How a CIA analyst began an interfaith quest for citizen diplomacy

“Allah-hu-akhbar,” God is great, the congregation murmured as I stood shoulder to shoulder with a veiled woman. It felt strangely intimate to be physically touching the Muslim woman, even though we had never spoken. I followed her body movements, as well as those of the men in front of the partition ahead of me, for cues as to what to do next. As we bent over and put our hands on our knees, her young daughter watched me intently, giggling as she scooted out of the way. As my forehead touched the floor, I felt how easy it is in that position to think of humbling myself completely before the Almighty. Among my prayers was one of gratitude for the distance I’d traveled physically and mentally since my time in Iraq—to be praying alongside Muslims instead of interrogating them for the CIA.

Before 9/11, my work as a CIA analyst had focused on Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, I’d purposely steered clear of the Middle East because it seemed so unappealing—just loads of angry people fighting relentlessly over a bunch of sand. After 9/11, however, such a naïve view was no longer an option. I was assigned to a task force to support joint wartime efforts in Afghanistan. Then, after the Iraq war started in 2003, I volunteered for a 90-day tour, which turned into 21 months.

I started out in Iraq as the CIA counterinsurgency analyst charged with Al Anbar province, part of the “Sunni Triangle.” Although removed, thankfully, from the war’s front lines, I got a taste of the darker world of antiterrorism efforts as I interrogated insurgents in Abu Ghraib prison in response to four American security guards who’d been ambushed, burned, and strung up on the Fallujah bridge. That horror hit me especially hard because one of the four was a friend of my brother’s—they’d served together in the Navy SEALs—and I’d ridden across that bridge a month earlier to gather intel from local sources.

As the only female CIA official and one of very few civilian women at the Marine base just outside Fallujah, it was my job to provide additional intelligence to the military effort: Who exactly was fighting us, and why? Were they Saddam loyalists or Islamic jihadists? Were they supported from abroad? And whose side were the people on?

Out of consideration for my privacy as the only woman, my boss had me sleep in a single trailer near the Marines while the rest of my team slept together on cots in a tent next to the main buildings. The thunderous sound of mortars and rockets—mainly outgoing—was deafening. Between the blasts and constantly having to dive under the bed—which is what you’re supposed to do, not that it would make any difference—sleep was pretty much impossible.
The intensity of the war zone was almost surreal: the deafening noise of artillery, the fatigue, the constant question of life and death, the Marines coming back wounded from the field, and the heavy burden of personal responsibility to do something—anything—to solve the problem. I tried my best to shed light on the situation. But as with too many other battles, Fallujah ended without moving us forward. Instead, local politicians prevailed, and the city was handed off to a ragtag group of locals who quickly enacted Taliban-style rule. Before long, it was a no-go zone for Coalition forces, with very little humanitarian relief or rebuilding. For me, however, the battle was decisive, the beginning of a personal turning point that would lead me, years later, to kneel alongside this Muslim woman under the curious gaze of her little girl.

A warm welcome at the mosque

I had gone to the mosque, called the Islamic Community Center, with members of a local chapter of the Euphrates Institute, an organization I founded to foster understanding between the West and the Middle East. We were there to learn about Islam and meet some of the Muslims in our area. Except for the imam, all the men had accents and were apparently foreign-born. Everyone was exceedingly friendly, thanked us again and again for coming, and asked about attending our chapter meetings.

The imam had prepared a special sermon on the history of Islam and the U.S., and I was surprised to learn that the Prophet Muhammad is depicted on a frieze in the chambers of the United States Supreme Court, alongside Moses and Confucius and a dozen or so others heralded as humanity’s premier lawgivers. The first country ever to recognize the United States was the Muslim country of Morocco in 1786, in what was later codified as the “Moroccan-American Treaty of Friendship.” The imam closed his remarks by appealing to our common humanity. “Do we not all breathe the same air?” he asked. “Don’t we all bleed when we’re hurt? All shed tears when grieving? We should remember that the only way we differ is our religion. We’re all humans first.”

It can be easy to lose track of such fundamental facts in a war zone, easy to forget or ignore that the “enemy” breathes and bleeds and grieves just as we do. Yet if you look closely enough, there are glimpses of humanity—even of peace—right in the midst of war.

A life lesson at the river’s edge

About a month after the battle in Fallujah, while at a Special Forces base in Ramadi, I went up on the roof at dusk to cool down after a run. The base was along the Euphrates River and the first thing I noticed was the stillness. The only thing I could hear was the gurgling of the water and swaying of the bulrushes. The river was gently gliding, an intense blue matching the blue of the sky. I just wanted to float downstream.

Then it struck me that Fallujah was downstream. Not far away the river flows under the bridge where the four guards had been hung and on into the battleground between Marines and Iraqis. Whoa! It struck me how diametrically opposed those two images were: the quiet of the river and the intensity of the war zone. I couldn’t focus on both at the same time. A question formed, “Which one will you choose?” I had been unaware of the quiet stillness of the river amid the clash, and at that moment of peace, the stress and fear of the conflict were gone completely.

