



**Woodrow Wilson
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*Project on Leadership and
Building State Capacity*



OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

What Really Works in Preventing and Rebuilding Failed States

Religious Responses to Conflict: Lessons Learned and Practical Strategies for Peacebuilding

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SUMMARY

- Religious responses to conflict have involved the invoking of religious ideals, beliefs, sentiments, and principles, as well as the engagement of particular religious leaders and traditions. These activities must be judged on the basis of their positive impacts on conflict.
- Holistic approaches to peacebuilding, combining political, diplomatic, and religious solutions to conflict, should be pursued.
- Collaboration between diplomats and government officials and local religious and community leaders is key. Religious leaders working on a national and international level are often ineffective without secular political peacemakers and international organizations. And because of their access to quiet, backchannel diplomacy and their ability to reach those whom others cannot, religious peacemakers are able to initiate a process and bring groups together when nobody else has been able to do so.
- Religious leaders can be effective peacemakers for various reasons: religion moves them to act and serves as a tool upon which to draw; they are connected to their communities, as opposed to staying for only a few years; and they have a perceived authority because of their stature as religious leaders.
- Religious leaders can bring antagonists together and mediate in part due to their ability to combine indigenous peacemaking techniques, Western conflict resolution methodologies, and their shared religious exhortations and sensitivities.
- During a war, people are despondent. The arrival of religious leaders sends a strong message to the people, who, irrespective of their faith, are seeking comfort, guidance, and support.
- An important lesson peacemakers can learn from religious leaders is that they “knew what they did not know.” They were aware of their ability to bring people together yet equally aware of their limitations in negotiating disarmament and ceasefires.
- For governments, interacting with religious leaders and religiously motivated peacemakers presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Mainstreaming religion can be difficult, and policymakers must determine how best to approach religious peacemakers—whether working to magnifying their work or simply getting out of their way.

What Really Works in Preventing and Rebuilding Failed States

ABOUT THE SERIES

This occasional paper is the fourth in a series titled, “What Really Works in Preventing and Rebuilding Failed States.” The series is based on a series of public forums held between 2006–2008 under the direction of Ambassador Howard Wolpe, director of the Project on Leadership and Building State Capacity at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The series aims to examine key thematic issues that affect conflict transformation in settings of weak and conflict-prone societies. This fourth occasional paper is based on a public forum that took place on, Thursday, March 13, 2008, at the Wilson Center, entitled, “Religious Responses to Conflict: Lessons Learned and Practical Strategies for Peacebuilding.” Michael Lund, consulting program manager to the Leadership Project and senior specialist for conflict and peacebuilding at Management Systems International Inc. (MSI) moderated the session. The publication was compiled and edited by Mathias Kjaer and Sarah Cussen of the Leadership Project.

Religious Responses to Conflict: Lessons Learned and Practical Strategies for Peacebuilding

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* The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

INTRODUCTION

Results Matter: The Search for an Integrated Approach to Peacebuilding by Michael Lund

There is an unfortunate tendency in Washington to promote one or another approach or strategy of intervention irrespective of empirical results. The situation can be likened to a kind of “policy bazaar” in which people tout various ideas but are rarely held accountable for showing observable impacts. Our series, “What Really Works in Preventing and Rebuilding Failed States?” seeks to remedy this situation and place advocacy up against actual analysis. It is borne out of the conviction that results matter—that it is not what we assume, what we hope, or what we intend, but ultimately, actual performance on the ground that should guide the approaches taken in a given context.

Extensive effort has been devoted since the end of the Cold War to gather knowledge about the causes and drivers of conflict. Numerous organizations, such as the United Nations or United States Agency for International Development, have provided significant funding for such studies and there is a general consensus that progress is being made. However, assessing the effectiveness of the various responses has received much less attention. It remains unclear what individual or strategic combination of approaches to resolving conflict may actually make a difference on the ground. It is evident that various mixtures of carrots and sticks, along with institution and relationship building, are needed, but their precise nature has not yet been sufficiently identified. This lack of knowledge about the ingredients of effective approaches to peacebuilding is the impetus behind our series and we have analyzed several approaches so far.

This publication will consider an approach to conflicts that has received significant attention. Religious responses to conflict have involved the invoking of religious ideals, beliefs, sentiments, and principles, as well as the engagement of particular religious figures and leaders. These activities must be judged on the basis of their positive impacts on conflict; that is to say, by their success in preventing, mitigating, or lessening conflict or strengthening the institutional capacities for dealing with it. This publication and the event on which it is based are not focused on religion as a source of conflict but rather as a potential ameliorator of conflict. Contributors were asked to provide evidence of the demonstrable impacts of the involvement of religious leaders or religion in some form on the prevention, attenuation, or resolution of specific conflicts. To help narrow the focus of the contributors, a series of sub-questions was provided to elicit various possible impacts: How does one define impact? On what scale and levels of conflict were religious influences effective? Which long-term sources or short-term drivers of conflicts did they affect? Were religious actors successful in mediating specific conflicts? Did they help foster some sort of peace settlement? Did they influence national political processes? Were religious actors successful in heading off violent confrontations or crises? Have religious peacemakers shaped the consciousness of certain religious communities that are on opposing sides of a conflict? Under what conditions are religious influences most effective?

In essence, contributors were asked if faith-based approaches are based on simply on the “faith” of their sponsors alone, or if there is actual evidence or plausible causal reasoning behind their claims of fostering peace. While the New Testament says, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9), it also says, “By their fruits, you shall know them” (Matthew 7:16).



