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Final Report (December 10, 2010- December 31, 2013)

Grant # S-LMAQM-11-GR-513

Ambassadors for Peace - Iraq

Summary

In 2008, the American Islamic Congress along with its Partner Cure Violence (then, Cease Fire) began an ambitious program in two neighborhoods in Basrah, Iraq. The intent was to execute in Iraq a violence reduction, public health model that had been working in some of the most violent neighborhoods in Chicago. After two years of success in Basrah with the Basrah Anti-Violence Campaign (BAVC), AIC expanded the program and inaugurated Ambassadors for Peace. This program would maintain the same public health model, but expand the scope of involvement to four further neighborhoods and increase the reach by opening the program to two parts of Sadr City in Baghdad, an internationally-known violent hotspot.

This expansion of the program was ambitious, taking into account the fraught nature of the environment AIC was accessing. Sadr City had long been considered an area where no program originating in the US would have any utility. Due to Ambassadors for Peace's focus on credibility-building and working within extant tribal structures, AIC was able to find a purchase in this environment and begin to bring about positive outcomes over the course of the program.

Over the course of the last three years Ambassadors for Peace has been saving the lives of Iraqis and improving the living situation of many others. In the communities where Ambassadors for Peace operated, we changed minds about the inevitability of retaliatory violence and adjusted the way that members of our communities thought about how to solve their problems. This is an important and necessary part of the public health model and is also significant to its sustainability.

Mediating individual conflicts to stop violence and save lives is important on its own, but Ambassadors for Peace's work to build on those individual achievements to establish and strengthen local social structures around mediation and networks of people committed to combatting violence will produce a lasting positive effect on the community. Changing of norms is slow and difficult, but our success in mediating individual conflicts and then demonstrating that success to a network that we created and expanded demonstrated the feasibility and the benefits of mediation versus retaliation.

After three years, Ambassadors for Peace can claim many successes, our efforts to create a network focused on nonviolence turned out better than we

expected. Our message of peace through mediated resolution and combatting retribution spoke to many Iraqis and our outreach efforts reached many more people than we had originally expected. Our efforts at direct mediation were very important and saved many lives. While it is difficult to say exactly how many would have been killed had we not intervened, our interrupters mediated many conflicts they deemed likely or very likely to turn deadly meaning that at least one life was spared in most cases and likely, with Iraqi cultures predisposition to retributive violence, possibly many, many more.

Program Description

Ambassadors for Peace is based on a model developed in the University of Illinois (Chicago) School of Public Health by epidemiologist Gary Slutkin. Dr. Slutkin proposed that violence in a given geographic region had a tendency to spread like a contagious disease like cholera. Dr. Slutkin developed a model for using the principles of epidemiology like quarantine, interruption, and behavior change to combat violence as a social disease. He applied these principles to a program to fight violence in some of the most violent neighborhoods in Chicago using people he felt would be the most credible messengers to the target communities. These “credible messengers” were gang members or former gang members quite often they were ex-convicts who had paid their debt to society and were looking to reform. The conflict interrupters and outreach personnel employed in the Cease Fire program built networks in their communities to help detect violence events before they could happen and they watched hospitals to interrupt cases of potential retaliatory violence. Conflict interrupters intervened directly with the population sometimes long in advance of a potential event, sometimes right as it was happening. Successful in these endeavors, the Cease Fire model had been franchise to other US cities experiencing high levels of violence such as Albany, Baltimore, and Phoenix.

Basrah Anti-Violence Campaign and Ambassadors for Peace are the first extension of the model to a city in another country. This represented a good combination of the strengths of the two partners. Cease Fire had the model and the American Islamic Congress had the strong network and the ability to implement projects in Iraq. AIC also provided the cultural savvy in Iraq and an understanding of the patterns of violence. Together the partners worked to develop a training and program plan that kept the epidemiology principles and attuned them to the Iraqi environment for maximum impact. Experts in the model from Cease Fire and Iraq hands from AIC wrote a program multiple

training programs for the new conflict interrupters that the program would take on.

The major changes that had to be made to the program, besides obvious language differences, included what constituted a “credible messenger” and how to access the networks, the particular messaging we used, and a greater focus on training of the public in conflict resolution techniques. There was also a greater element of having our Ambassadors for Peace program join, support and participate in other programs pushing for peace and civil society in Iraq.

