

# **The Transformation of Intractable Conflicts III**

Perspectives and Challenges for Interactive Problem Solving

Honoring Herbert C. Kelman on his 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday

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Interactive Problem-Solving and Political-Religious Dialogue-  
Working in fragile and interlinked religious-political contexts

Berghof Foundation Project in Partnership with the Lebanese Dar al-Fatwa: “Strengthening the Capacities of Sunni Institutions to Enhance Stability and Religious Tolerance”

## **Background and Project Rationale**

The project is based on the rationale that intra-religious dialogue, namely Sunni-Sunni dialogue, is a pre-requisite to any interreligious dialogue in the Lebanese context. Given Lebanon’s political environment and sectarian system, which entail power-sharing in the government in the form of ‘consociational’ democracy, patron-client relationship dynamics are formed between the political elite and the people. This is especially true amid state absence and regional patrons’ rivalry, thus engendering stark divisions in the society and allegiance to various Sunni figures, whereby one’s religion and/or sect becomes an identity marker away from nationhood and patriotism. In this framework, intra-religious dialogue would serve to foster the (re)building of trust relations and enhance social cohesion. It increases awareness about how to improve human interactions, unify the Sunni constituency by unifying the vision and action plan of their leaders, all the while recognizing the importance of integrating different Islamic (Sunni) identities into intergroup dialogue.

As a presumably neutral actor and a governmental institution, Dar al-Fatwa, the highest Muslim authority in Lebanon, was envisioned to be a convenient dialogue leader and facilitator, primarily between religious opinion leaders and eventually between political figures. Accordingly, the project aimed at strengthening the capacities and strategy-building of the official Islamic institution, mandated by the law to manage all Muslims’ religious affairs- to lead intra-religious dialogue and develop a de-radicalization and counter-extremism strategy. This is to be achieved through the lens of five main project themes within Dar al-Fatwa’s mandate and

which the latter deemed a priority in this phase: religious education, religious media, religious counselling for Islamist prisoners, social services provision and capacity building for internal structures.

One of the main realizations to be necessarily achieved by the religious institution in order to attain the aforementioned objective is increase its representation of the entire Sunni community. Herein lies the two-fold challenge: the Sunni community does not feel represented by Dar al-Fatwa: it does not speak for them; they do not relate to it, its stances- if voiced- hardly resonate with the Sunnis' concerns and aspirations. This is also partly due the fact that Dar al-Fatwa is perceived as affiliated with one political party, the Future Movement, which is also weak in representation and incoherent in vision and overall strategy. Likewise, Dar al-Fatwa lacks the awareness, realization and capacities to represent the entire Sunni community spread all over Lebanon. Amidst the power-sharing system and the ruling sectarian elitist regime, the institution perceives itself as merely another pillar of the sectarian system, sponsoring the Sunni constituency, despite being hollow, inefficient on the inside and lacking a substantial role on the ground.

Indeed, in Michel Foucault's early work on institutions, he sometimes gives a sense that power somehow inheres in institutions themselves rather than in the individuals that make those institutions function. What Foucault explores in his books<sup>1</sup> is how the creation of modern disciplines, with their principles of order and control, tends to 'disindividualize' power, making it seem as if power inheres in the institution (religious institution in our case). Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; "in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the idea is to create an architectural idea that, ultimately, could function on its own: it did not matter who exactly operated the machine: "Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director [...]."<sup>3</sup> The idea behind our project is to strengthen the institutional dynamics whereby neither full power nor decision-making privileges would only lie in the Mufti's hands; rather, a chain of command should be created to be capable of managing the institution based on a firm hierarchical internal structure. Through an overhaul of Dar al-Fatwa's internal structures, providing relevant training for Dar al-

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<sup>1</sup> The books are: 'Madness and Civilization,' 'The Birth of the Clinic' and 'Discipline and Punish.'

