



In the Shadow of a Massacre, a Peaceful Return in Iraq

USIP Partners Ease Tensions Over 2014 Slaughter by Islamic State

July 16, 2015

[Part 1](#)

By Viola Gienger

In a plain-as-beige conference room at Baghdad’s Babylon Hotel, the anger flared among the 16 robed Iraqi tribal leaders. The men, after all, carried into the room the outrage and fear from one of the country’s deadliest atrocities in recent years – the execution-style slaying in June 2014 of an estimated 1,700 young Iraqi air force cadets and soldiers at a base known as Camp Speicher. The accusations flew across the conference table – that tribes in the area supported the rampage by the self-styled “Islamic State” extremist group, and even joined in the killings. At one point, one of the highest-ranking sheikhs charged up out of his seat to leave the room. It was clear that others would follow.

That scene in a Baghdad hotel in late March represented perhaps the crescendo of tension in a series of meetings and negotiations since December, supported by the U.S. Institute of Peace to forestall a new cycle of killing. The talks were led by the Network of Iraqi Facilitators (NIF) and SANAD for Peacebuilding, Iraqi non-government organizations that were established with the Institute’s support and whose members sometimes work at great personal risk.

The Speicher discussions were part of a structured effort that had begun months earlier and continues today. The aim is to foster dialogue and ease the outraged cries for revenge on both sides that threaten to perpetuate a succession of violence over the massacre at the base, located near the northern Iraqi city of Tikrit and once used by the U.S. military.

Drawing on Iraq’s own cultural norms, its tribal traditions and both governmental and unofficial contacts, USIP’s staff in Washington and in the field backed their partners in laying the groundwork, opening communication channels and connecting leaders who previously had considered each other adversaries.

“If you do not take care of the tensions immediately, the government and the international community will have limited leeway once this spirals into more violence.” – USIP Senior Program Officer Sarhang Hamasaed.

“We have established a very large network” of contacts, said Haider al-Ibrahimi, executive director of SANAD, the Iraqi NGO. “The team is well-trusted by the big players ... They listen to the NIF members. They know there is no political interest behind any activities of NIF, SANAD or USIP.”

This wasn't the first time USIP and its Iraqi partners had negotiated peace between warring communities in Iraq. In 2007, the Institute and local facilitators worked with the U.S. Army's [10th Mountain Division Brigade Combat Team](#) to mediate a [reconciliation](#) among 31 Sunni and Shia sheikhs of the pivotal Mahmoudiya district south of Baghdad known at the time as the “Triangle of Death” for its high rate of Iraq and American casualties. In 2012 and 2013, the facilitators mediated tensions between the Christian and Shabak religious minorities in the Nineveh region in the country's north. Still, the Camp Speicher conflict was challenging.

“The Speicher case was important because, if you do not take care of the tensions immediately, the government and the international community will have limited leeway once this spirals into more violence,” said Sarhang Hamasaeed, a senior program officer at USIP who has been involved in the project.

Mass Graves

Because “Islamic State” is known as a staunchly Sunni Muslim group, and the victims in the Speicher massacre were mostly Shia Muslims from the country's south, antagonists on both sides could – and did – seize on the anger with inflammatory rhetoric that exacerbated the risks of further violence. Fear and outrage flared again in March, after the mostly-Shia Iraqi Army and unofficial Iraqi militias called “Popular Mobilization Forces” [recaptured](#) Tikrit and quickly began to uncover mass graves. Sunni families fled the area in fear that the Shia militias would seek revenge. Both sides were desperate for their own idea of justice and a restoration of security.

As the Iraqi mediators and USIP worked to prevent further violence, the first break came at that March meeting in the Hotel Babylon. Each side agreed to take certain actions (more on that later). That was followed by a remarkable press conference in April by leaders of the two tribes that Shias had accused of complicity with the Islamic State group, al-Bu Ajeel and al-Bu Nasir. The leaders denied involvement in the massacre and pledged to help bring to justice any members of their tribes who might be found to have participated. The denial was extraordinary because taking such a step could have been seen by cultural norms as a sign of fear or weakness. Instead, the support of other tribes for that step made the declaration acceptable.

“They used the Iraqi way,” said Ali Sleiman, a USIP program officer in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. “When you are from a respected tribe and talk to others, they listen to you.”

Then in June, came an even bigger reward. The channels the peacebuilding team had opened among tribal sheikhs, militias and government officials had unlocked another door – the prospect that families

who'd fled Tikrit, either during the 2014 Islamic State rampage or during the city's recapture in March, could return. So in early June, more than 400 Sunni families piled into buses and safely made the journey back to their communities, even escorted and welcomed by members of the militias. Within weeks, the number of families who returned exceeded 1,000.

Whether the Iraqi government can achieve the return of families to areas recaptured from the Islamic state "could determine whether the country can recover its unity," according to a June 19 [report](#) in the Washington Post, which said virtually the city's entire population of 150,000 people had been driven out in the course of the war. The New York Times also reported the [returns to Tikrit](#) represented "a crucial test of the [Shia-dominated] central government's ability to stabilize" and peacefully reintegrate Sunni areas retaken from the Islamic State group.