As to the “credible messengers,” instead of seeking formal criminals AIC provided insight into the patterns of retaliatory violence in Iraq. The major drivers of violence in Iraq were caught up in Terrorism (which was not particularly based in retaliation) and tribal conflict (which was). Finding, or in some cases creating, the right kind of messengers meant looking for people who would have solid familial reputations and were well connected with the tribes, but did not have a vested interest in any one tribe. The criminal element in Iraq does not have gangs separate from the tribal structure so credibility within the tribes was the crucial element. This is where AIC added much value to the project. AIC had a solid reputation as a disinterested dealer and a strong network of individuals from which to recruit. These provided the initial group of BAVC conflict interrupters. For Ambassadors for Peace, as our anti-violence networks and reputation had grown on the ground, we were able to use those contacts to easily expand into other areas.

Our greater focus on providing trainings was also important to the cultural context. Simply asking Iraqis to join a network to improve their communities may not work well. In our target neighborhoods, Iraqis might interpret “communities” differently. Also, there is less a focus on community volunteerism and much greater emphasis on transactional relationships, particularly with people and organizations that one does not know well. Turning outreach into training meant that we were offering free skills training to members of the community all while getting the word out about mediation, retaliatory violence, and behavior change. The model worked well and we were able to reach many participants, and expand our network across many demographics particularly the young.

Lastly, we also worked to support other civil society efforts whether or not they spoke directly with anti-violence. This work had a few positive effects. By supporting other organizations trying to get things done, we supported the

idea of civil society in a country that sorely needs it. Also, being seen in the community helping to support others' work lent our anti-violence activities a great deal of credibility. This was also a vehicle for expanding the program's network through the NGO and local government community. The success of this was evidenced by our close connections with leaders of tribes, police, NGOs and academic institutions.

Despite these cultural differences, the heart of the program remained direct mediation of potentially violent events. These other networking and credibility-building efforts served to allow Ambassadors for Peace mediate more conflicts and systematize the peaceful mediation of conflicts. This in turn began the process of behavior change away from retaliatory violence that was the hallmark of our success in our neighborhoods.

Objective 1:

Increase awareness among residents of Sadr City and Basrah regarding their civic roles and empower them to create a safer Iraq through training in conflict mediation and violence reduction.

As part of an effort to bring about behavior change in our target communities, A4P had a concerted campaign to educate the public on the nature of violence and how it affects the individuals and the neighborhoods. Throughout the course of the project outreach personnel held 408 workshops for 14,864 participants.

One of the most important pieces of the public education campaign to bring about behavior change is about teaching the model itself. A4P trainers are completely up front about the Cure Violence model and how behaviors are communicated and can lead to or away from violence. Once a population has this understanding it makes them more mindful of their own behaviors, more amenable to observation and change, and more likely to join our network to assist in identification of potential violence events in which we can intervene.

This effort covered all types of demographics for training. We focused intently on youths as they are highly susceptible to influence and make up the next generation of leaders in the community. If we could plant the seed of anti-violent behavior it would be more effective and longer-lasting by focusing on the youth.

We covered many topics, often focused on the particular group to which we were speaking but many focused on the following topics:

- Sectarianism
- Gender-Related Violence
- Violence as a Disease
- De-escalation Techniques
- Sources of Violence in the Community
- Inequality of Education for Women
- Influence of Media

Objective 2:

Create networks of local people to mediate and mitigate violence.

In order to increase awareness we also had a robust interpersonal and mediated outreach campaign involving everything from “man on the street” type engagement, to placarding, small and large events, and media outreach.

A4P took a kitchen sink approach to building our network. Outreach workers, who were, first of all, hired for having their own networks, would hit the streets in their neighborhoods and make connections with the important groups, tribes, NGOs, businesses, families, or otherwise in order to get the word out about the program, get known, and offer to act as a resource for combatting violence. We also worked from the top-down, so to speak, by reaching out to tribal sheikhs and political leaders such as Directors General, police leaders, and Provincial Council Members. Where appropriate we would do some outreach to the media to publicize the program. We also made a great effort to attend events, especially sporting events, many of which we organized ourselves) to demonstrate ourselves as good actors, reach many people and to get the word out about our brand of combating violence.

The network is essential for building credibility for our organization and especially for conflict detection. The most effective way to get involved with a conflict before it comes to violence or as it is taking place is to have a strong interpersonal network built around anti-violence. Essentially, our organization became the local conflict mediation outfit. The people in our network called us in to handle conflicts as the honest broker.

We also supported others' events such as NGOs, tribes, and government offices. It is important to our efforts to have people interrelate with each other and not just with our outreach personnel. The more interconnectedness, the easier it is for different groups to find common ground. For this reason, we supported civil society generally to lessen estrangement between groups in our target communities.