I choose the river, I declared silently, almost instinctively, seeing that it was the more powerful force. No matter how many bombs went off, the water flowed on, undisturbed, undeterred, unaffected. I sensed at that moment that, even in the bleakest of human
circumstances, there is hope, there is life. We just need to open our eyes and see it. My life has never been the same since that moment on the roof overlooking the Euphrates. You might say that I floated on that river all the way to the mosque in my little city in America where I’d knelt in prayer.

Visiting my local mosque was a very simple gesture, really—but it put smiling, curious, and friendly faces on a religion that has been portrayed as opaque, evil, and violent. I couldn’t help but think our visit had the same effect on our hosts. We had put smiling, curious, and friendly faces on what probably seemed a starkly white and frightening community. A glimmer of hope. One sad irony is that the mosque was located out of the way, in the back of a nondescript building, and the relative secrecy was for their safety. After 9/11, a nearby Sikh temple had been attacked because the worshippers were mistaken for Muslims. And just a couple of years ago, anti-Muslim graffiti had been scrawled in the dorms that housed Egyptian Fulbright scholars attending our local community college.

That night we visited, the appreciation on both sides for having gotten better acquainted felt genuine. It made me believe these kinds of encounters could help prevent extremism on both sides.

Failed efforts in Iraq

I knew from experience that our military and intelligence efforts didn’t create lasting change in Iraq. Time and again, we went to great effort and expense to catch someone on the target list, only to watch several more take his place. We were just catching drops of water from a leaky faucet. So I requested and received a reassignment to the Coalition Provisional Authority, where I worked with the political team. I thought politics might be a way to fix the faucet.

Without a doubt, helping nascent Iraqi political parties prepare for the country’s first-ever democratic election was a step in the right direction. Instead of interrogating Iraqis, I was listening to them. Instead of analyzing what was going wrong, I was helping to envision what could go right. I no longer saw Iraqis as a faceless enemy, literally—detainees at Abu Ghraib were brought from their cells to the interrogation room with a bag over their head. Instead, these Iraqis became friends and colleagues with whom I shared common ground and purpose. That said, our progress toward democracy was hard-won and proved to be short-lived. I left the CIA in 2005, committed to forging a more effective route toward peace with the Middle East.

In 2006 and 2009, I returned to Iraq as an ordinary American—the head of the newly formed peacemaking group the Euphrates Institute—rather than as a member of the CIA. I came to see for myself what real change had occurred in Iraq, and the answer was virtually none. The shock caused by the U.S.-led toppling of the Hussein regime was just that—a shock, not a transformation. For the first time, I realized how badly Washington had overestimated Iraq’s ability to weather the stormy shift from a totalitarian regime to democracy. We created a political void that we were unprepared to fill, and so it refilled itself pretty much as it had been before, with a different cast of characters.

The real, societal change that will remove the dictatorship from Iraqi hearts—and thus prevent the rise of future despots—will require much more time and must be created by Iraqis themselves. The hopeful news is that I am in touch with many individuals and organizations that have embarked on this type of long-term societal and cultural change.
The unsung heroes of Iraq

One such individual is Zuhal Sultan, founder and director of the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq. She sees herself as a bridge between East and West and also among the diverse youth of her country. Starting the orchestra when she was just 17, Sultan brought together young people from every religion and ethnic group in Iraq to build bridges through music. The orchestra members overcame incredible obstacles of war, violence, and lack of resources to perform successfully throughout Iraq and Europe, giving people a symbol of real hope and unity—something no Iraqi politician has been able to do.

I have come to believe such grassroots efforts present the only road to lasting change, yet the American government offers them little if any support. For example, the Pentagon estimated in 2015 that the cost of U.S. military operations against ISIS was $9.4 million per day, while an entire season for the Iraqi Youth Orchestra—music lessons, rehearsals, administration, travel, and concerts—costs $500,000. Yet Sultan’s orchestra gets no funding from the U.S. Government.

Fortunately, today, more than ever before, citizens can set different priorities from what their governments do. We can support the Youth Orchestra of Iraq, for example. And, closer to home, we can kneel alongside our Muslim sisters and brothers at our local mosque. Our group of Christians visiting the mosque that day were not diplomats or even local politicians—just ordinary citizens who wanted a better understanding of an issue about which they’d felt helpless. In this simple act, we were doing the work of citizen diplomacy, not sitting on the sidelines waiting for someone else to solve the problem.

“Us” and “Them” Are More United Than We Think

Muslims comprise roughly one-fifth of the world’s population, about 1.6 billion people, and form the majority in 56 countries. As with any major religion, there’s a full range of Islamic practices and expressions, from mainstream to extremist. By treating Muslims with suspicion, discriminatory policies, or even violence, we provide a reason for mainstream Muslims to sympathize with extremists or even join them.

The good news is that groups like ISIS and other Islamic extremists constitute an extremely small number: just 0.01 percent of the globe’s Muslims, according to an in-depth study conducted by a bipartisan, 34-member expert panel called the U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project.