Deadly Raid

The "Speicher Intervention Team" organized by USIP and its Iraqi partners in December had its roots in a task force established with the facilitators' network in May 2013, to detect early signs of potential violent conflict and analyze the tensions in order to intervene before they escalated.

That mobilization followed a deadly raid in April 2013 under then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who already was facing criticism for increasingly authoritarian actions. Iraqi security forces had cracked down on largely nonviolent protests by citizens in [Hawijah](#) in the country's predominantly Sunni north who were challenging their increasing marginalization in what was supposed to be a power-sharing government structure. The April raid, in which dozens of people were killed, accelerated the tensions.

Maliki's failure to address the country's growing divides ultimately led to his ouster from power in 2014. But it was already too late. The Islamic State, which has its origins in the onetime U.S. nemesis al-Qaida in Iraq, had gradually gained strength in fighting the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in that grinding civil war next door. With that force, the group swept into Iraq, tearing across its north and west in June 2014 and taking control of the cities of Mosul in Nineveh Province and Tikrit in Salahaddin Province.

As reports of atrocities increased, the team of USIP, SANAD and NIF intensified their monitoring of the tensions. Once Maliki lost his bid to keep his seat in the aftermath of that year's parliamentary elections, for example, opponents of the new government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi frequently accused the authorities openly of failing to deliver justice, further inflaming public opinion over the massacre.

By December 2014, USIP and its partners identified the Speicher massacre as an incident that was rife with the danger of escalating calls for revenge but also held prospects for prevention. The Iraqi government had formed a committee to investigate the incident but granted it limited scope. Initial

findings by another investigative committee formed by the Iraqi parliament implicated entire tribes and groups, further heightening the pressure on all sides for another violent response.

July 17, 2015

[Part 2](#)

By Viola Gienger

It was December 2014. USIP and its partner organizations in Iraq had recognized a June 2014 massacre at a military base near the northern city of Tikrit as a flashpoint of tension that could accelerate into a cycle of revenge killing. Predominantly Shia tribes from Iraq's south, where many of the victims were from, had accused Sunni tribes around the base, known as Camp Speicher, of supporting, even joining in the massacre. But careful conflict resolution might prevent a further downward spiral. The intervention team set to work.

The team was led by two members of the Network of Iraqi Facilitators (NIF), which has been supported by USIP since its origins in 2004. The two are respected civic leaders with long experience informally mediating local disputes and trained by USIP in conflict resolution skills and the rigors of [conflict analysis](#).

“It was the first time to have an intervention on such a dangerous and critical issue.” – Iraqi facilitator Abdul Aziz al-Jarba

One of them, Abdul Aziz al-Jarba, is from Nineveh Province. He gained some of his negotiating credentials as a representative of local communities and farm owners like himself in talks with U.S. soldiers of the Army's 101st Airborne Division when they first entered Mosul in 2003. He said he was able to persuade the unit to help resume work on an irrigation project for the agricultural lands in the region.

“From that, I saw that dialogue was possible,” he said in an interview. He soon formed a non-governmental organization to conduct peacebuilding projects in the area and encourage more involvement by local citizens to ensure their voices were heard by the new government. He has been a facilitator with USIP since 2004 and has helped train others.

The team on the Speicher project met for weeks individually or in small groups with tribal, political and religious leaders as well as officials of the United Nations and other international organizations working on and in Iraq. Team members needed to understand clearly who was working on the issue and gain support for a peaceful [dialogue](#) to resolve disputes surrounding the massacre and its aftermath.

Among the tribes, they started with an “outer circle” of leaders who were neither implicated in the massacre nor related to its victims, but who had contact with tribal leaders who were.. Throughout the

project, each step was carefully prepared. The team held advance meetings with representatives of all sides to smooth the way, explain, persuade and negotiate terms.

The team then conducted a daylong meeting in February with 14 tribal sheikhs from southern Iraq. Contrary to common assumptions, many of [Iraq's tribes](#) have mixed sectarian backgrounds – some in the north have roots in Shia Islam, while some tribes in the south have a history in the Sunni branch. Most of Iraq's Shia militias, such as those that recaptured Tikrit in March, are from the south, as were most of the victims of the June 2014 massacre. In the north, the al-Bu Nasir tribe, one of those that denied complicity with the Islamic State, includes Saddam Hussein's family.

The meeting with the southern tribes was held in the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, which housed journalists during the 2003 invasion. Like the Babylon, it has been attacked on several occasions. In the most recent attack on the Babylon on May 28, a car bomb exploded in the parking garage as several members of the Speicher Intervention Team were in the hotel for a meeting. They were unhurt, though 15 people were killed and dozens injured in that assault and another on the [same day](#) at second Baghdad hotel.

The February meeting at the Palestine identified key issues and confirmed the leaders' interest in a dialogue. The southern sheikhs also agreed to meet with a group of tribal leaders from in and around Tikrit.

“What surprised me is the relative fast shift in their position,” said Elie Abouaoun, USIP's director of Middle East programs, who was there. “When we started the meeting in the morning, they were quite negative and aggressive, and they considered all the Sunni tribes in that area to be responsible for the massacre.”

