FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW
Summer 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 1

Sociopolitical Movements and the Development of Non-Violent Civil Resistance: A Conversation with Ches Thurber

Interviewed by Austin Bowman

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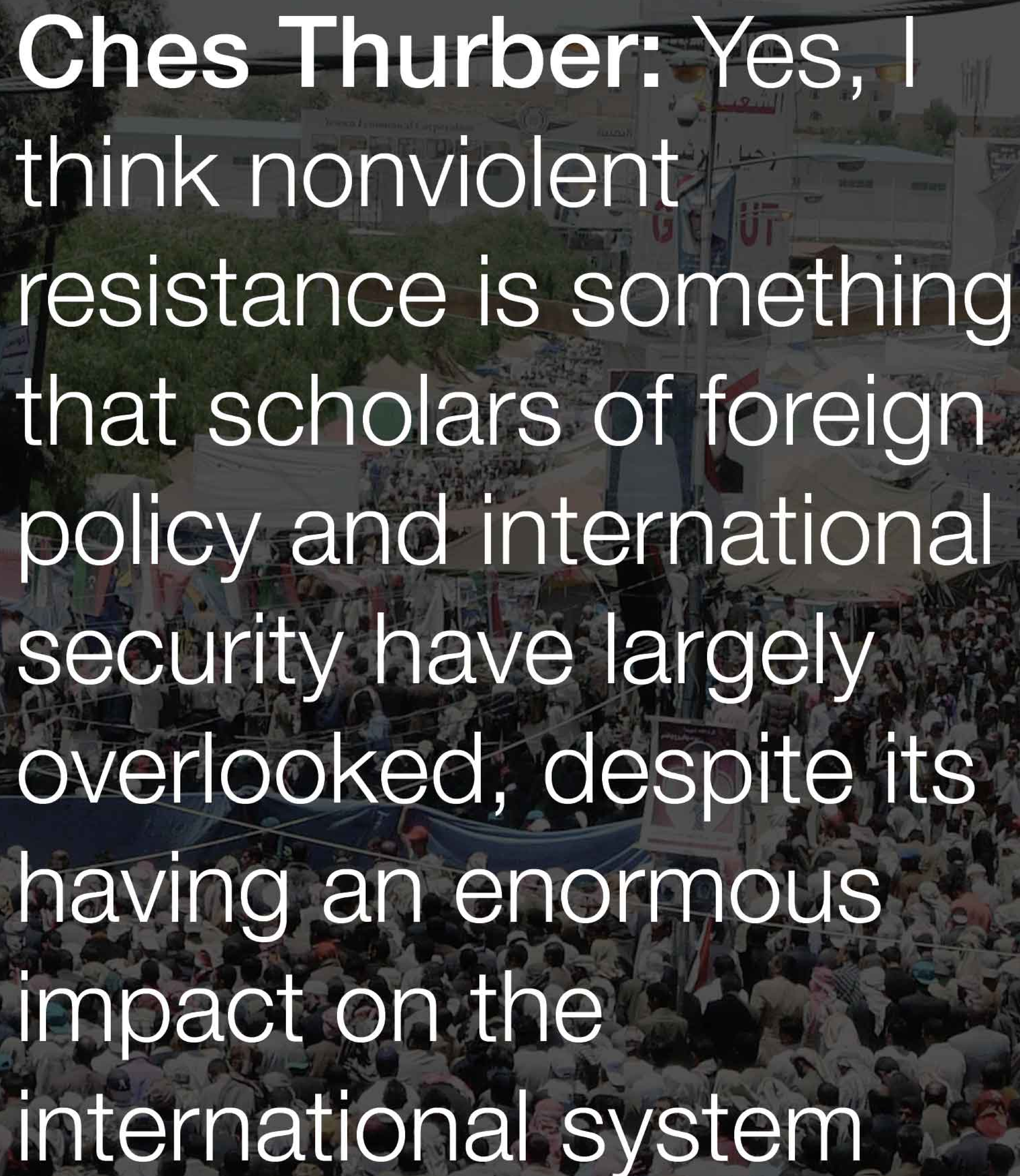