Polls conducted in the Muslim world indicate that instead of rejecting Western values, many Muslims admire them. Majorities in the Middle East and North Africa favor democracy as a system of government, according to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll—with at least three-quarters supporting democracy in Lebanon (81%) and Tunisia (75%). At least half in Egypt (55%), the Palestinian territories (55%), and Iraq (54%) do so as well.

Muslims are even more united in their views against ISIS-style extremism. In fall 2015, people in 11 predominantly Muslim countries overwhelmingly expressed negative views of ISIS, including 100 percent of those polled in Lebanon and 94 percent in Jordan, according to the Pew Research Center. Only in Pakistan did a majority offer no definite opinion on ISIS.
The United Religions Initiative

The world’s growing interfaith movement is a boon to moderates of all faiths—and anathema to extremists. Instead of trying to convert others, denigrate their ideas, or meld all religions into one, the interfaith movement brings people of all traditions and faiths together to learn about each other’s backgrounds from a place of openness and respect.

For example, the mission of the United Religions Initiative, a global grassroots network of over 800 interfaith groups (the Euphrates Institute is one) in 95 countries across the world, highlights this greater purpose: “to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.” Seventy-three of these interfaith groups, called “cooperation circles,” are in 13 Middle Eastern countries, including war-torn Syria and Iraq. I have visited several of these groups in the Middle East and have witnessed Jews, Muslims, and Christians working together to tackle a host of problems, from mitigating environmental degradation to lobbying for women’s rights to creating positive opportunities for youth leadership.

The Tipping Point for Peace

I believe peace in the Middle East can emerge from small, grassroots efforts because so many other large-scale societal changes have happened this way. The process—known as “Diffusion of Innovations”—was first identified in the ’60s by Everett Rogers, PhD, a social scientist from Stanford. Rogers’s now famous theory is that social change follows an S-curve pattern, starting small at the bottom with just a few people, the “innovators” who are “willing to experience new ideas.” The change is accepted gradually by “early adopters” until it reaches a tipping point—somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of the population involved—after which the change is unstoppable. Building on Rogers’s theory, subsequent scholars found that time is best invested on those at the front end, who are naturally quick to make changes and adopt new ways of doing things, rather than trying to convince the “late adopters” at the back.

The world’s extremists and fundamentalists are classic “late adopters”—resistant to the shift toward globalization, interconnectedness, and interdependence already under way. The more they see their world change and evolve, the tighter they cling to a tribal, national, or religious identity and to a traditional worldview they believe offers safety and security. As social change theorists point out, if we want to create peace or solve climate change, our time and energy are better spent on the innovators than on the late adopters.

Recently, I asked Gidon Bromberg, the Israeli director of EcoPeace Middle East, an environmental advocacy and peacebuilding organization, about Rogers’s theory of massive change stemming from a small percentage of the population. “Oh, we have definitely seen evidence of that!” he replied. Bromberg went on to describe a program started 16 years ago that brought together Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian community leaders to rehabilitate the dwindling and sewage-filled Jordan River, a river that is holy to half of humanity.

“At first, we were literally laughed at for even thinking that the Jordan River would ever get freshwater again,” Bromberg told me. And for a while, the program was vehemently opposed by a vocal and determined group in each of the communities where EcoPeace works. At the beginning, many people thought water flowing down the Jordan was wasted: “water going to the enemy,” as Bromberg put it.
What EcoPeace did was to build awareness of the problems of pollution in the Jordan River, the economic benefits of cleaning up, and the need to work together with groups on both sides to address the issue. “We are at the local level,” Bromberg emphasized. “We’re embedded in the community. We’re identifying the self-interest of the community, what motivates them. We couple that with research—the economic loss [that comes from the] demise of the valley and the economic gain of rehabilitating the river.”

After years of investment in people and awareness-building at the community level, coupled with political advocacy and research, EcoPeace now sees concrete results—in terms of the river and relationships. Before, “you could count on your fingers the number of people who had met folks on the other side,” Bromberg recalled. Now, Jews, Jordanians, and Palestinians meet with each other and take part in regular activities together.

In 2013, freshwater started flowing again into the Jordan for the first time in decades, and three new wastewater treatment centers have been erected. Meanwhile, Bromberg and EcoPeace have labored to finalize a master plan for the whole Jordan Valley in which the entire length of the Jordan River will be transformed from a sewage canal to a free-flowing centerpiece. Once this plan is realized, the Jordan Valley’s current $4 billion economy would become a $73 billion economy.

But Bromberg sees an even bigger benefit in all this, pointing out that poverty and lack of development are causal factors of instability and conflict. The development and rehabilitation of the Jordan Valley could serve as a pilot, he suggested, for a type of Marshall Plan for the region. “Just imagine the potential,” Bromberg said excitedly, “if we could extend that same type of design to stabilize the broader Levant, Syria, and Lebanon.”

****

Join a special webinar with Janessa Wilder and other guests this weekend: “Designing for Deeper Inclusion.” More details and RSVP info here.