IN JULY 2013 in Raqqa, the first city liberated from regime control in northeastern Syria, a Muslim schoolteacher named Soaad Nofal marched daily to ISIS headquarters. She carried a cardboard sign with messages challenging the behaviors of members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as un-Islamic after the kidnapping of nonviolent activists. After Nofal was joined by hundreds of other protesters, a small number of activists were released. It is a small achievement, but an indication of what communities supported in responsible ways from the outside could achieve on a larger scale in areas controlled or threatened by ISIS.

In the fight against ISIS, unarmed civilians would seem to be powerless. How can collective nonviolent action stand a chance against a heavily armed, well-financed, and highly organized extremist group that engages in public beheadings, kidnappings, and forced recruitment of child soldiers and sex slaves? One whose ideology sanctions the killing of “infidels” and the creation of a caliphate?

Nonviolent resistance alone cannot defeat this radical scourge. The global response must be multifaceted. Still, as the international anti-ISIS coalition led by the United States considers nonmilitary options to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS, it should focus on empowering local civil society in Syria and Iraq with targeted resources, technologies, and knowledge to build resilience and deny ISIS the moral and material support it needs to wield effective control. Public and private investments in independent media and local self-organization initiatives, including those led by women, are two key ways to counter ISIS influence.

ISIS’ LEVERS OF CONTROL

This type of external support first requires a sophisticated understanding of the levers and networks of influence that ISIS employs to capture and control territory and minds. While their brutality captures headlines, ISIS operators use their Dabiq propaganda magazine and a plethora of social media outlets to promote ISIS as resisting oppression and providing for local communities. ISIS is paying its fighters relatively high salaries. It is cutting deals with local tribal and other influential leaders to afford communities a degree of governance autonomy in exchange for obedience. And it is using targeted terror to deter any opposition.

1 http://sojo.net/magazine/2015/03-0/resisting-isis
As ruthless as ISIS’ circa 30,000 fighters might be, the organization still relies on the active and passive obedience of large numbers of people. The challenge is to use collective action to weaken these dependency relationships while protecting civilians from greater violence—using tactics that go beyond street protests and demonstrations. Civil resistance historically has proven to be twice as effective as armed struggle, even against opponents willing to use mass violence and against nonstate actors.

Though typically out of the headlines, there is much nonviolent activism in Syria and Iraq that could be bolstered through international efforts. From the beginning of ISIS’ presence in northern Syria, civilians challenged their rule—albeit on a small scale. After Nofal’s early efforts, in April 2014 the “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” campaign created a Facebook page and Twitter account to expose ISIS’ crimes against civilians, attracting thousands of followers. However, activists from Raqqa admitted that failure to take a more concerted earlier stand against ISIS helped the group consolidate a formidable presence there.

The villages of Kafr Nabl and Saraqeb in northern Idlib province remain hotbeds of creative Syrian nonviolent resistance. Kafr Nabl achieved international acclaim for its colorful and clever banners offering critical commentary on various aspects of the revolution. The village is a paradigm of self-organization and boasts a robust media apparatus. In Menbej, a town in Aleppo, the business community closed their shops in a general strike against ISIS in May 2014. ISIS sent its militants to reopen the shops and the villagers remained defiant, albeit only for a short time.

Throughout Syria, the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), once the backbone of the nonviolent resistance, are still leading grassroots activism despite more focus on humanitarian relief. The LCCs regularly document and publish information about crimes committed by the Assad regime and by ISIS. They are supported by new Syrian media outlets, which are innovating in extremely difficult circumstances. The Aleppo Media Center, Enab Baladi, SouriaLi Radio, the Abounaddara Collective, Syria Untold, and other media continue to report on nonviolent grassroots initiatives to challenge violence on all sides and start the process of national healing.

An interactive map developed by the Syrian Nonviolence Movement shows where civil resistance is still happening inside Syria via noncooperation, civil disobedience, and the building of parallel structures and institutions. A major challenge for Syria activists facing regime barrel bombs, daily shelling, and extremist violence is finding ways to link these various initiatives.

This is where international support could come in. External actors could support these groups with grants and help to connect Syria activists to each other and to nonviolent leaders from other protracted conflicts (such as the Balkans, Liberia, and Colombia) to share lessons and best practices. The most dynamic and creative media projects advocating nonviolent approaches to transforming the conflict should be given the financial and technical means to vastly expand their reach inside Syria and regionally via FM and satellite broadcasting. Women’s participation in local councils should be strongly encouraged and supported.

In refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—real and potential recruitment grounds for ISIS fighters—Syrian civic leaders have launched innovative educational and artistic programs targeting youth. These include the Sonbola education project in Lebanon and the Project Amal ou Salam youth camp initiative in Jordan; both initiatives are operating on a shoestring.

GROWING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN IRAQ
Acts of defiance targeting ISIS are spreading in Iraq as well. In Mosul, a city overrun by the extremist group last summer, acts of civil disobedience are expanding among the mostly Sunni population that once sympathized with ISIS’ fight against the Shia-dominated Iraqi army. A deteriorating economic situation and ISIS’ failure to provide basic
services are turning the population against it. In July 2014, after a prominent imam and 33 followers refused to pledge their allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, a large number of Iraqi supporters flocked to mosques where they preached to show solidarity for these leaders’ act of defiance. ISIS detained some of the leaders but has not killed those with such a significant following.

Local groups of Iraqis have resisted ISIS’ destruction of local landmarks and shrines in Mosul, a city that is considered an archeological treasure and paradigm of religious coexistence. In July 2014, when members of an ISIS battalion tasked with destroying mosques that were deemed heretical threatened to explode the Crooked Minaret, residents living nearby formed a human chain to protect it. They warned the fighters that they would need to kill them if they wanted to blow up the mosque. The militants backed down and left.

Satire has become a particularly powerful weapon of nonviolent resistance that Syrians, Iraqis, and others in the Arab world are using to delegitimize ISIS. Videos dramatizing the absurdity and illegitimacy of ISIS’ tyranny have gone viral on social media and have been shown on satellite television stations.

THE LONG GAME
Supporting civil resistance against ISIS is not a short-term strategy, and the organization’s capacity for cruelty should not be underestimated. As the U.S. Special Operations Forces commander for the Middle East, Maj. Gen. Michael Nagata, has emphasized, the struggle against ISIS’ ideological allure and power base must be long term. The link between extremism and predatory, discriminatory governance must be understood.

An alternative, more powerful, and life-affirming method for advancing rights, justice, and dignity should be proactively and creatively reinforced. The significant amount of U.S. and global resources being dedicated to waging the military campaign against ISIS should be matched by commensurate focus on the far less costly but arguably more important social and political battles being waged by civil societies in Syria and Iraq.

Helping these groups remain resilient, organized, and connected, assisting them to spread their counterextremist messages, and expanding their skills base in the area of strategic nonviolent action would go a long way to confronting the ISIS menace, along with the governance failures that spawned them.

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