Ches Thurber: Yes, I think nonviolent resistance is something that scholars of foreign policy and international security have largely overlooked, despite its having an enormous impact on the international system

Yemeni protesters at Sana'a University during the Arab Spring (Email4mobile [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yemeni_Protests_4-Apr-2011_P01.JPG]/CC BY-SA 3.0 [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode])

Sociopolitical Movements and the Development of Non-Violent Civil Resistance

A Conversation with Ches Thurber

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Fletcher Security Review: I wanted to discuss your article "Militias as Sociopolitical Movements." You wrote about how Shia militias in Iraq can't be conceptualized as warlords or paramilitary groups. What differentiates Shia militias from the aforementioned groups, and do you see other groups today as fulfilling those same criteria?

Ches Thurber: My thinking on the subject began when I was working in DC as a legislative aide in the House of Representatives. I thought much of the analysis of the Shia militias in Iraq was missing part of the story. In the case of Iraq, it was less about warlords and more about viewing them as purely Iranian proxies – these groups got their money from Iran. This specific obsession, that they were getting a lot of weapons and technology from Iran, was not untrue. But it was missing the degree that these groups were political actors with social bases of support in Iraq as well. This was important to understanding their dynamics and how they operate.

You could clearly see differences between two groups. One, the Supreme Council led by the Hakim family, which had roots in exiled refugees from the Iran–Iraq War living in Iran who were set up by the Iranian revolutionary guard in the later years of that war. The Hakim family had deep roots within the Shia community in Iraq, but they also had strong connections to the Iranian military leadership, particularly the Revolutionary Guard Corps. Not only that, but they became very close with the U.S. government and were invited to participate in transitional Iraq post-Saddam. They engaged in a game that I termed "green zone politics," the equivalent of what we might call "Beltway politics" in the United States. These are the politics you engage in when you have access to the traditional institutions of political power. They sent representatives to Washington to meet with U.S. officials in the Pentagon, and they had seats on the initial Iraqi Governing Council. When it came time for the election they manipulated the process so that their group would remain in the top positions on the electoral lists.

The other group, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, had a long history of social organizing in Iraq under Saddam's regime. They built up quite a following within the Shia community exactly because they had not left Iraq during the age of Saddam. They stayed and experienced oppression, but they also worked to advance the interests of the Shia community at that time by providing social services. By the post-2003 period, there was quite a bit of grassroots support, and U.S. policymakers underestimated this level of support of the organization. This stopped them from foreseeing the threat he could pose in 2004 when he tried to become involved in politics. When he was shut out of the process, he concluded that if they were not going to be included in the political process, they should use their arms against the Americans, and that would force negotiation. Force then becomes the basis for how Muqtada al-Sadr operates. Providing social services, building the grassroots support, and mobilizing support in armed form to create enough political pressure to achieve his political goals.

FSR: Both groups had support in different areas, but over time, the Iraqi people grew tired of these militias and the militias began to fracture. What was the source of the loss of support amongst the Iraqi people and why these militias fractured?

CT: One of the issues Muqtada al Sadr struggled with was that he did not have access to the financial resources that the Supreme Council did. He was asking his supporters to fight for him, but in most cases, could not pay them a salary. The money they made in order to make a living came from predatory behavior directed towards civilians. That did two things: one, it turned off local populations, and two, it created a disconnect. If they were making their own money, they were less willing to listen to Muqtada al-Sadr if he told them stop treating civilians this way.