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, p.202 (1975)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Fatwa's staff (Sheikhs and employees), periodical internal workshops, meetings, and dialogues, new strategies were envisioned to be developed for the aforementioned project themes, thereby bringing to the surface all the requirements of Dar al-Fatwa, needed qualifications and competencies, vacancies as well as skills. In the words of the Grand Mufti's advisor: "Berghof lit a candle for us inside a very dim Dar al-Fatwa [in terms of hierarchy, structure, needs and challenges]."

In a sense, our project put Michel Foucault's theory into the test, particularly amid contentious politics and Lebanon's strategic location. Our insight into the internal dynamics of the religious institution and power dynamics in Lebanon -demonstrated in the constituencies' allegiances to powerful figures and leaders instead of the nation or the state- led us to the conclusion that "disindividualized" power could be counter-productive and even harmful in Lebanon's case; it would only serve to maintain a shaky architectural build-up for a limited time in an unstable society. In contrast, a director's (i.e. Grand Mufti's) individualistic power, demonstrated in a clear vision, strong and courageous personality, good external relations and diplomacy, is a must in Lebanon's sectarian system, state absence and fragile conviviality. Not only would it liberate the religious authority from political intrusion, it would also unite the constituency around one representative opinion leader.

Foucault, makes clear in his later work, however, that power ultimately does inhere in individuals. As Foucault explains in "The Subject and Power," "something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action."<sup>4</sup> This is typically translated along the lines of the project themes and the ensuing activities on the long run that the Mufti is expected to lead 'reform' or 'renewal' based on: strategy building for religious education, religious media, social services, religious counselling for prisoners and capacity-building for internal structures.

Since political hindrances, Sunni division and mistrust in the government are the prevailing challenges in the Sunni community in Lebanon, it is worth exploring the best model(s) for the relationship between state and religious institutions since religion and religious institutions may

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, p.219 (1982)

be employed as a technology of government, as it is put into action. This might have the potential to offer up some productive conceptual strategies and tools.

Ultimately, an efficient and representative religious institution can best operate through a separation from divisive political affiliation and the presence of a strong state. In the meantime, as Lebanon struggles in its state-building and endeavours, the first steps entail ‘small steps’ by way of increasing its outreach and embracing all the representatives of the different schools of thoughts and their institutions/parties/groups to bring them all under the umbrella of Dar al-Fatwa. This could be achieved through intra-religious dialogue which was offered by the Berghof Foundation to undertake dialogue facilitation, provide expert input and raise awareness and knowledge of the Sunni components (of each other and of their rights and responsibilities).

However, to speak of intra-religious dialogue is to speak of an encounter between human subjects, not a comparison of doctrinal belief systems. In saying this, we do not assume that religious beliefs should be excluded. But we wish to emphasize that first and foremost dialogue is an event of intersubjective communication. Those involved in such dialogue are not simply intellectual beings but also spiritual, moral, bodily, affective creatures. Their identities have been formed by family, people, tribe, nation, culture, religion and, no doubt, the wider universe.<sup>5</sup> These identities have also been formed in a history of civil, regional and global wars, often producing a bundle of prejudices, insecurities and presumptions about the ‘other.’

### **Challenges and Achievements**

The challenges faced with the project are several and multi-faceted. They range from political and security challenges to communications and slow decision-making within the institution. We are going to highlight the two most important challenges that we believe mostly stood out for us and stood in the way of achieving all the objectives of the pilot project.

The first is the lack of a clear inner “constitution” for Dar al-Fatwa’s trajectory in general and with respect to radicalization and reform in specific. The absence of a vision and mission for Dar al-Fatwa (due to competing schools of thoughts within the institution, lack of expertise and an – arguably- reluctant Grand Mufti) created vagueness sometimes around some planning aspects of the project; the Grand Mufti’s strategy when he assumed office in August 2014 was ‘cleansing’

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<sup>5</sup> Fethullah Gülen, "Inter- or Intra-religious Dialogue?" (paper presented at a Conference in the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne 15th – 16th July 2009).

the financial, reputational and political mess<sup>6</sup> caused by the previous Mufti and mitigating losses before moving forward to constructive planning and achieving concrete steps. This leads to tardiness in decision-making and a slow paced activity conduct and achievements, for instance upon approving draft versions of the media strategy and other policy-oriented research studies.

