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ETHNIC CONFLICT: AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

*Victor Asal & Jonathan Wilkenfeld**

INTRODUCTION

To talk about the behavior of others is to generalize¹ especially if that behavior is perceived to be negative.² As researchers who have studied ethnic discrimination and ethnic conflict for close to two decades, we have noticed, anecdotally at least, that this penchant for generalization is rampant in discussions of ethnic politics. Newspapers are not the only forum in which one will find articles that talk about one or another ethnic group's involvement in violence without specifying a political organizational agent—by which we mean groups with a set of political goals along with an organizational structure. If an organization is mentioned, the article often offers a generalization about the use of violence or the

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¹ See generally Eric Hoyle, *The Professionalization of Teachers: A Paradox*, 30 BRIT. J. EDUC. STUD. 161 (1982).

² See generally Wouter Vanhouche & Joseph W. Alba, *Generalizing from Negative Experiences*, 26 INT'L J. RES. MARKETING 238 (2009).

behavior of an entire ethnic group based solely on the characteristics of one organization within that ethnic group. This problematic type of analysis is too often present in policy and academic journals as well.

The problem of generalizing ethnic behavior becomes more pronounced when one examines the attribution of a particular behavior to a group over time. For example, take the statement that the “Kurds have always rebelled against Turkey,”³ which is problematic for many reasons since not all Kurds have ever rebelled—as many Kurds would tell you. Certain organizations that claim to represent the Kurds have rebelled for extended periods of time while others have not. Generalizations about the Palestinians provide a more extreme example: “Historical circumstances have changed over the years, but *the Palestinians have always* seemed to prefer the hopes of annihilating Israel in concert with Arab states, or the romance of violent struggle, to constructive accommodation”⁴ (emphasis added). Is this the desire of some Palestinians? Yes, disturbingly so, as some surveys suggest.⁵ Is this the desire of all Palestinians? No, and polls continuously provide evidence that this is not the case. For example, consider the polls from the Oslo process where “monthly CPRS polls show an increase in general public support for the ‘peace camp,’ from thirty-nine percent in January 1994 to fifty-five percent in October 1995.”⁶

This kind of generalization is a serious obstacle to understanding conflicts and identifying solutions because it prevents policymakers and academics from getting at the messy reality of ethnic politics—especially when they become contentious or violent. Generalizations are even more problematic when the goal is to identify the implications of different policies. Although the Kurds,

³ Dilara Sezgin & Melissa A. Wall, *Constructing the Kurds in the Turkish Press: A Case Study of Hürriyet Newspaper*, 27 MEDIA, CULTURE & SOC’Y 787, 788 (2005).

⁴ Saul Smilansky, *Terrorism, Justification, and Illusion*, 114 ETHICS 790, 796 (2004).

⁵ See generally Stuart J. Kaufman, *Narratives and Symbols in Violent Mobilization: The Palestinian-Israeli Case*, 18 SEC. STUD. 400 (2009).

⁶ Khalil Shikaki, *The Peace Process, National Reconstruction, and the Transition to Democracy in Palestine*, 25 J. PALESTINE STUD. 5, 7 (1996).

Palestinians, Druze and other ethnic groups each have a shared identity, “ethnic groups” do not make policy decisions and are not monolithic wholes. Rather, it is the individuals and organizations within the ethnic groups that initiate political behavior. Accordingly, we must recognize that organizations are much more flexible about the behaviors they are willing to embrace than generalizations permit.

Using a dataset of 118 ethnopolitical organizations in the Middle East and North Africa spanning the period 1980-2004, this article analyzes the enormous variance in behavior among and between organizations claiming to represent the same ethnic group. It also will show how such organizations often change their policies and shift back and forth between violent and nonviolent strategies, occasionally adopting both at the same time. While this article does not focus on the larger question of which policies make organizations more likely to move in one direction or another, it illustrates the importance of avoiding over aggregation when studying contentious politics. In the process, this article provides a counter-balance to generally accepted wisdom concerning the relationship between ethnicity and conflict.

I. ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR CAN CHANGE: THE MAROB DATASET

The Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (MAROB) dataset⁷ examines organizations that represent Minorities at Risk groups.⁸ The 118 organizations included in the MAROB dataset include twenty two ethnopolitical groups in sixteen countries of the Middle East and North Africa, operating between 1980 and 2004.⁹

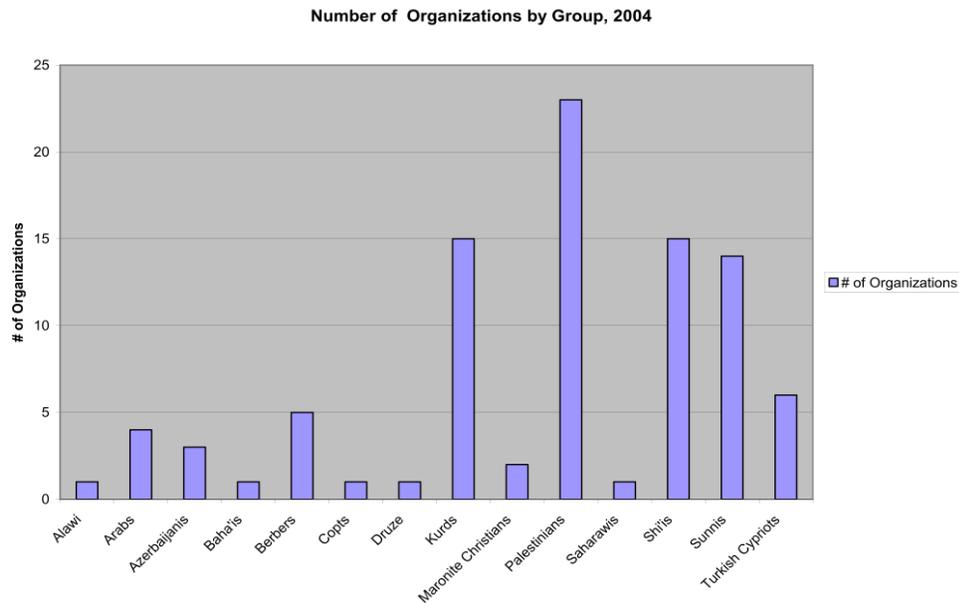
⁷ Victor Asal, Amy Pate & Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior Data and Codebook*, MINORITIES AT RISK PROJECT (Sept. 2008), http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/data/marob/me_marob_sept08_codebook.pdf.

⁸ Center for International Development and Conflict Management, *Minorities at Risk Dataset*, MINORITIES AT RISK PROJECT (Nov. 2010), <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/data.asp>.

⁹ Data collection is currently underway on the Terrorism and Extremist Organizations (TEO) Database, which will update much of the MAROB Middle East dataset through 2010. Victor Asal, R. Karl Rethemeyer & Jonathan

To be included in the dataset, the organization must not have been created by a government, must claim to represent an ethnic group, must be active at least at the regional level and exist for at least three years.¹⁰ Table 1 provides a breakdown from 2004 of the number of Middle Eastern and Northern African organizations in the dataset by ethnic group.¹¹

Table 1. Organizations in the MAROB Dataset in 2004 by Ethnic Group



Highly different organizations frequently claim to represent the same ethnic group. Table 2 lists two ethnic groups, Kurds in Turkey and Palestinians in Jordan, and a sample of the organizations

Wilkenfeld, *Terrorist and Extremist Organizations* (2012) (data collection will be completed by 2015).

¹⁰ See Asal et al., *supra* note 7.

