Radil FY 2017 Seed Grant Application Cover Page

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Amount Requested: $11,652

PROPOSAL TITLE: Modeling the Social and Spatial Networks of Violent Extremist Organizations in Syria and Iraq

Proposal Checklist:

- Cover sheet (1 page)
- Abstract (1 page; 200 words max)
- Narrative (2 page max)
- Bibliography
- Budget Form
- Biographical Information (3 pages max)
Modeling the Social and Spatial Networks of Violent Extremist Organizations in Syria and Iraq

ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, new forms of organized political violence have emerged as non-state Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) are now the predominant type of political actor in many regions around the world. The nature of VEO-driven conflicts is characterized by VEO partnerships with other VEOs and by a high level of transnational activity which pose challenges to the quantitative modeling of conflict in social science. This proposal requests funding support to develop a new dataset that models both social network and spatial aspects of the war to better understand the dynamics of VEO-driven conflicts. Building on the PI’s work to develop an integrative analytic framework, this project can form the basis for a substantial future line of research that promises to yield better understandings of the processes that underpin contemporary conflicts. This proposal would fund creation of a new set of pilot data for manuscript and grant preparation, and partially support the recruitment, training, and mentoring of a graduate student. Both are critically important steps to developing a sustainable funding program around current needs and opportunities in quantitative social science.
NARRATIVE

Background
Over the last decades, new forms of organized political violence have emerged that have challenged the long-standing notion of war as the sole purview of the state (Kaldor 2003). A plethora of non-state Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) have developed and thrived in particular regions around the world. The ongoing maelstrom of violence in Syria and Iraq are but the most recent expression of this phenomena as numerous VEOs that possess the means of violence that were once limited to states seek to establish new political arrangements out of the territory of both states. For example, the Islamic State controls vast areas in both countries while numerous ethnically-defined militias from within and outside Syria have allied with each other against the Syrian regime. This example sheds light on the nature of VEO-driven conflicts, which are characterized by VEO partnerships with other VEOs and by a high level of transnational activity. The fact that VEOs are now socially connected with other groups and that these relations extend beyond the traditional geography of national borders constitutes a key challenge for those who seek to understand the conflict dynamics in order to restore peace.

Objectives
Building on new means of data collection on VEO-driven political violence (Carter Center 2015), this proposal requests funding to support extending an emerging conflict analysis framework to the case of Syria and Iraq. This framework, developed by the PI, is called Spatializing Social Networks (SSN) and models how political actors are embedded in both network space and geographical space (Radil et al. 2010). SSN has been successfully used to model the dynamics of urban violence (Tita & Radil 2011), interstate war (Radil et al. 2013; Chi et al. 2014), and civil war within a single state (Radil & Flint 2013; 2015). The case of Syria and Iraq provides a unique opportunity to further develop the SSN framework as it has novel social and spatial characteristics. By considering the dual spatial and social network dynamics of the VEOs involved in the conflict, the project’s ultimate aim is to understand how the location of actors in space, their spatial practices, and the geographic arrangements of their social networks affect the potential for VEOs to cooperate or be in conflict with other armed groups or government forces. To do so, the project will address three interrelated questions.

(1) First, it is important to study the social structure of VEOs. Understanding. SSN can be used to map how VEOs have been connected to other actors in the region during the conflict and model the overall social structure of VEO networks and the role of each actor within this system. As the overall network structure defined by the relationships among VEOs provides opportunities for or constraints on their political and military action, the ability of VEOs to carry out violence is expected to be impacted by their relative location within a set of relations to both their enemies and allies in the region.

(2) Second, it is also important to study the spatial structure of VEOs and the effect of space on their social networks. Data on the location of violent events in Syria and Iraq enables questions about the spatial patterning of VEO activity across the region. Given that the conflict has spread over some national borders (Syria-Iraq) but not others, the role of national borders
in shaping the geography of violence can be examined. The geography of violent events is also expected to develop in accordance with the spatial patterning of the pre-existing social networks of VEOs rather than develop on a purely random or opportunistic basis or strongly shaped by the presence of a national border.

(3) Third, how can VEO networks be disrupted? Drawing on the information about the social and spatial structure of VEOs yielded by the previous questions can highlight policy strategies that could disrupt VEO networks and contribute to restoring peace in the region. From a network point of view, any VEO network structure with a profusion of cooperative relations can be disrupted by identifying the most central groups to that structure. From a spatial point of view, identifying the core areas of operation for each group allows for the development of targeting security and peacekeeping operations that focus on key VEOs.

Outcomes and deliverables
The project will leverage new data on the conflict in Syria and Iraq which records information about the various VEOs, their relations with other VEOs, and the locations of violent incidents involving them (Carter Center 2015). However, the data will need to be prepared for use in the SSN framework which involves coding and modeling VEO relationships and events using both network and spatial data models. Such efforts will require a significant time and labor investment and data collection and preparation will comprise the primary project outcome to be accomplished under this proposal. If awarded, data collection and preparation will begin during Summer 2016 and extend through Fall 2016. Once completed, the network and spatial data will be used to address the research questions defined above.

This proposal represents a crucial first step in advancing an emerging approach to quantitative social science research on an important topic. As such, it is likely to be an attractive project to qualified graduate students and has potential to draw positive attention to the university in an area it is not well known for. Initial findings will be prepared for submission to Political Geography and Social Networks, top journals in Geography and Social Network Analysis respectively. Any funding awarded under this proposal will be used to support a graduate research assistant to help the PI collect and develop the data. Although the PI does not currently have other funding to support this project, the PI’s startup funds will be used to supplement an award in order to fully support a graduate student to work on the project. The data collection efforts will also form the core of a proposal to the NSF program in Geography and Spatial Sciences for further funding and to other relevant funding sources.

Contribution to field and to professional development
The PI’s work on conflict modeling has been recognized as innovative and impactful. This proposal would further those efforts and can form the basis for a substantial future line of research that promises to yield better understandings of the social and spatial processes and relationships involved in conflicts involving VEOs. This seed grant would also contribute to the PI’s professional development by allowing the creation of a new dataset for investigation and further grant preparation, and to recruit, train, and mentor a graduate student in quantitative social science.
Bibliography