This came to a head in 2007 with the Bush administration's Surge policy and Iraqi efforts to retake areas in Southern Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr chooses to stand down

in the face of this military offensive because he was starting to lose control of his fighters and he thought he could use the counterinsurgency offensive as an opportunity. He issued a ceasefire to determine who was loyal to him and who was not loyal. He wanted to outsource his discipline problem, and let the U.S. take care of rogue actors within his group, except that Iran also stepped in and started buying off former Sadrist fighters by offering them money and compensation. Iran wanted them to be a proxy army, not the socially rooted type of militia that Sadr led.

FSR: It sounds like they lost touch with their key support base, the Iraqi people. Was there ever the potential for these militias to become legitimate political or social parties in Iraq and refrain from violence? Was there a way to legitimize these actors within the system, or was that beyond how they were operating?

CT: It is tough to say because al-Sadr was allegedly trying to move toward an exclusively political and social movement until the rise of ISIS and the Syrian Civil War. Meanwhile the Supreme Council has fragmented. One faction of the Supreme Council, led by Ammar al Hakim, kept the name and has become primarily, if not exclusively a political party. The other faction, the Badr Organization, led by Hadi al-Amiri, is still involved in politics, but it also controls one of the largest and most powerful militias operating in Iraq.

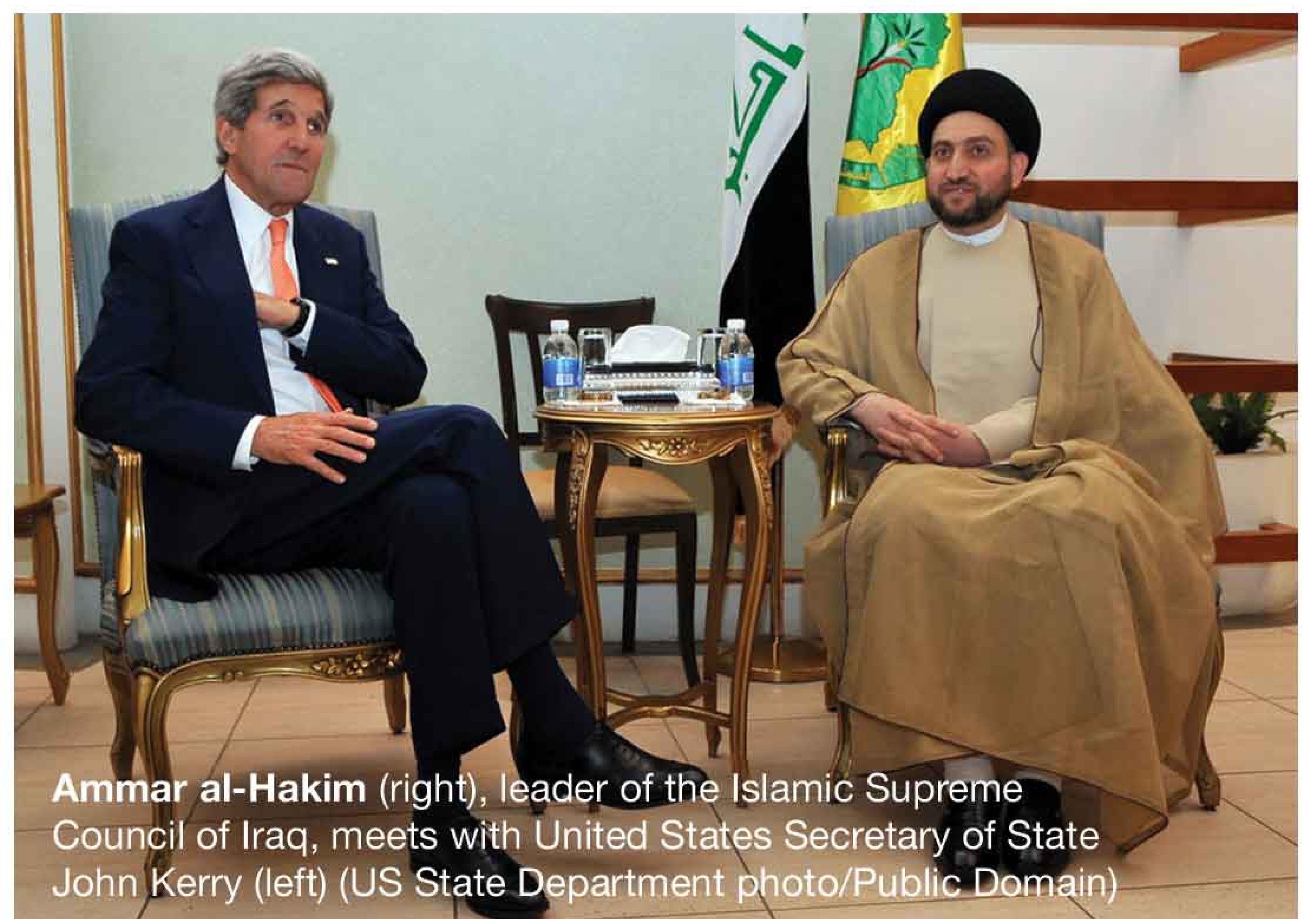
One of the things that has made the transition to purely nonviolent politics difficult for these groups is that there were still a host of actors with skills and specialties in the use of armed force, and they still need to earn a living. If the Shia movements were to disband their militia units, what were these fighters going to do? This is where the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps were crafty to step in and offer these actors paychecks to continue their activities. With the rise of ISIS, the situation flips again because it became politically advantageous for political actors to say that they were participants in the fight against radical Sunni actors.