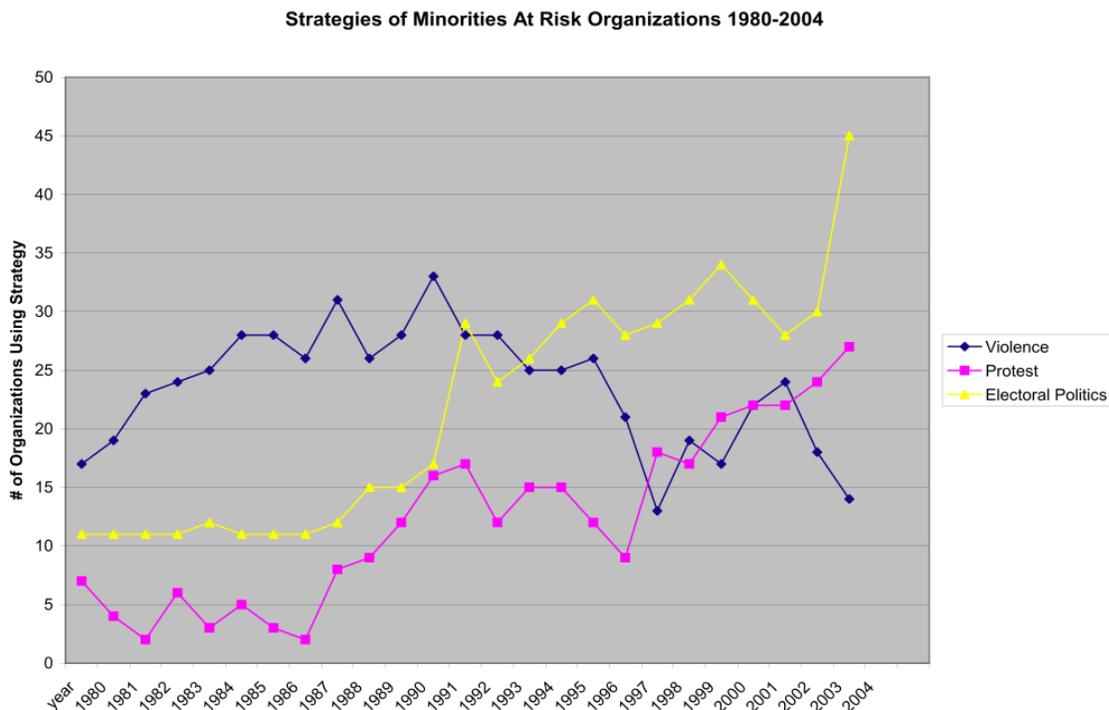
¹¹ Other contributions to this issue of the *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs* also focus on the challenges presented by multiple organizations' participation in conflict and violence. See, e.g., David E. Cunningham, *Who Should Be at the Table?: Veto Players and Peace Processes in Civil War*, 2 PENN ST. J.L. & INT'L AFF. 38 (2013); J. Michael Greig, *Intractable Syria? Insights from the Scholarly Literature on the Failure of Mediation*, 2 PENN ST. J.L. & INT'L AFF. 48 (2013).

that claim to represent them. For example the Partiya Karkari Kurdistan, which claims to represent the Kurds, has used violence for every year in the dataset while the Halkin Emek Partisi and the Kurdistan Ulusal Kurtulus Partisi never used violence during this time period. The same diverse strategic picture can be seen if we look at the Palestinian organizations in Jordan. The Jordanian People's Democratic Party, which was a spinoff of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, has not used violence since its founding in 1989, while the Black September Organization used violence for all but one year of its existence in Jordan between 1984 and 1988. To uniformly label the Kurdish or the Palestinian ethnic groups as violent represents a gross distortion of reality.

Table 2. Examples of Minority at Risk Groups and MAROB Organizations

Minority at Risk Group	MAROB Organizations
Kurds in Turkey	Partiya Karkari Kurdistan (PKK) Halkin Emek Partisi Kurdistan Ulusal Kurtulus Partisi
Palestinians in Jordan	Jordanian People's Democratic Party Black September Organization

An examination of general behavior trends for the region over time reveals several observations about the ethnopolitical organizations claiming to represent MAR groups in the Middle East. First, a very large proportion of the organizations used violence in any given year (Table 3). That is, for an extended period of time more than twenty percent of the organizations in the dataset used violence in the same year, and in some years the number shot up past thirty percent.

