Religious "minorities" and "majorities": the inclusiveness of the excluded

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Inter-religious tensions based on non-tolerance or lack of desire for dialogue, account for the majority of cases of intra- and inter-state violence. Apart from prevalent religious beliefs, the presence of minority faith groups, and their tensions with or repression by the mainstream politics often raises questions as to the future.

Conflict ethnography, as outlined by David Kilcullen (2009), should deconstruct one sole country, considering geography, religion and language, socio-cultural contexts and identity meanings. This is crucial as a first step to the establishment of common denominators among different culture, and development of cross-border dialogue.

The initiation of dialogue as a means to combat the "clash of civilisations" has been projected largely as an initiative of the West. This does not mean, however, that other societies lack peaceful conflict management tools. Many know of the Afghan traditional dispute resolution still widely practiced in villages and tribal areas, yet, few have gone deep into this conflict transformation tradition.

My research explores the opportunities for dialogue between communities as a means to initiate peaceful coexistence. With the support of impartial religious and secular institutions, local grassroots and international community, dialogues will lead to building trust and bridges on multiple levels.

Keywords: Iran, Afghanistan, Minorities, Peacebuilding, Ethnography, Islam.

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INTRODUCTION

The conflict momentum in the modern world has been gradually but steadily shifting from the traditional inter-state war to a more subtle, yet no less harmful intra-state violence. Globalisation, internationalisation and eruption of insurgencies against oppressive political regimes have all had their say in the current peace and conflict situation worldwide. When examining the crises in the Central African Republic, in Myanmar, in Bosnia, and in South Sudan, there seems to be a parallel in the escalation of violence and the role of religion and minority groups playing in it. The major religious movements, such as Shi'a and Sunni Islam, Christianity, Judaism and

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Buddhism are most frequently in limelight as the "insurgent" initiators. Yet, smaller, often religious, linguistic or ethnic minority groups, in a country are rarely given enough attention in the larger scale of conflict, unless they act as an impetus, which was the case with the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

The international attention towards minority religious groups has plummeted among scholars and policy-makers alike with the ethnic tensions in Myanmar and the escalation of the conflicts in South Sudan and Syria. A region with perhaps the most astounding mixture of ethnic, linguistic and faith-based groups, the Middle East is also an unfortunate example of how political violence may spread into becoming a religiously dividing intra-, and indeed, inter-state war. Taking its roots back in Huntington's "clash of civilisations" theory, it seems that the statement "great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" is not an empty locution (Huntington, 1993).

The reason for the choice of Afghanistan and Iran in the comparative study is due to the extremely deep historical, cultural and tribal link that exists between the two countries- a phenomenon not found anywhere else in the region.

The scholarship in relation to the studies of minorities and majorities has predominantly been the fate of anthropologists and historians, with a limited overview by the professionals of international relations, which is seen in the Human Terrain System doctrine of the US military (Human Terrain Handbook, 2008). Yet, it is an increasingly important issue to consider the various layers of the local population and the power dynamics within it from a security and war perspective, as this will have serious implications on the relation of the external forces with the local government and the people in the long-term.

In the analysis that will follow, the terms 'minorities' will be used

to denote the ethnic, linguistic and religious communities that are part of a nation, yet not forming the predominant part of the population, or not always being treated by the mainstream politics equally. I will cite examples of more well-known minorities or the practices of the majorities in order to argue that these traditions can be taken to a new level among other layers of the population concerned.