FSR: Do you think there was a way to create a situation where it wasn't politically advantageous for different groups to take advantage of these individuals and groups? Or was the situation between the Sunnis and Shias too divisive, and no matter what there would have been an incentive for the Sunnis to react to the years of Shia militia groups within Iraq?

CT: Former Prime Minister al-Maliki was trying to play the game of how many bones to throw in the direction of the Shia militias to keep them happy and keep them under control. At the same time, he gave them plum positions within the security apparatus and turned a blind eye their abusive actions towards Sunni populations. This produced resentment that created a fertile ground for ISIS.

The question of integrating the militia forces into official state security forces is a thorny problem that is currently being debated in Baghdad, and honestly, I'm not sure what the right answer is. On the one hand this is a move towards state building; the state should have a monopoly on violence and these groups should be under state control. At the same time, Sunni populations are scared; if these groups have state conferred legitimacy, they could continue to act as brutally as they have in the past.

At the height of the sectarian conflict, a group known as the Wolf Brigade wore Iraqi Security Force uniforms when they conducted night raids. They forced people from their homes and took them to torture camps. This was a dark history of the militias and the state becoming one. At the same time, if the state does not legitimize them they will operate outside the security structure and take orders directly from Iran. Or if the state tries to disband them, the result is having armed actors out in society that need to make living somehow. Are they going to engage in other forms of violence in order to do it? This is the challenge of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, in a host of conflicts. Even though scholars have been studying these processes for quite some time, I am not sure if we have a good answer for the best way to solve the problem.


Ammar al-Hakim (right), leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, meets with United States Secretary of State John Kerry (left) (US State Department photo/Public Domain)

FSR: Your new book project focuses on strategies of violence and nonviolence in revolutionary movements. When people think of revolutions and resistance, they often think of violence. Is this a mistake?

CT: Yes, I think nonviolent resistance is something that scholars of foreign policy and international security have largely overlooked, despite its having an enormous impact on the international system. The most dramatic examples of these are perhaps the protests that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, or indeed those of the Arab Spring. Groups using predominantly nonviolent tactics actually have a pretty good track record at being able to topple regimes, even those of brutal dictators that had been previously thought to be deeply entrenched. The work of Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth shows that the track record of nonviolent groups is actually substantially stronger than groups that have pursued a primarily armed strategy. I am investigating why, if nonviolent groups are having success, more actors are not choosing that strategy. Why do some groups nevertheless feel compelled to take up arms?

