

# How Lessons from Algeria Can Shape Iraq

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

After its military defeat in Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) has transformed from a governing entity to a scattered organization. Nonetheless, due to the worldwide spread of extremism, it is still necessary to combat the group's ideology, which can easily be developed and spread by other extremist organizations. Luckily, the successful fight to defeat radical ideologies during the decade-long Algerian Civil War can provide a blueprint for those seeking to challenge terrorism in Iraq today.

The Algerian struggle against extremism began in 1990, after the Islamic Salvation Front Party (FIS) declared jihad against the Algerian government, leading to civil war. While the administration's first efforts focused on suppressing extremist groups through the Algerian military, the government soon realized that focusing on military repression alone fed extremism, and that counter-terrorism required challenging the ideological appeal of these groups.

A syncretic approach dealing with the political, military, economic, and religious drivers of extremism has had major success in Algeria both internally and externally. Twenty years later, radicalism now holds relatively little appeal in Algeria. The country's Armed Islamic Group (GIA) was successfully repressed. And even GIA's successor, the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), lacked both manpower and resources to fight against the Algerian army and eventually left the country entirely, pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda and building a successful network in the Sahel. In other words, Algeria has not only suppressed its extremist groups but has also vaccinated itself against future extremism.

IS was not successful in recruiting Algerians to join their cause. Only 170 joined the group, whereas more than 3,000 Tunisians and 1,500 Moroccans joined IS, with many more caught attempting to do so. Even *Jund Al-Khilafa* (Soldiers of the Caliphate), IS's Algerian branch, failed to develop into an actual threat to the country. These figures demonstrate a marked difference from earlier periods before Algeria's systemic fight against terrorism: Algerians were among the first fighters to travel to Afghanistan to engage in a global jihad movement against the Soviet Union, and these veterans joined extremist groups during the civil war in the 1990s.

Given the effectiveness of Algeria's strategy inside Algeria, applying these measures to countries that have struggled with IS as a domestic issue, such as Iraq, may prove more effective to the current efforts towards continued military suppression. IS's continued activities in Iraq demonstrate that the country's challenges with extremism, while currently muted, are far from over.

Due to key similarities between IS and groups like GIA—such as declaring a caliphate in order to galvanize supporters—Algeria’s past efforts to suppress radicalization can guide contemporary strategy against IS. In other words, by looking to Algeria as a success story, Baghdad may be able to significantly reduce both IS’s capacity to spread its ideology and other extremist groups’ abilities to appeal to citizens.

### **Political Measures**

Algeria initiated a political settlement (The Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation) that involved all political opponents in a dialogue to regain safety in the country. In an attempt to bring closure to the civil war, Algeria unconditionally offered amnesty for fighters who handed in their weapons after the end of the civil war in 2006. Additionally, the government began an innovative rehabilitation program that allowed fighters and prisoners who were engaged in terrorist activities to express remorse and renounce their violent ideology.

Now that Iraq has successfully regained territories controlled by IS, a political rehabilitation program is finally feasible. Moreover, rehabilitation cannot succeed without an inclusive political dialogue that can incorporate actors throughout the Iraqi political spectrum. To this end, the makeup of Iraq’s next government is key to the success of political implementation. Thus, as the upcoming administration develops its governing agenda, Iraq has a chance to set adequate conditions necessary for a successful de-radicalization program as demonstrated in the Algerian case.

### **Security Measures**

Algeria has applied a tight security approach based on two strategies: deterrence and coercion. During the height of concern over IS, the Algerian army proactively doubled its military spending and capabilities, with an increase of 176 percent, taking total annual spending to \$10.4 billion. Algerian forces focused on border control, which ensured that other regionally active terrorist groups could not enter the country.

This strategy of deterrence worked only when the government coerced the remnants of the GIA to concede by assuring amnesty, which led six thousand extremists to lay down their arms and hasten the political process that aimed to end the civil war. The same thing is applicable for Iraq if Baghdad initiates a reconciliation process with the potential promise of absolution to remnants of IS while applying a strategy based on deterrence and coercion.