Like everything else in Lebanon (due to dysfunctional, absent and inefficient state institutions), problems are rarely faced directly and in a bold manner; rather, decision-makers tend to beat around the bush to get their way (for instance, Dar al-Fatwa favors holding big conferences instead of effective small workshops). This often leads to the formation of non-state parallel structures to fill the vacuum left by the official institutions (such as the Muslim Scholar committee, Jamaa Islamiyya etc...)

This vacuum persists as the religious institution still struggles to ‘strand on its own two feet’ in a realistically balanced way based on its inherent capabilities, and as the Mufti attempts to clear the institution from the remnants of his predecessor, literally still assuming positions within the institution.

This brings us to the second main challenge which is of a practical nature: how to support Dar al-Fatwa to ‘walk the walk’ and not just ‘talk the talk.’ The first obstacle herein is that Dar al-Fatwa, although a governmental institution mandated by the law to oversee Muslims’ affairs in Lebanon, functions as just another minor Sunni institution in Lebanon. In other words, they do not act like an umbrella organization willing to take the risk and engage with other Sunni counterparts. This is partly due to Dar al-Fatwa’s unfamiliarity with its own mandate and capacities. On the other hand, it is also due to political influence; but in the words of one of the GM’s most influential advisor and political figure “when a Mufti is strong enough, he can overcome political control [and assert his agenda to be a man who is followed and not a man that follows].”

Experts tend to agree that reviving Dar al-Fatwa and its capacities was not within the Sunni leaders’ priorities; their efforts were rather concentrated on financial control and in the attempts to manoeuvre through and control the main institutional pivots at Dar al-Fatwa. The institution’s judiciary branch and Islamic endowments suffered from political struggles leading to further internal and structural deterioration where the main priority became halting corruption, clientelism and harming people’s interests. Therefore, the new Mufti’s will for change was

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<sup>6</sup> “Lebanon’s new mufti in testing times: Sheikh Abdel-Latif Derian,” *Al Arabiya English*, August 11, 2014.

hindered by administrative and financial obstacles without the ability to resolve them, in addition to political conflicts which exacerbate the challenge of judicial and administrative appointments. It is true, though, that one of the main objectives of the project was in the first place to build the internal and organizational structures of Dar al-Fatwa, develop its strategies (including vision & mission and media strategy) as well as its capacities to lead a Sunni-Sunni dialogue and develop de-radicalization strategies. Having achieved the development of a V&M and media strategy as well as policies for a national de-radicalization strategy was a first step to overcome this challenge and move to achieving tangible results. It is important, though, to mention that the Berghof Foundation was aware of this and was successful in turning it from a weakness point for Dar al-Fatwa to a point of strength for the project and for the institution as a whole. Methodologically, the project revived the dialogue component inside Dar al-Fatwa by way of the Advisory Board (which has religious and political figures representing different Sunni leaders), in addition to meetings between different religious figures from Dar al-Fatwa and outside to develop a de-radicalization strategy for Dar al-Fatwa.

Instead of being the passive and secluded institution it is, Dar al-Fatwa became a knowledge hub with an open-door policy allowing students, researchers and professionals in the Sunni community to be engaged in active discussions during workshops and conferences asking Sheikhs and Mufti direct and frank questions as well as giving their opinions on matters such as religious media, renewal and extremism.