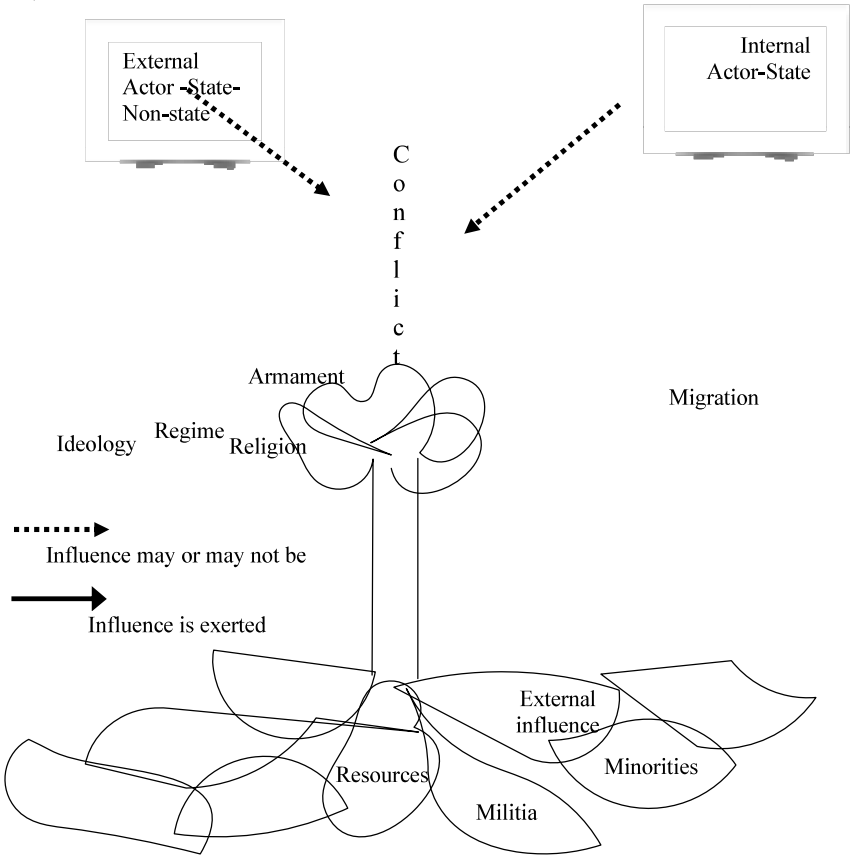
My research stems from the lack of concrete grassroot dialogue between communities of different faiths and origins, and appreciation of its benefits in the long term. The segregation that persists between the practices of the East and the West, of Islam and Christianity, of majorities and minorities could be transformed to create a space for peaceful dialogue in order to prevent the eruption, escalation and protraction of conflict. Efforts to come closer and understand each other are getting ground on community level. Yet, we may not speak of a systematic approach, let alone some factual positive results, unless we ourselves are willing to fully comprehend the 'Other', break the invisible wall that our prejudices formed, and whole-heartedly contribute to peacebuilding.

THE ROLE OF ETHNICITIES IN CONFLICT

Nations with highly marked and diverse ethnic identities sometimes tend to be more prone to instability. Separatism, political oppression, struggle for self-determination and equal rights- all have an impact on the national and international relations.

The basic hierarchical approach to violence eruption and "suppression" can be illustrated by a diagram of the "tree of conflict". The diagram illustrates the birth of a conflict and the influences exerted upon it from outside. The conflict arises from one or more of the several factors located in its roots- a specific grievance or cause of unrest, which may be deeper or less well-rooted in the ground. In a

ripened confrontation, external and internal actors come into play, in an effort to resolve the situation from the top. Yet, we may picture an easier way out of the conflict, rather than 'watering' the tree from above- cutting off the roots will weaken the conflict tree and perhaps even make it fall. The less the roots there are, and the shallower they are, the shorter and more weak is the tree.



As we see in the image, one of the causes of instability concerns the minorities. Anthropologically, the area of modern Afghanistan and Iran is one of the greatest historical creations, and yet one of the most fragile and complex regions with its unique historical, political and cultural processes. At least a dozen ethnic groups, as many religious

and faith-based movements, and more than 75 languages and dialects constitute Iran's diversity (Ethnologue). As for Afghanistan, a world-renown linguist Harald Haarmann argues that there are 40 minor languages and 200 dialects in the country (Haarmann, 2002, p.273-274).

Religion and violence are two topics that have been amply discussed in literature, and the interrelation between them is prone to overestimation. Since ancient times tribes and communities have faced intra- and inter-communal violence and have used peaceful methods to resolve it. For example, historically, the tribal elders, especially of the Pashto speaking regions of Afghanistan have been in charge of the informal dispute resolution- the Shura or the Jirga councils based on the Pashtoonwali code, of which I will speak below.

Undoubtedly, most of the cases the international community considers are related to established systems, whereas remote minorities, and even women and children often face discrimination in traditional conflict resolution practices. Nevertheless, appropriate training and gradual involvement of women, adolescents and minority representatives in grassroot processes may make a positive impact in impartial and just dispute resolutions. From a local level, with the help of government actors, this practice may be guided into spreading to other communities and could touch upon more complex matters-regionally and nationally. At first, though, it is critical to establish peaceful and inclusive communication within and among minority communities.