Table 3. Strategies of Ethnopolitical Organizations 1980-2004

Of course, organizations can engage in more than one activity at the same time. If terrorism is defined as the intentional targeting of civilians, then clearly Hamas is a terrorist organization. If insurgency is defined as an organization that shoots soldiers, then Hamas is not only a terrorist organization but also an insurgency. But as Table 4 illustrates, Hamas is not solely a violent organization. It also spent some of its time involved in electoral politics, and by 1994 was active in education, propaganda and in providing social services. This is not to say that Hamas is not a terrorist organization but it does show that Hamas is complex and acts as more than just a terrorist organization. Understanding that Hamas has a larger presence is a starting point for gaining a better understanding of why part of the Palestinian public might have very strong concrete reasons for being loyal to Hamas beyond its policies as they relate to Israel.

Table 4. Political Behavior of Hamas, 1987-2004

Year	Attack Civilians	Attack Security Forces	Provide Social Services	Education and Propaganda	Involved in Electoral Politics
1987	no	no	not used	not used	not used
1988	no	yes	not used	infrequent	not used
1989	yes	yes	unclear	infrequent	frequent
1990	yes	yes	unclear	infrequent	not used
1991	yes	yes	unclear	frequent	frequent
1992	yes	yes	infrequent	frequent	infrequent
1993	yes	yes	infrequent	frequent	infrequent
1994	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	infrequent
1995	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	infrequent
1996	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	frequent
1997	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not used
1998	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not used
1999	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not used
2000	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not used
2001	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not used
2002	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not Used
2003	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	not used
2004	yes	yes	frequent	frequent	infrequent

Despite its other efforts, Hamas has clearly made a choice to embrace violence in general and target civilians specifically as a central part of its policy, as shown by the organization's involvement in attacks against civilians every year since 1989. There is in this chart, though, a hint of the fact that organizations make choices about their strategies and that those choices can change or be influenced. In 1987 Hamas did not use violence at all. In 1988 they moved into the realm of violent politics but the organization did not target civilians. Something happened in 1988 and the organization embraced the targeting of civilians. This change over three years suggests that organizations make strategic choices about violence and those choices can change over time. One might argue that it is not so

complicated and is simply an escalation of violence—but that reasoning would be a mistake. Terrorism is called the “weapon of the weak” not only because some people are trying to validate reprehensible behavior. Shooting a civilian without a weapon is a lot easier than shooting a soldier with one. As Martha Crenshaw so trenchantly pointed out:

The observation that terrorism is a weapon of the weak is hackneyed but apt. At least when initially adopted, terrorism is the strategy of a minority that by its own judgment lacks other means. When the group perceives its options as limited, terrorism is attractive because it is a relatively inexpensive and simple alternative, and because its potential reward is high.¹²

This remark suggests that Hamas’s move to begin attacking civilians was not simply an escalation but a choice about what it was willing to do, and a statement that it reached a point where intentionally killing unarmed civilians was acceptable; collateral damage is a different issue. If an organization chooses to move toward killing civilians, this suggests that an organization can choose to move away from such behavior as well.¹³ For example, Amal in Lebanon fits this category. Before 1989 Amal regularly engaged in terrorist tactics. From 1989 on, it did not engage in intentional attacks against civilians, but it continued to engage in attacks against military personnel during the entire time period. Some organizations flip back and forth on a regular basis. As Table 5 shows, the Palestinian Fatah Revolutionary Council based in Lebanon went back and forth repeatedly between using terrorist tactics to not using such tactics, to ending the use of violence entirely, to then going back to its use.

¹² Martha Crenshaw, *The Causes of Terrorism*, 13 *COMP. POL.* 379, 387 (1981).

¹³ For a discussion of Hamas as well as other extremist organizations use of mixed tactics (violent and non-violent), see Kristine Höglund, *Tactics in Negotiations between States and Extremists: The Role of Cease-Fires and Counterterrorist Measures*, in *ENGAGING EXTREMISTS: TRADE-OFFS, TIMING, AND DIPLOMACY*, 221, 236-39 (I. William Zartman & Guy Olivier Faure eds., 2011).