These types of outreach took on many forms but the following is a representative example of our outreach events and engagements:

- Distribution of school aid for needy pupils.
- Grand Opening of Sport City in Basra.
- Attended a symposium about environmental pollution, its causes and how to combat it, held by Iraqi Red Crescent Association.
- AIC launched a campaign entitled "Resolve it Yourself" calling for the spreading of peace and cooperation among community members.
- Attended a play entitled "Ballot Box" held by Fine Arts Faculty and sponsored by the Iraqi High Electoral Commission.
- participated in a symposium of Islamic unity attended by Sheikhs and politicians including the Governor of Basrah

Conflicts

The crucial element of this objective is to get interrupt potentially violent conflicts. Ambassadors for Peace began this part of the program from the very beginning and followed it through to the end. The conflict interruption is an important instrumental element in demonstrating to the public the viability of non-violent solutions, deescalating hotspots, and creating space for civil society to grow.

As described above, our interrupters will get in between belligerents before conflicts happen or as they occur. They attempt to mediate a non-violent settlement or bring in members of the community who would be able to do so. Ambassadors for Peace would also use its network to access authority figures within the community with the necessary influence and credibility to negotiate peaceful settlements, when they could not do it alone. We then recorded the types of conflicts, their likelihood of turning deadly and their location. These statistics are included below.

Conflict Data

The following represents conflict data after we had begun disaggregating it by the ten subjects in the chart.
There are more earlier conflicts accounting for the disparity in the totals.

| Conflict Nature | Commercial | Sexual Harassment | Domestic Violence | Community | Youth | Religious | Political | Tribal | Services/Utilities | Familial | Total | Conflict Nature |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|----------|------------|------------------------|
| Khamza Meel | | | | | | | | | | | | Khamza Meel |
| Unlikely | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | Unlikely |
| Likely | 9 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 48 | Likely |
| Very Likely | 11 | 4 | 3 | 17 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 55 | Very Likely |
| Unknown | 7 | 1 | 0 | 12 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 34 | Unknown |
| Total | 30 | 8 | 8 | 41 | 41 | 0 | 1 | 18 | 5 | 0 | 152 | Total |
| Al Jamhuriya | | | | | | | | | | | | Al Jamhuriya |
| Unlikely | 5 | 1 | 4 | 18 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 35 | Unlikely |
| Likely | 8 | 0 | 2 | 14 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 37 | Likely |
| Very Likely | 1 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 22 | Very Likely |
| Unknown | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | Unknown |
| Total | 14 | 5 | 12 | 38 | 17 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 98 | Total |
| Hay al-Hussein | | | | | | | | | | | | Hay al-Hussein |
| Unlikely | 5 | 0 | 5 | 11 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 35 | Unlikely |
| Likely | 4 | 1 | 2 | 19 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 61 | Likely |
| Very Likely | 2 | 5 | 7 | 13 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 47 | Very Likely |
| Unknown | 5 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 20 | Unknown |
| Total | 16 | 6 | 16 | 51 | 53 | 1 | 3 | 11 | 4 | 2 | 163 | Total |
| Mdaina/Zubair | | | | | | | | | | | | Zubair |
| Unlikely | 10 | 2 | 3 | 13 | 12 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 43 | Unlikely |
| Likely | 5 | 0 | 2 | 13 | 13 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 38 | Likely |
| Very Likely | 10 | 10 | 7 | 22 | 18 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 76 | Very Likely |
| Unknown | 4 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 24 | Unknown |
| Al Mdaina Total | 29 | 13 | 15 | 55 | 44 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 181 | Zubair Total |
| Al-Sadr City | | | | | | | | | | | | Al-Sadr City |
| Unlikely | 4 | 2 | 8 | 25 | 9 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 56 | Unlikely |
| Likely | 17 | 6 | 6 | 21 | 12 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 71 | Likely |
| Very Likely | 9 | 12 | 9 | 22 | 14 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 83 | Very Likely |
| Unknown | 8 | 1 | 5 | 27 | 9 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 58 | Unknown |
| Al-Sadr City total | 38 | 21 | 28 | 95 | 44 | 11 | 8 | 12 | 6 | 5 | 268 | Sadr City total |

Objective 3:

Challenge the social norms that allow violence and raise awareness of peace.