'MINORITY' TO 'MINORITY' DIALOGUE

The cultural space of a nation is based on multi-layered identification of a community and an individual in it. Reflecting on his values, habits, and beliefs that differentiate his community from the

neighbouring one, the individual is able to identify himself with a social group. Self-recognition is a complicated process that comprises religion, language, literature, rituals and history. Groups with certain characteristics tend to relate themselves primarily to the particular community they belong to, rather than to the nation and country in which they live in. This sub-national affinity is much more pronounced when several factors are present- remote location, few or non-existent links to city life, particular occupations in agriculture or alike, strong traditions of communities prone to more engaged self-determination, for example the Kurds and the Kashmiris. This process may be transformed or altogether forgotten in mixed marriages or urbanisation, as the person begins to associate himself more with the nation rather than with his sub-national roots.

Minorities in Iran, especially the older generation, tend to integrate wholly into the Iranian society without losing, however, their unique history and traditions. Preserving the cultural heritage of each distinct minority community is a basic human right and the basis for a flourishing multiethnic yet united country. For the population, to be Iranian, and at the same time Balochi or of Bahai faith, or to speak Assyrian- these are not mutually exclusive factors, on the contrary, they enrich the national identity. At the same time, especially in the face of conflict, extreme or specific circumstances, the historical commonality is the reference of all peoples of a country.

A plethora of populations is to be found in the "Heart of Asia" space. What type of communication exists between these people? What are the best practices that can show us how dialogue between minority communities can act as a peace building technique? Initiatives in the Middle East and the Philippines during the Mindanao crisis, and very recently, in Yemen, have shown the readiness of Islamic groups to act as mediators and to embrace one form of dialogue or another (IWPR, 2008). There are many community based

organisation and alike that focus on providing the population with a forum to express their grievances through non-violent means. The relevant Tajik Secular-Islamic dialogue project is a good example of a programme that gathers representatives of various groups in order to constructively discuss issues of a given community with a goal to resolve it. Although governed by the central administration, this initiative is not openly oppressive to minorities. With much room for improvement in terms of impartiality and outreach, the dialogue project may be seen as a best practice example of inclusive communication.

The maliks- the tribal chieftains of the Pashtuns- act as power-brokers in conflict situations within their villages, as well as liaising with higher political instances. In a recent conflict resolution training conducted by the US Institute for Peace (USIP), the maliks were very enthusiastic in learning the practices of their fellows from other villages and sharing the ways in which conflicts were tackled in their particular communities in remote regions (Gaston et al, 2013).

With regards to the Pashtoonwali code, an interesting practice that concerns us is the *nanawatey,* or asylum- a conflict resolution practice that embraces hospitality, mutual understanding and reconciliation. The ritual starts with *nanawatey* when regret leads the repenting party to his enemy's house to ask for asylum. To deny such a request would be shameful. The desire for reconciliation comes into being, and tribal elders gather to agree on temporary peace- *teega*-, and pay reparations. Now, hospitality replaces rivalry (Irani, 2000). The story of the Lone Survivor, the US Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell reached the corners of the world, when he was saved by the Sabray tribe who granted him refuge against the attacking tribes. The following table illustrates the main principles as outlined by the verbal Pashtoonwali code.

Principle	Details
Melmastia (hospitality)	Regardless of nationality, religion or potential reward.
Nanawatey (asylum)	1) Protection of a person at your house against the enemies. 2) Repenting party comes to enemy's house for reconciliation.
Badal (justice)	Blood feud. No time limit.
Isteqemat (trust in Allah)	Reflects Islamic faith and principles.
Ghayrat (respect, honour)	Respect for close ones.
Imandari (righteousness)	Good deeds and thoughts. Respect for environment.
Sabat (loyalty)	To family, friends and tribe.
Turah (bravery)	Defence of property, land, women etc.
Naamus (protection of women)	Protection of honour, and from physical and verbal harm.
Nang (honour)	Defence of the weak.

Sets of principles exist in almost any culture and group of people. Moral and non-verbal traditions are transferred through generations, but many of them are lost, unused or not researched enough. However, they are exactly the building block of social cohesion.

The recent appointment of Samiyeh Balochzehi as mayor of Kalat city council in southern Iran has been a breakthrough in the traditions of not only the mainstream politics, but, more importantly, the local society. The position and the enthusiasm of the young woman will hopefully strengthen the relations between the central government and the provinces, and lead towards a more inclusive dialogue within the community itself. This may a pushing factor for other regions and people to support a more progressive stance in regional politics and gain appreciation of each other. With central government support, promoting inclusiveness and unity through the emphasis on multi ethnicity as a unique national factor seems the right policy.