**Table 5. Violent Behavior of the
Fatah Revolutionary Council Based in Lebanon**

Year	Civilian	Security
1980	0	0
1981	0	0
1982	1	0
1983	0	0
1984	1	0
1985	1	0
1986	1	0
1987	1	0
1988	1	1
1989	1	1
1990	0	1
1991	1	1
1992	0	1
1993	0	1
1994	0	0
1995	0	0
1996	0	0
1997	0	0
1998	0	0
1999	0	0
2000	0	0
2001	0	0
2002	0	1
2003	0	0
2004	0	0

II. STATE BEHAVIOR CAN CHANGE TOO

These case studies suggest that generalizing about an ethnic group is a mistake and a potentially serious one, and that we need to be open to the possibility of change even at the organizational level. The same is true for the behavior of the state toward an organization. Table 6 provides yearly observations of Israel's behavior toward Fatah in the West Bank and Gaza and Fatah's behavior in the West Bank and Gaza as it relates to attacks against civilians and security forces from the beginning of the Oslo process in 1993 to 2004. This table illustrates how state and organizational behavior can change and strongly suggests the possibility of a delayed feedback between the behavior of one actor and the behavior of the other actor.

**Table 6. Select Years for Israel and Fatah
Negotiation and Violence
from the Beginning of the Oslo Process until 2004**

Year	Negotiation Between Fatah and Israel	Israel's Attacks on Fatah	Fatah Attacks on Civilians	Fatah Attacks on Security Forces
1993	some concessions	yes	yes	yes
1994	some concessions	yes	yes	yes
1995	some concessions	yes	yes	yes
1996	negotiation	no	no	yes
1997	some concessions	no	no	no
1998	some concessions	no	no	yes
1999	some concessions	no	no	no
2000	negotiation	yes	yes	yes
2001	negotiation	yes	yes	yes
2002	no negotiation	yes	yes	yes
2003	negotiation	yes	yes	yes
2004	no negotiation	yes	yes	yes

Organizations clearly choose from a menu of various strategies but they rarely choose or commit to one strategy alone. Many organizations in the Middle East will often switch between violent and nonviolent contentious strategies as well as traditional

political activity. Moreover, the choice of strategies can be impacted by the type of regime and the behavior of the government as well as by the ideologies of the organizations themselves.

III. GENERALIZATION LEADS TO BAD POLICY—AND ORGANIZATIONAL DATA CAN HELP GROUND ANALYSIS

Policymakers need to realize that the structure of the government and the way governments treat organizations and the populations they claim to represent will often have a direct impact on how those organizations behave. This brief overview examining examples of Middle Eastern ethnopolitical organizations is of equal importance, as it highlights the importance of disaggregating the behavior of organizations from the groups they claim to represent and the importance of not assuming that what is now true in terms of an organization's behavior was always true—or always will be. The MAROB data allows us to underline the importance of specificity in policy making and the need to check general assumptions. It also facilitates analysis that can allow policymakers to get a handle on the various factors that will impact outcomes not just based on one case or anecdotal evidence, but on data that can be used to accept or reject our own assumptions.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Ethnopolitical organizational behavior in the Middle East is complex, and our ability to understand such behavior and identify the right policy choices is often ill-served by generalizations expounded by scholars and journalists. Often multiple organizations claim to represent the same ethnic group, and while some will engage in violence and even terrorism to achieve their goals, others will persist in more traditional avenues for addressing grievances such as electoral politics (and arguably, this is something to be encouraged). Furthermore, organizations will change their tactics over time, or

¹⁴ See generally, e.g., Victor Asal, Richard Legault, Ora Szekely & Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *Gender Ideologies and Forms of Contentious Mobilization in Middle East*, J. PEACE RES. (forthcoming 2013); Victor Asal, Mitchell Brown & Angela Dalton, *Why Split? Organizational Splits among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East*, 56 J. CONFLICT RESOL. 94 (2012).

adopt more than one tactic at the same time. While ethno-political violence is a continuing problem as the headlines from Iraq, Israel and various other countries in the Middle East illustrate all too often, our ability to understand and address these problems are hampered by over aggregation and simplification. The international community's ability to better understand ongoing conflicts and the potential avenues for solutions would be best served by taking a more nuanced and rigorous approach to collecting and analyzing data at the organizational level where important distinctions between organizations can be identified and key shifts in tactics can be followed and thus encouraged or discouraged.