A4P has played a crucial role in bringing different Iraqi sects together and facilitating dialogue. We have sought to build trust on all sides as trust is often what is missing between disparate groups. If we can effectively perform the role of a trusted link, we can bring about trust-building between these groups.

We also pursued a two-pronged public education strategy, peace promotion and conflict resolution training. The former seeks to publicize our work and promote peace as a norm while the latter gives participants the tools to deescalate conflict situations in which they might find themselves trapped. Both of these efforts greatly extend our outreach and effectiveness.

Often one of our methods of advancing peacebuilding was to act in the role of a third party mediator. This helps in laying the groundwork for decreasing violence and establishing a safer space for the development of greater civil-society involvement for the people in our target areas creating a virtuous circle.

Throughout the project we worked constantly at gaining the support of tribal leaders as Iraq is dominated by tribal culture especially in the areas where we work. The involvement of tribal leaders is crucial to a long lasting peace in Iraqi society. The tribal leaders are personally, socially and economically attuned to their constituents and their locality. Thus they are pivotal to building networks in their localities and maintaining the peace in the area.

Our efforts in behavior change were successful, but unfortunately reversible. We smoothed the process that led to parties seeking mediation to their disputes. In the areas where we worked going from conflict to mediation often skipped violence all together, even in conflicts where we could not get directly involved. Quite often it seemed as if moves to mediation or negotiation were almost automatic. This process did not, on its own, diminish the causes of conflicts (except in cases of retaliation), but it did make the process for resolution easy and non-violent. We can claim great success in bringing this change. These gains were substantial, but over time could be reversible. There is still great tension in Iraq and with the ending of the project, there may not be an easy to access facilitator for these processes in the future. Behavior change takes time and at this point we cannot claim that these positive gains will be permanent without continued support or an overall diminishing of drivers of violence, which does not appear to be the case.

Challenges in Implementation and Lessons Learned

As this program was very cutting edge and was operating in a very difficult environment the partners in Ambassadors for Peace did a significant amount of learning throughout its execution. We discovered problems in reporting and data disaggregation, a paradox in our ability to outreach to media, a lack of

gender-sensitivity in our mediations, and the difficulty of having an outside monitor observe operations in dangerous and prohibitive environments where our operations took place. Early on, we also had to rework the way we targeted conflicts for mediation to ensure we were getting to potentially violent ones. We worked through all of these difficulties with varying degrees of success.

Internal reporting structures were initially fairly rudimentary and served as an insufficient check on the actual activities of the Ambassadors for Peace on the ground operations. One of the features of the program was that it had an entirely Iraqi face in Iraq. Top to bottom, all A4P workers in Iraq were Iraqi. This was necessary to our credibility especially in Sadr City where in 2010 any whiff of US influence would have ended our activities immediately and potentially cause our employees to flee to preserve their physical safety. This worked well for our credibility, but not for our communications especially that of important programmatic churning on the ground. Weekly reports were often late and would come in packs of five at a time. Also, the way we classified different conflicts originally only allowed for four different types: "personal," "tribal," "political," and "other." Based on the individual interrupter's assessment, almost all (>90%) of the conflicts were classified as "personal." A handful were "tribal," and one was "political." Obviously, this data disaggregation was not providing any insight.

We fixed these problems by replacing the Iraq-based office liaison and training the new employees on expectations of returning weekly reports. These we also changed to reports every two weeks to make better use of the Iraq office's operational rhythm. After review of the descriptions of the causes of the various conflicts upon which our people reported we developed a new classification list with ten different types, including "youth," "commercial," "domestic violence," etc. and trained our conflict interrupters on what each of these meant to better facilitate documentation and to attempt to learn something about the nature of conflicts we were addressing.

Media outreach had us in a bit of a programmatic bind. On one end we had a benchmark of 500 media mentions that we would have liked to hit. This would have expanded the reach of our messaging about anti-violence. Unfortunately, initially we had to conduct our anti-violence campaign sub-rosa, particularly in Sadr City. We had to work through established structures. Operating at full speed with media outreach would have exposed our program to unwanted scrutiny. We had to build trust slowly by showing ourselves to be forthright actors in conflict mediation. This process took time. Initially, we had a fatwa

against us in Sadr City promulgated by the Sadrists. Thankfully this fatwa was one of caution and not outright enmity. Over time, our Baghdad office built trust within the target communities and we were able to be much more public with our operations. That came late however, and this is what caused us to miss the mark on our media mentions numbers.

