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Eshhad (Testify)

Proposal Narrative

Sectarianism is a long-standing and deeply engrained problematic phenomenon within Egyptian and Middle Eastern societies and institutions. Discrimination based on religion is manifested in everyday events, ranging from simple hiring practices to the construction of houses of worship to the lack of investigation of crimes committed against minorities. Most societies in the Middle East, Egypt included, choose to look the other way and often deny the presence of sectarianism, let alone its impact. In light of this, I am submitting a Davis Projects for Peace Proposal to request support in order to establish a database to facilitate the reporting of sectarian attacks, ultimately contributing to documentation of the trend and on the long run, recognition of the problem and effective resolution. Funds from this grant will support the launch of a professional website and database, help establish the project as a recognized 501(c)(3), and endow the project with the outreach and local network necessary to launch.

Project Context

In the wake of ex-President Morsi's ousting and the state's violent dispersals of the sit-ins of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Raba'a al-Adaweya and Nahda squares, Egypt's Christian community witnessed unprecedented levels of sectarianism across the country. Since then, this deliberate sectarian violence has included the burning of churches, the looting of homes, the death of innocent civilians, and continued intimidation and threats. While Egypt has long been plagued by sectarianism left unresolved by the state, the security void that the country now witnesses gives rise to more attacks, increased tension, and a proliferation of the problem. Additionally, the rhetoric of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, Salafi groups, and some religious figures has become increasingly violent, inciting against minorities.

Since August 14, 2013, there have been over [200 attacks](#) recorded on homes, churches, stores, schools, and orphanages. Because the majority of such attacks take place outside of the capital, the information is slow to spread. As the security situation in Egypt is in constant flux, road safety and access continues to be limited, and xenophobia continues to impede the work of non-Egyptian journalists; eager reporters continue to have difficulty speaking to sources and being able to report on such attacks. With little coverage, even high profile attacks have been met with impunity, allowing perpetrators to go unpunished, investigations to remain incomplete, and victims to be unable to seek immediate help.

Although the majority of attacks have been targeted towards the country's Christian population, they are, by no means, the only victims of sectarianism in Egypt. Society and even arms of the State have heightened discrimination against the country's Bahai, Shia, and atheist populations. The problem of sectarianism is not one that only Egypt contends with. Countries across the Middle East have seen village clashes and large-scale violence committed against minority religious communities; the phenomenon of sectarianism continues to split apart families, deprive children of their parents, and deepen sources of inequity in countries like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Project Details

Eshhad is a platform that aggregates and collates sectarian attacks in Egypt. In addition to maintaining a database largely based on news-reports, Eshhad allows individuals to self-report sectarian attacks and/or violence via online submissions accessible with smartphones, mobile short codes, and newly-established applications like [UShahidi](#). In cases in which individuals self-report attacks, a team of volunteer researchers will independently verify the data. Eshhad is the Arabic word for "testify."

As a project that aggregates and collates sectarian attacks in a database, Eshhad seeks to address (1) the lack of reporting on sectarian events, (2) the refusal of the State and society to recognize sectarianism as a problematic phenomenon, and (3) the lack of accountability for events that take place with a sectarian motive. In light of the information vacuum that currently exists, the need for a platform like Eshhad is absolutely necessary to allow individuals to immediately report sectarian attacks in a coordinated and focused manner. While Twitter and Facebook have previously been used for these purposes, the information is often scattered, difficult to verify, and easily misused. Furthermore, many individuals fear the backlash and threats that come in repercussion of reporting attacks; an anonymous, but verifiable platform will give marginalized voices a protected space to do so. By using a crowd-sourcing platform like Eshhad, marginalized voices will be able to reach mainstream news in a much more efficient manner, thus forcing the State and local security to contend with reports and more efficiently provide resolutions. Furthermore, establishing a verified database will serve as an invaluable resource for policy and decisionmakers to produce relevant analysis and eventually suggest legislative reform to address the problems which are documented and thus, harder to ignore.

As an Egyptian-American who was raised with an in-depth awareness of the political and social nuances of Egyptian society, I have long recognized sectarianism as a problem. Having had the opportunity to study the Middle East at Stanford University, and later at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, I developed a wide-knowledge base in policy and foreign affairs. Now, as a law student focusing on international law, I have developed skills that pertain to the drafting of legislation and bringing litigation, ultimately endowing me with the knowledge-base necessary to build a database like the one proposed and the burden of proof involved herein.

At present, Eshhad will begin by focusing on Egypt; it will eventually expand to cover the entire Middle East. While Eshhad is not currently supported by other grants, I am currently meeting with a number of NGOs that focus on religious rights. Once the database is moved from its current temporary home at www.sectarianattacks.com and Eshhad is formally launched, ongoing costs will be minimal coming only from outreach, international phone calls, and annual website maintenance.

Proposed Activities

- Conduct meetings with relevant actors and institutions (including State Department and USAID, local and Egyptian-based NGOs working on human rights and religious rights, and academics)
- Register as a 501(c)(3) in the District of Columbia
- Hire a website developer to finalize and incorporate the existing database, which exists at www.sectarianattacks.com into a full-time, working website at www.Eshhad.org
- Launch the website with a formal press release to media & social media/email blasts
- Design promotional materials for launch of website and call for volunteers
- Recruit volunteers to input data & verify reports via university programs/student groups, NGO networks, social media communities around religious rights
- Train volunteers in the verification of sectarian events and the inputting of data into the website

Benchmarks and Indicators of Successful Implementation

- A network of supporters & advisers to provide feedback on website design and research strategy
- A Board of Directors (for advising purposes)
- A registered 501(c)(3) entity
- A website with pages for the database, self-reporting application, and analysis/bloggging
- A complete and functional database (integrated onto the website)
- A one-page promotional document & brochure about Eshhad
- A volunteer database and training guide