Of course, decision-makers have to be weary of the way local societies perceive the "regional" identity. Where the Bakhtiars and the Lurs see the right to land and preservation of cultural traditions, the Azeris or Kurds may consider a more politically-oriented movements and the fight for self-determination. The current tendencies of the latter communities may increase the suspicion of insurgencies. Certain separatism is often found even among families. So, the Shia Azeris, especially the younger generation, tend to lean towards relation development with the neighbouring Sunni Turkey. And yet, despite economic or political interests, it is doubtful that an Shia Azeri would marry his Sunni neighbour. At the same time, inter-ethnic marriages with Iranian Shias are a widespread practice, which reveals the dominance of religion in a nation.

These tendencies are a good basis for impactful action in minority transformational dialogue and inclusion into the wider social and political life of the nation.

THE VOICE OF THE 'MAJORITIES' AND INCLUSIVE POLITICS

Without doubt, the nation is almost always controlled by a majority population, or by those assimilated with the majorities. High-ranking positions in Iran and Afghanistan are traditionally occupied by a leading elite. In modern days, dealing with conflict has become almost a tradition of governments- very often with foreign assistance. With the intention of making peace, these actors rarely go into comprehending the root divisions between ethnicities and understanding the mechanisms that exist for their mitigation. This widespread top-down approach does well in certain spheres, but does not go deep into the practices that could be put to good use in cases of inter-ethnic violence and the relationship between the national groups of a country.

The effect of this poorly informed intervention is in fact two-fold.

On the one hand, former internal enemies unite in face of an external actor, the presence of which they perceive as an invasion of an almost private space. The sub-national, tribal mentality quickly transforms into a national belonging. Had I been yesterday a Nuristani fighting a Pamiri, today I am an Afghan fighting the US. This has clearly been illustrated among the FATA and NWFP hot spots, where tribal enemies were, nevertheless, forming the leadership of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and forgetting their traditional enmity in face of a higher threat, at least until the latter would be fought down. On the other hand, however, prolonged intervention has the potential of serious side-effects. The power dynamics of the local militia, population and other forces changes as new power groups emerge and impact the long-term activities of the government, the international actors, radicals, insurgents or freedom fighters, to name a few.

Afghanistan faces frequent lack of formal judiciary mechanisms. The creation of self-developing mechanisms, where the local councils or grassroot groups would be supported, yet not guided by international communities is the best option. Keeping in mind the need for official legal structures, and the development thereof in the future, bottom-up initiatives based on principles of local traditions and religious law, where applicable, should be used improve enforcement and access to justice for minorities. Creating forums within the community and establishing links between these forums in different villages and towns, could increase the role of education and improve rights-oriented dispute resolution. Dual-way reconciliation is a long-term process and a tool for both- counter-radicalisation, de-radicalisation and peaceful coexistence with conflict prevention.

As Van der Stoel (2009), the HCNM, states, we require the transformation of existing and the establishment of new mechanisms, institutions and instruments for constructive and transformational dialogue at local and national levels. Interethnic, inter religious and

perhaps even linguistic councils should work with the support of international organisations and the local government to accommodate interests of the communities without having to renounce broader national integrity. The Yemeni National Dialogue has started its work as a national initiative, backed up by the international organisations and governments. Through challenges and successes, it has been a bold undertaking, albeit not evident in a fragile environment. Yet, the very fact of inclusion of representatives of the opposition, the children, women and tribal leaders, has shown the world that constructive and transformational dialogue is indeed possible. Leaving a decent amount of self-determination and ensuring protection and preservation of fundamental rights will strengthen the sub-national identity not at the expense of the national one, but, ideally, strengthening the national unity of a population.

CONCLUSION

Worldwide peace building and community reconciliation initiatives have surged in the past few years. Several of them are based on traditions of faith and legal systems, whereas many more operate at the lowest informal grassroots level. The Pashtoonwali code is perhaps the most famous non-verbal set of conducts that governs many communities in Afghanistan. Extracting these traditions from minority groups and developing them through local engagement for their own benefits will lessen the divide between ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, and promote healthy communication based on mutual appreciation.

Community level reconciliation, peace building and transformational dialogue should be supported by the national government and international institutions and policy makers. Through appropriate development of formal and informal structures, and their inter-cooperation, the concepts of horizontal and dual way

reconciliation may easily be engrained into the psychology and everyday life of both, the 'majorities' and the 'minorities'. This, in turn, may act as a tool to mutual understanding and building of bridges among the communities. Best practices illustrate that, with common historical, religious and linguistic roots, the people of the 'heart of Asia' countries can find similarities in their practices, or come to comprehend the richness of the diversity, without compromising their own unique identity and traditions. This bottom-up approach could prove to be a stable basis for further expansion onto the national and international levels, with adequate cooperation and programs in place. ❖

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