Over the course of the program, it became evident that some of the mediations we participated in led to unfortunate outcomes for women especially as it pertained to domestic violence cases. The common trope went thus: A husband would beat his wife who would seek the protection of her family. That protection would come in the form of violent retaliation by the wife's family against the abusive husband. The husband's family would then get involved by attacking members of the wife's family. The conflict would then metastasize to a tribal conflict involving multiple belligerents and victims. Because A4P had limited access within the home, the conflict would have grown to tribal in nature by the time we would step in to mediate. Commonly, the tribes would negotiate a truce to their hostilities, but only with the condition that the husband and wife remained together, often with the husband promising no further domestic violence. This would solve the tribal conflict, but would only reset the conditions which led to it. Obviously, this was a suboptimal resolution. Initially, our interrupters were much better equipped with skills to navigate the tribal conflict and less able to deal with the domestic issues.

The American Islamic Congress worked with Heartland Alliance to improve our ability to deal with domestic violence cases. After a bit of coordination one of HA's trainers visited both our Baghdad and Basrah offices. Despite happening late in the program the things learned in the training were very useful in the field and armed our interrupters with better sensitivity to gender issues.

Monitoring this project from a distance was a challenge for AIC. The need to keep the Iraq office at a distance for the purposes of maintaining credibility made the offices difficult to visit for State Department and outside contractors alike. Most of our monitoring was done by AIC's Executive Director, Zainab Al-Suwaij, unfortunately our independent contractor was never able to visit our offices. All monitoring was done through people hired through our Country Director, Essa Musa, limiting their independence. The program was evaluated by Sophia Sahaf, and independent contractor, who did a thorough job evaluating our reporting data, but could not visit the programs on the ground meaning the sources for her data were the same as our internal data.

Initially our interrupters encountered many conflicts, but few of these conflicts were of high value. Interrupting conflicts requires trust and the higher the stakes the greater the trust level required. We needed to interrupt the conflicts that people would give us access to. At first these were of the upset fruit cart variety. It took a while before we were allowed access to the more dangerous conflicts. The problem was that among our interrupters there was a habit to intervene in everything even after we were getting access to the more crucial conflicts. Our interrupters were essentially putting their focus on non-lethal conflicts. To solve this we conceived and executed some booster training focusing on targeting and reporting. This brought a change in focus to the potentially deadly conflicts.

One last element that came to our notice throughout the process of repeated mediations was how often conflicts were resolved by some kind of transaction. Often this transaction was outside the bounds of official authorities. For example, a case of assault might be resolved between the parties through some kind of financial or other compensation. We often saw this as a positive with one caveat. If offenses were being resolved without the involvement of the courts or police on a purely transactional basis, there is the possibility that someone could act antisocially without true punishment, as long as they could afford to compensate. We never saw evidence of this getting too out of hand, but we did consider the permutations and advise interrupters not to avoid police involvement where appropriate.

M&E

- Recruit and hire staff/outreach workers:
 - **59/59 staff hired**
- Conduct training session for staff and outreach workers in conflict resolution and violence-reduction techniques:
 - **59/59 staff trained**
- Conduct training session for staff and outreach workers in public education campaign:
 - **59/59 staff trained**
- Train local people to reduce violence and take a more active role in civil society:
 - **14,864/16000 individuals trained through workshops**

- Evaluate the effectiveness of Ambassadors for Peace
 - **M&E process ongoing**
 - **We hired local observers**
- Map and analyze violence to determine key people and violence-ridden areas
 - **12/12 maps created**
- Build relationships and network of people
 - **113,807 individuals through outreach, 14,864 through workshops/16000**
- Develop Rapid Response Plan
 - **1 per area/1 per area**
- Local people mediate conflicts
 - **1355/2000 conflicts mediated**
- Implement street campaign against violence
 - **3884/20000 posters and billboards**
- Implement large and small public education events
 - **4/6 large events**
 - **41/192 small events**
 - **161/500 media mentions**

Conclusion

While not all of the individual benchmarks from the original proposal were not completely met, the project objectives were mostly successful. Ambassadors for Peace made great strides in diminishing the level of violence in the hotspots in which we worked. We also made great leaps in institutionalizing the mediation process, deputizing sheikhs and other important community leaders and training them to mediate effectively. This made our efforts sustainable, but we are leaving this program where we feel there is room for continued improvement. Further activity in peacebuilding in our neighborhoods would go a long way to stabilizing the most vulnerable communities particularly with the pressures mounting on the Iraqi people right now. The past few months have demonstrated that Iraqi communities are under serious threat of violence from without and within. AIC hopes to be a part of combatting that violence in the future.