FSR: Have you come across anything in your research to suggest why some groups are rejecting nonviolent strategies and using violent ones even though nonviolent strategies have proven effective in the past?

CT: The problem is not one that lends itself to a single "silver bullet" explanation. There may be some kinds of groups that are ideologically committed to violence. Other groups, as Wendy Pearlman argues, may lack the cohesion needed to have a highly effective organization necessary in order to carry out nonviolence and maintain nonviolent discipline. Moreover, competing factions can create various incentives for violence.

The aspects that I look at in my book are the social networks from which movements draw their support. In order to carry out an effective nonviolent campaign you want a base of support that has certain characteristics. You need ties that connect the movement to large segments of the population. For example, if you announce a rally in the square, you must be able to generate large amounts of turnout. Some groups will look at the strategy of nonviolence and the tactics involved and decide they don't have the capacity – they don't have the strength in numbers. In other cases, they may have the numbers but there is a major cleavage that divides members of the movement and members of the regime. Getting elites within the regime to flip sides and join the movement, or to make it difficult for the regime to engage in violent repression against protesters who are maintaining the appearance of nonviolence, is one of the mechanisms scholars of nonviolence point out as critically important. It may not be achievable in these circumstances where a major social cleavage is present.

One of the dimensions that I'm interested investigating is the varied role ethnicity plays in civil wars versus civil resistance. Over 50 percent of civil wars are classified as so-called ethnic civil wars – where the rebels are of one ethnicity, and the regime is mostly of a different ethnicity. The motivation behind the civil war is often how this minority group is being treated. By contrast, very few of the nonviolent campaigns fall into that category, approximately 15 percent. Thus, it appears that the social dynamics that underlie these types of conflicts look quite different.

FSR: In terms of ethnic civil wars, not having strength in numbers becomes a detriment to using nonviolent strategies. In your research, have you seen that those civil wars became violent because they lacked the capacity to reach out to the other ethnicity? For instance, if half the population is with you, does that mean the other half would automatically be against you?

CT: Yes, I think that may be a dynamic that occurs and that may be deterring some groups from seeing a nonviolent strategy as viable. I have been looking at Syria quite a bit and it is exactly that type of case. Syria is majority Sunni, which is why there was a reason to be optimistic about the ability to generate mass protests even though they were slower to take action than in Egypt and Tunisia. Eventually, though still in the early days of that conflict, you do have significant nonviolent protects, but the military was able and willing to engage in a brutal repression the protests. I would argue that this was largely because Assad was very deliberate in making sure members of his own Alawite sect were distributed around the military.

In some cases, Sunni soldiers wanted and were willing to disobey orders – such as those to not fire on the protesters – but when they refused there were considerable consequences. Soldiers were being executed for refusing to follow orders. Others would obey the orders because

Aleppo, Syria. A Free Syrian Army soldier holds a machine gun (Voice of America/Public Domain)

they knew that Alawites were around and were monitoring them. A team of scholars made up of Kevin Koehler, Dorothy Oh, and Holger Albrecht, have some really interesting work on this. I would argue that those mechanisms key to nonviolent success – the high cost of repression, winning over loyalty shifts from the regime and others – did not really happen in Syria. When defection did happen, it resulted in large numbers who left the military and formed the Free Syrian Army. They had seen what happened, and nonviolence in their view was not working. When they left the army, they took their guns with them, and they fought a more traditional armed insurgency against the regime.

FSR: Do events such as Syria make you pessimistic about the ability of nonviolent civil resistance to work in some circumstances depending on the context and social situations?

CT: There is no question that it is more difficult in some cases than in others. But I think in the Syrian case, armed rebellion didn't work well either. There were enormous humanitarian costs, and it has not been successful in achieving the rebels' political goals. That said, there were many reasons why it was more difficult for nonviolence to gain traction in Syria than compared to Egypt and Tunisia.