Over the next couple of hours, the SANAD staff and the facilitators slowly, carefully deconstructed many of the group's ideas about the massacre and encouraged thoughtful reflection about what was really known and what likely happened. The USIP partners did so without directly challenging the respected leaders, a move that might have alienated them.

“At the end of the day, the tribal leaders were quite open to making the distinction between the actual perpetrators and the idea of collective responsibility of the Sunnis,” Abouaoun said. “I think that was the tipping point.”

Keeping Them in the Room

Then came the meeting at the Babylon in March. For two days, eight tribal sheikhs from Tikrit and the surrounding province, Salahaddin, and eight from the country's south were to meet to hash out steps to be taken by each side. It would be the first time representatives of the northern and southern tribes affected by the Speicher incident had met to discuss the attack and develop a plan of action.

These leaders, in turn, have good connections with the tribes accused of complicity with the [massacre](#) or the tribal branches with members who are survivors or relatives of victims. The intervention team selected one trusted leader on each side to be prepared to intervene in case the tension boiled over. The conference also included Iraqi government officials; members of the National Reconciliation Committee, which is charged with trying to cultivate dialogue among the country's warring factions; and representatives of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the top Shia religious leader, who often has struck a conciliatory note during these years of turmoil.

But to achieve a comprehensive agreement would require keeping them all in the room and participating in the talks. That standard almost broke down the first day. As in the February meeting, generalized accusations flew, tainting entire tribes or population groups with the same brush, as so often happens in the heat of distress over the horrors of war.

Suddenly, one of the tribal leaders erupted in anger, challenging others and making moves to walk out. USIP is not identifying him to preserve the confidentiality of the talks.

"At first in every intervention, people are skeptical about the purpose and the motivations," al-Jarba said. "The most difficult thing about working as an Iraqi facilitator is that we have to be patient. If we're not patient, we won't achieve what we want."

His fellow lead facilitator, who asked not to be identified for security reasons, was instrumental in persuading the tribal sheikh to stay, al-Jarba said, and the discussion resumed after a coffee break.

Horrendous Losses

It soon became clear that all sides had suffered horrendous losses, including the northern, mainly Sunni tribes who'd previously been tainted with the same brush of extremist violence as the Islamic State. A Sunni sheikh lost a sister in the Islamic State's onslaught last year. In one district, a northern tribe protected a group of Shia army trainees from the south for two weeks after the Speicher massacre. The tribe helped them navigate around Islamic State-controlled areas and make their way home.

The northern sheikhs relayed a case in the town of [Baiji](#), north of Tikrit and near Iraq's biggest oil refinery, when a tribe rescued 200 trainees and helped them escape through Islamic State militants' checkpoints by disguising them as relatives of the local leaders' own wives and sisters.

As the southern tribal leaders heard the stories, they grew to understand that not every Sunni or every resident of Salahaddin Province was complicit with the Islamic State group, said USIP's Ali Sleiman.

The result was a series of remedies and mechanisms for moving forward that was agreed upon by the southern and Salahaddin tribal leaders at the conference. The two pages of concrete steps included acknowledging the atrocity and assigning responsibility to the Islamic State group and its ideology

without generalizing to entire tribes. The government would provide moral and material compensation to the victims' families. Moral compensation would include a transparent investigation and prosecution, and the establishment of a memorial for the victims.

In April, the two tribes implicated in the massacre, al-Bu Ajeel and al-Bu Nasir, held a press conference. They denied responsibility and agreed to cooperate with an investigation and prosecution. It was a huge step in a culture that would more readily see such a move as a sign of weakness.

"This is a powerful signal to the Shia side that they are serious about addressing this," USIP Senior Program Officer Sarhang Hamasaeed said.

Newly Opened Channels

From there, the communication continued to flow through the newly opened channels. The two northern tribes also had appealed for displaced families from Tikrit to be allowed to return, some after almost a year.

The task force, along with tribal leaders from southern Iraq, met with National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayadh, who also heads a government committee with nominal control over the Shia militias, known as "Popular Mobilization Forces." He expressed support for the return of families determined to be innocent of involvement in crimes committed by the Islamic State group. Al-Fayadh then arranged the vetting by security forces of 400 families, clearing them of complicity. That allowed the families to pass through the numerous checkpoints controlled by Shia militias from the south, and return home safely. And so the process continued.

After the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the task force plans to resume work on compensation for the families of Speicher victims. The group also will monitor security conditions for those who have returned to Salahaddin Province, to ensure they don't become the victims of reprisals by Iraqi Army or militia members from the south who now control the area.

Other areas of [Iraq](#) might similarly benefit from conflict resolution initiatives as the tumult continues. USIP experts have briefed U.S. government and other coalition officials on the Speicher intervention and emphasized the urgent need for reconciliation initiatives in areas recaptured from Islamic State militants, [to stabilize these communities](#) and ensure they don't become vulnerable again. Ultimately, USIP's goal is to nurture similar consensus-building on a much larger, even [national](#), scale.

"The Speicher intervention is one of a kind," al-Jarba said. "It was the first time to have an intervention on such a dangerous and critical issue. We think it could be an example for other situations in the future."