Today, these policies are instrumental as Iraq reaches the tail end of its fight against IS. Both methods can be actualized through federal counter-terrorism forces connected to but independent of the Iraqi army. This force should be intentionally diverse and work to coordinate with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the Iraqi government, and the Sunni tribes in order to ensure that its capabilities are not hindered by internal concerns. By developing this force at the Iraqi border with Syria, Iraq can bolster its other efforts to prevent terrorists from coming over its border, including a security fence currently being built. And by establishing permanent pressure in these areas, these forces may be able to coerce IS pockets to hand over their weapons while offering an outlet to the Iraqi fighters to repent and reunite with their families.

### **Economic Measures**

In 2000, the Algerian government began extensive economic reforms, which included mega-projects and infrastructure aimed at offering new economic opportunities to citizens. These economic measures aimed to attract greater direct foreign investment and enhance the relationship between the government and its population, which had deteriorated during the so-called “black decade.” In addition, Algeria also addressed the issue of victims of the national tragedy by providing financial compensations to families of the dead and missing to help heal their wounds.

Economic reform is possible in Iraq, a country where natural resources have made it an attractive site for the inflow of reconstruction funds. In practical terms, the Iraqi government must initiate a dialogue with the Sunni population and implement policies that target regions previously held by IS. One of the driving forces behind Iraqi defection to

IS was the sense of socioeconomic exclusion in northern Iraq. Consequently, Baghdad must focus on good governance in former IS territories and alter the economic challenges and feelings of sectarian exclusion that have led to radicalization. Thus, military security will only prove stable if economic security can also be ensured.

## Religious Measures

The fourth procedure focuses on controlling domestic religious discourse to prevent radicalizing messages. Algeria maintained a tight command over all religious institutions and shut out radical preachers that promulgate an extreme version of Islam from mosques and Quranic schools. However, suppression is not enough: the Algerian government has also replaced this toxic ideology by encouraging another interpretation of Islam: *Salafiya Al-Elmia* or quietist Salafism. *Salafiya Al-Elmia* has offered moderate views as alternatives for those who were disappointed by the violence of terrorist groups. The scholars of *Salafiya Al-Elmia* concern themselves with personal religious practice and reject political activism, focusing on how the primacy of their goal of individual “purification and education ([https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper\\_Jacob-Olidort-Inside\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Jacob-Olidort-Inside_Final_Web.pdf))” will eventually lead to an Islamic state without violence.

Today, the concepts behind *Salafiya Al-Elmia* represent a means for Iraq to alleviate specific push and pull factors of radicalization. Hence, rather than characterizing counter-terrorism efforts as “moderate ideology versus terrorist ideology,” religious institutions in Iraq should instead frame the battle of ideas as “terrorist elements versus Islam.”

In this battle of ideas, countering the discourse is paramount in order to disseminate moderate arguments from scholars of *Salafiya Al-Elmia* who have contested IS’s interpretation of Islam and rejected its vision of jihad. The Iraqi religious institutions must welcome these scholars and encourage the publicizing of these views within mosques, on TV channels, and through social media to provide a rich and viable alternative to IS ideology.

While to some, Algeria’s successful fight against terrorism may seem the product of another era, the factors that shaped Algeria's fight with extremism should be a source of inspiration for Iraq. It is true that the two wars are fundamentally different in their causes and outcomes, but there are still lessons to be learned from non-military methods applied during the Algerian civil war. Algeria proves that counter-terrorism requires more than just forcing the caliphate underground: it calls for counter-radicalization as a solution that leads to an ideological defeat. Thus, the best approach to counter IS ideology is to combine both hard and soft measures in the long-term and to believe that extremism as a credo that can be defeated and replaced by better objectives. ❖

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