Part of what is motivating my research going forward is to better understand why some groups feel the need to abandon nonviolence in favor of violence, and to think of what the alternatives might have been for them. What could you do when you are facing circumstances where it is difficult to mount an effective nonviolent movement because social cleavages prevent the creation of mass mobilization or allow the regime to engage in brutal repression? One option might be to form coalitions across those social divides, if you can. The East Timor movement was somewhat successful in this; it joined groups that were trying to oust Suharto in Indonesia 1990s, and took advantage of that political opportunity to press further for their own independence. Scholars have also looked at the impact of internationalizing the conflict, that is, getting international actors to put pressure on the regime. In the case of Syria, internationalizing the conflict did not end up working because international actors were pumping money into Syria explicitly in support of armed conflict. One of the things we can think about going forward is, are there ways for international actors to effectively provide support or greater leverage to groups that are employing nonviolent action?

FSR: What sorts of mechanisms can the international community do to help these movements to succeed?

You mentioned international groups pouring money into fuel the conflict in Syria, but have you found any means or methods the international community can use to assist nonviolent civil resistance movements?

CT: Unfortunately, it is still an open question. One thing we have seen is that international support can be a double-edged sword. First, the types of things an international actor can do are not as inherently valuable to the strategy nonviolent resistance as the types of things an international actor can do to support the strategy of armed resistance. When Russia or Saudi Arabia pump money and weapons into the Syrian conflict it has a dramatic impact on the ability of the actor they are supporting to fight. Social science research confirms this: rebel groups with foreign sponsorship do better than ones without. The evidence so far indicates that for nonviolent groups external support does not have much of an impact. I don't think it is meaningless, because we see cases where it can help. In the case of South Africa, international sanctions put pressure on the South African regime to reform and end Apartheid. In other cases though, it seems to create a backlash and undermines the domestic opposition because they are seen as being a potential fifth column. This happened last year with groups in Nepal fighting for greater political autonomy. India intervened and blockaded gas shipments to Nepal to try to assist the protesters, but it backfired. India and the protesters were blamed for causing a blockade that created a lot of hardship for the Nepalese. It then became good policy for the leaders in Kathmandu to take a harder line on the protesters and on India. Figuring out when external intervention works and what tools to use, whether it is providing resources and support to the movements versus sanctioning the regime, is work we still have to do.

FSR: Is this where an analysis of the political context is critical in order to determine what help to offer? Or is it much more about looking at what tools to apply where and when?

CT: I think both are right. Context absolutely matters. It is my job as a political scientist to unpack what we mean by "context." Can we more specific about what contextual factors determine whether intervention would be helpful or backfire, and determine whether "positive support for the movement" versus "negative sanctioning of the regime" would be more effective. I do not think we are there yet, but it is something I am thinking about, and something other scholars have been thinking about and working on as well.

One project I worked on with Maria Stephan and Matthew Burrows at the Atlantic Council analyzed some of these issues. One of the things we found was that apart from the types of interventions we see "in the moment" of a nonviolent uprising, was that U.S. support over time to civil society – providing resources and organizational training – in countries with authoritarian leaders was very helpful. It is not the "in the heat of conflict" intervention; it is longer-term, under-the-radar support. But then, in the moment, when this kind of an uprising occurs, when actors are in the street and taking advantage of an opportunity, having the infrastructure already in place makes a real difference. We followed a few cases, the uprising in the Philippines, the Color Revolutions of early 2000s, where civil society groups that had previously received training and built an infrastructure with U.S. funding were better positioned to take advantage of those moments of opportunity.

FSR: It's good to hear that prior investment in some of those areas really does pay off down the line. That's all I have for you Ches, I really appreciate it.

Ches Thurber

Ches Thurber is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Northern Illinois University. He was previously a research fellow at the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism at the University of Chicago and at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. His current book project, *Strategies of Violence and Nonviolence in Revolutionary Movements*, examines why political movements seeking to overthrow the state embrace strategies of either armed insurgency or civil resistance.