### ***Dar al-Fatwa and Radicalization***

In analysing the recently hot topic of the root causes of extremism and examining religious institutions' role in preventing and countering radicalization, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power comes to mind and we would like to put it on the table here for further discussion. Bourdieu "attempts to specify in theoretical terms the processes whereby, in all societies, order and social restraint are produced by indirect, cultural mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control"<sup>7</sup>. As Bourdieu argued, while in previous ages people refused to recognise it even where it was staring them in the face, without turning power into a "circle whose centre is everywhere and nowhere", we have to be able to discover it in places where it is

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 104 (1992)

least visible, where it is most completely misrecognized<sup>8</sup>. According to Bourdieu's definition, "symbolic power is a power of constructing reality," it is "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it"<sup>9</sup>. This is increasingly becoming the case in Lebanon where suicide bombing claimed by ISIS and other groups have targeted several cities in Lebanon, and other deadly bombing plans were halted by the security forces. The perpetrators were mainly local Sunni Lebanese youth, born and bred, frustrated with the disenfranchisement of the Sunnis, believing that 'Islamic Jihad' by way of combat is the solution, and seeking to establish a utopic Islamic state. Although these are only a minority of the Sunnis, they do possess symbolic power that produces new security and governmental policies and that causes destabilization, deaths and violence, based on an interpretation of Islam they have now adopted as their reality. More dangerously, several Sheikhs have reportedly gone to Syria to fight alongside their Sunni brethren against the Shias and 'infidel' regime in Syria. These Sheikhs have naturally disseminated their ideology to their followers and mosque attendees. What is the religious institutions' role in light of the above theory and amid increasing sleeper cells and radicalization in Lebanese communities that are gaining power in terms of endangering innocent lives, harming the rest of the Sunnis by way of stigmatizing them with being 'radicalized,' harming the economic and touristic situation in the country, exacerbating communal conflict and sensitivities and demonizing the 'other'? To what extent is the local official religious institution responsible for that, and the regional reputable religious institutions (al-Azhar, Zaytouna, Saudi Arabia) accountable amid increasing globalization and transnational discourses? We would say, they are responsible to a great extent; but only through rooted transnational reform of education, jurisprudence and discourse renewal can religious interpretation renewal be achieved.

### **Lessons Learned and Reflections**

Practically speaking, one of the valuable lessons we learned is that people and entities will always have ulterior motives; this, for us, meant that we should work and do our job nonetheless, with a focus on the sincere enlightened and reformist figures.

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, *Raison Pratique. Sur la théorie de l'action.*, 163

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, *Raison Pratique*, 164

Another lesson is to always have high expectations but also a realistic framework and starting point; we realized that religious institutions in general and Dar al-Fatwa in specific need decades of work to achieve reform or religious renewal; we also realized that it takes tremendous patience, perseverance and alternative plans all the time in working with such institutions, obsolete in mentality (generally speaking) and in practice (sending emails can be a pain sometimes for them).

Throughout the journey, we came across sincere, open-minded and genuinely hardworking people. We discovered the importance of strengthening these moderates by always engaging them with as much activities and researches as possible with Dar al-Fatwa and through strengthening their network on the ground.

Given the challenges we faced, we were happy to have achieved baby steps, but made sure that such changes are on a rooted trajectory, which we learned is better than achieving major steps with a void and incompetent base.

Finally, a major lesson learned is that efficient reform cannot be achieved through building religious institutions' capacities and strategies (only); this would be superficial and counter-productive in most cases. Efficient reform is achieved through building the capacities of the minds, teaching Muslims to think outside the box, teaching Sheikhs to question things and teach them how to teach this way. We realize this is a universal problem with education systems in general all around the world; but this is a pressing issue, a wakeup call, for Islamic official institutions particularly who are entrusted with religious education among other things to start education and curricula reform exactly from this point: rethinking Islamic education and jurisprudence. We have already started with a timid step on this way (through the religious education mapping) and intend to build on it by way of education networking between al-Azhar and Dar al-Fatwa.

### **Alternatives**

We wouldn't do things differently; on the surface, it might appear that we have tackled too many themes at the same time and would have been better off to just focus on one theme; this would have been a trap. The advantage of this pilot project is that it introduced us to all of the religious institution's aspects, its main people and allowed us to come up with our own analytics of actual long-term project with the diverse network we created. We now have a holistic knowledge of



Dar al-Fatwa that even some of its Sheikhs and employees don't have; this is necessary for rooted reform project.

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