside of, IS controlled areas can provide the kinds of services and alternative infrastructures that IS will prove unable to. Particular attention should be given to basic needs that are unified across geography and ethnic group.

## 4 The Viability of a Grassroots Nonviolent Movement Against the Islamic State

Creating a sufficiently broad-based and strategic nonviolent movement in either country would surely be a difficult task. However, the risks involved are dwarfed by the price of continued war - the loss of livelihood, freedom, rights, and innocent lives. Not only do citizens of Iraq and Syria have experience with large-scale nonviolent movement organizing in their recent history - Iraq in 2003 and Syria in 2011 - tactics and lessons learned in the Syrian struggle in particular saw significant success and learning that could be particularly applicable to a struggle against IS.<sup>26</sup> An example of such an innovative tactic includes their so-called "flying protests" in which large demonstrations were quickly videotaped and uploaded

---

<sup>19</sup>Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, November 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>For recent nonviolent struggles in Iraq, see: Metta Spencer, "Ushering Democracy into Iraq - Nonviolently," *Peace Magazine*, January-March 2003, <http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v19n1p08.htm>. For Syria, see: Maciej Bartkowski and Julia Taleb, "Myopic Strategies of the Syrian Struggle and Key Lessons," prepared for *The Future of Authoritarianism*, a joint research project of the Atlantic Council and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, June 2014.

to the Internet before police could arrive.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that nonviolent struggles for freedom, justice, and peace are over in Syria and Iraq is a harmful untruth.<sup>28</sup> For instance, parents in places such as Mosul and beyond have been boycotting IS's school curriculum in favor of teaching their children at home.<sup>29</sup> Demonstrations against IS have successfully resulted in loved ones released from their jails, and community betterment projects have organized alternative spaces for youth to play and adults to seek healthcare.<sup>30</sup>

These are just a few of the examples of creativity and bravery of those in Syria and Iraq who are choosing not to cooperate with IS's plans. Nonviolent solutions that are capable of countering the violent threat of IS would need to harness this creative spirit in a more unified and continual way. Although the full range of considerations in forming such a movement is well beyond the scope of this article, a recently published book, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World*, includes both historical examples and strategic lessons from which a movement in Iraq or Syria might benefit.

In his MI6 report, Barrett observed that "it is hard to escape the conclusion that it is not so much that the Islamic State is strong than that the governments of Iraq and Syria are weak."<sup>31</sup> Yet the weaknesses that IS has managed to exploit could be transformed into strengths. The people of Iraq and Syria, working nonviolently across ethnic and social boundaries, could fill the power vacuums in their societies with far greater legitimacy and authority than IS. If social and political power vacuums have proven to be IS's greatest source of strength, it is the tremendous power potential of citizens in Iraq and Syria who may prove to be their downfall.

Although this article has focused on the unparalleled power that Syrian and Iraqi civilians may exert against IS, this does not mean that the international community has nothing to contribute. Instead of diplomacy-as-usual, states and international institutions should work to educate and support media and human rights reporters in conflict areas as a way of preventing human rights abusers like IS from taking advantage of the vacuum of narrative. They should invest more in building democratic institutions in shaky transition phases as a way of preventing groups like IS from taking advantage of a vacuum of services. Most importantly, states and international institutions should develop ethical and effective methods of supporting nonviolent actors struggling for their lives and freedom. It was international military intervention in the form of arms and military training that contributed to the decline of the nonviolent movement in Syria as it was gaining momentum, and in its place a deadly

---

<sup>27</sup>Maciej Bartkowiński & Mohja Kahf, "The Syrian Resistance: A Tale of Two Struggles," *Open Democracy*, September 23, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/civilresistance/maciej-bartkowiński-mohja-kahf/syrian-resistance-tale-of-two-struggles>.

<sup>28</sup>Ammar Abdulhamid, "Why Nonviolence Failed in Syria," Now, March 19, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/why-nonviolence-failed-in-syria>.

<sup>29</sup>Information on Mosul boycotts: Catherine Philp, "Parents Boycott Militants' Curriculum," *The Times*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4208724.ece>. Information on other boycotts: Alessandra Masi, "In Syria's Civilian Death Toll, The Islamic State Group, or ISIS, Is a Far Smaller Threat Than Bashar Assad," *International Business Times*, January 7, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/syrias-civilian-death-toll-islamic-state-group-or-isis-far-smaller-threat-bashar-1775238>.

<sup>30</sup>Julia Taleb, "From Assad to ISIS, A Tale of Syrian Resistance," *Waging Nonviolence*, August 22, 2014, <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/assad-isis-tale-resistance/>.

<sup>31</sup>Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group*, November 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

civil war has broken out.<sup>32</sup> The next time that large numbers of brave citizens nonviolently oppose the chains of authoritarian violence, the international community should be ready with programs and resources to provide the kind of support that will strengthen civilian capacity. There has been relatively little research and understanding on how international bodies can best support nonviolent movements, and there has been even less practical action. Such developments should be a high priority for all those who recognize the need for a more effective way to support human rights and political freedom worldwide.

#### **About the Authors:**

*Alia Braley* is a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School whose research interests are centered in the strategy of nonviolent action. Her thesis addresses the history and strategic possibility of a nonviolent response to non-state violent actors like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. She spent a summer as an intern in Belgrade at the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies, and this past year she was an intern at the Albert Einstein Institution, which was founded by the scholar of nonviolent strategy, Gene Sharp. She now works at the Institution full-time. Before moving to Cambridge, Alia worked for five years as the Administrative Director of an urban meditation center, prior to which she helped to found a technology start-up company. Her undergraduate degree is in Religion and Sociology, in which she focused on the themes of religious pluralism and economic justice.

*Srdja Popovic* was one of the founders of the Serbian nonviolent resistance group Otpor! Otpor!'s campaign against Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic was successful in October 2000 when thousands of protestors took over the Serbian Parliament. After the revolution, Popovic served a term as a member of the Serbian National Assembly. In 2003, Popovic and others started the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS). CANVAS has worked with activists from 46 different countries, including Zimbabwe, Burma, Iran, and Venezuela, spreading knowledge of the nonviolent strategies and tactics used by Otpor! In November 2011, Foreign Policy Magazine listed Srdja Popovic as one of the "Top 100 Global Thinkers" of 2011 for inspiring the Arab Spring protesters. In 2012 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2014 he was listed as a "Young Global Leader" by the World Economic Forum in Davos. Srdja is also the author of the recent book *Blueprint for Revolution*, a fun and humorous look at nonviolent activism worldwide."

---

<sup>32</sup>Maciej Bartkowski and Julia Taleb, "Myopic Strategies of the Syrian Struggle and Key Lessons," prepared for *The Future of Authoritarianism*, a joint research project of the Atlantic Council and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, June 2014.