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A Cultural Schema Underlying Crowd Member Decisions in the Middle East

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In March, 2006, a crowd of Kurds gathered in protest near the Halabja Monument. In an attempt to disperse the crowd, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan guards fired warning shots into the air from their machine guns. Rather than quelling the demonstration, the enraged crowd members braved the gun fire to drive the panicked guards away and attack the monument. They smashed windows and set fires, ultimately destroying the memorial (Worth, 2006).

Why caused this violent eruption? A traditional sociological explanation might appeal to the inherent irrationality that stems from crowd membership, combined with the general volatility of life in the Middle East. In contrast, following a “cultural epidemiology” approach to understanding decision making in cultural groups (Atran, Medin, & Ross, 2005), we propose that a culturally pervasive “oppression schema” often guides perceptions and drives decisions in Middle Eastern crowd situations. In cases where crowd members construe events in terms of oppression, then they are likely to sanction resistance against even a heavily armed security force. However, if the members of the security force act in ways that violate the schema, so that the situation cannot be construed in terms of oppression, crowd tensions are likely to be defused.

The purpose of the current analysis is to test a specific implication of the “oppression schema.” In particular, we examine crowd incidents to determine whether security force actions that are readily construed by crowd members as being consistent with oppression lead to increases in crowd member resistance, as compared with security force actions that clearly diverge from the oppression schema.

Method and Results

We employed Critical Decision Method (CDM) interviews to uncover and describe the decision making of Middle Eastern crowd participants, as well as security force personnel from the US and Middle East (cf. Sieck et al., 2006). We collected 36 incidents in the U.S. and Lebanon representing experiences with crowds in the Middle East from a variety of perspectives.

The interviews were coded to include Security Force triggering events, coded as those that escalate force and those that generate understanding or exhibit restraint. Also, crowd change points were classified in terms of whether they signified an increase or decrease in the overall level of conflict (See Table 3).

Table 3. Crowd Change Points by Security Force Escalation

	Increased Conflict	Decreased Conflict
Force Escalation	16	10
Understanding, Restraint	9	22

As can be seen, escalation of force against the crowd led to an increase in the level of conflict more often than not (62%), whereas attempting to understand the crowd or exhibiting restraint was much less likely to lead to an increase in conflict (29%). The association between kind of security force actions and crowd change points was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 8.57, p = .003$.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of CDM interviews, we find that, when widely-shared “oppression” schemata become activated, standard force escalation against Middle Eastern crowds tends to be ineffective and often counterproductive by triggering a deep compulsion towards resistance that trumps rational considerations of risk and reward. On the other hand, small acts that run counter to the oppression schema, such as simply making attempts to understand crowd members’ intentions, needs, and desires, or exhibiting stolid restraint in the face of spikes in crowd hostilities can be especially effective in defusing crowd events.

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