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Peacemakers in Action: Unsung Heroes and Voices of Moderation

by Joyce S. Dubensky, Esq.



JOYCE S. DUBENSKY
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There is much talk today about religion or religious extremism, a phenomenon that crosses our different traditions. There is also talk about moderate religious voices and their potential for ameliorating violence.

The topic of religious responses to conflict is thus both timely and appropriate. The Religion and Conflict Resolution Program at the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding focuses on discovering ways of reducing violence and conflict by religious actors, who use religion constructively for peace. The program is premised on the assumption that there are religious voices of moderation across our traditions doing effective work in preventing, mitigating, and resolving violent conflict, and the conviction that the work of these individuals should be given greater consideration.

The book *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge 2007) aims to provide such consideration by highlighting the work of 16 courageous individuals. Although varied in their beliefs, approaches, and context, the book profiles religiously motivated individuals, not necessarily clergy, who are driven by their religious beliefs, working in areas of armed conflict, who are doing work that includes, although not exclusively, work at the grassroots level. Special consideration was given to men and women who are relatively unrecognized in the international media, not necessarily those negotiating the “paper peace” or formal settlements. These peacemakers are the unsung heroes, the informal Track II diplomats on the ground whose religion helps motivate them to risk their lives and freedom to try to overcome conflict at all levels.

Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution is a compilation of in-depth case studies, based on intensive interviews and detailed research on the conflicts in which the peacemakers were—and continue to be—involved. A detailed analysis of their techniques is depicted in an effort to explain how religion motivates these individuals and how they, in turn, utilize religion to mobilize and strive for peace. A general conclusion of the book is that moderate religious voices from all religious traditions can and do have a positive impact on conflict, and that their techniques and approaches can be replicated by others. To illustrate this point, three brief examples will be given of some of our notable peacemakers.

Ephraim Isaac is an Ethiopian Yemenite Jew. He speaks 17 languages, and is the embodiment of a Track II diplomat. His work is focused on intervening in and trying to prevent conflict in Ethiopia, though his base is the United States where he spends a great deal of his time. During the contested national elections in May 2005, when there were widespread concerns of vote-rigging and fraud, there was a violent protest with over 200 people killed and over 1,000 opposition members jailed, many for life. Ephraim immediately sprang into action to try to resolve the tensions that were erupting in his country.

One strategy employed by Ephraim during the protests, which has gained him significant credibility, was to convene a “Council of the Elders.” In customary Ethiopian society, elders are the traditional secular and religious leaders of their local communities. They are revered for their wisdom and spirit of forgiveness, and are widely regarded as credible arbitrators of conflict. As the leader of the Council of the Elders, Ephraim employed a form of “shuttle diplomacy,” going back and forth from the jailed opposition leaders and the prime minister. His dedication was eventually rewarded and it was Ephraim and the Council, not the pressure of the international community, which ultimately resolved the crisis. Thirty-eight of the opposition leaders were released on the condition that they would take some responsibility for inciting the protests. Once they issued their apologies, the leaders were allowed back into political life and some semblance of normalcy began to return to everyday life. This story is an illustrative example of religious and community leaders utilizing quiet, backchannel diplomacy to reduce hostilities and promote reconciliation in place of excessive jail sentences and escalating tensions.

Sakena Yacoobi, an Afghan Muslim woman who taught literacy to women during the reign of the repressive Taliban, is another Peacemaker in Action. She taught literacy through the Qur’an, thereby circumventing the Taliban’s restrictive legal measures against the education of women. This was possible because Sakena is a pious woman whose work is built around teaching scripture. In addition to

basic literary, Sakena used the religious text to teach human rights, peace education, and respect for women. Once a basic foundation was laid among her pupils, Sakena focused on discovering ways of transferring her teachings to the local community and the women's personal lives. Through her efforts, Sakena was therefore able to affect the consciousness of an entire community and help to establish the groundwork for a more stable society. Today, she reaches 350,000 women and children, and she continues her work despite ongoing risks to her own safety. What makes Sakena unique is that she is able to reach those whom others cannot, working at several levels of conflict, from prevention to mitigation, in the hope of building a more stable peace in Afghanistan.

Friar Ivo Markovic presents another dramatic story. A Franciscan Friar from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Friar Markovic was able to overcome extraordinary personal loss and use his religion to spread the message of peace. One day, while performing peace work, Friar Markovic got a call informing him that his father and uncle had been murdered and his home destroyed. Friar Markovic relayed how the news plunged him into the depths of depression and self-blame, thinking that if he had been home he could have somehow prevented this terrible tragedy. However, rather than succumbing to his circumstances, Friar Markovic persevered and surrendered himself to his religion and commitment to peace work.

Friar Markovic carried out his conviction in numerous ways. One striking example occurred shortly before an imminent battle between two sides, when Markovic, in full religious attire, marched between two groups of armed adversaries toward a predominantly Muslim village. Somebody pointed a gun at him, and ordered, "Stop or I'll shoot!" Friar Markovic responded, "What? You're going to shoot me, you idiot?" He continued into the village and found the local Imam. The two religious leaders consulted and decided something had to be done to "stop this craziness." Together, the two leaders went out of the village and went to speak to the commanders. They got them to agree to a ceasefire. That day, no fighting took place and nobody was hurt or killed.

Friar Ivo Markovic is truly a hero. He overcame dramatic personal loss, remained true to his convictions, and dedicated his life to the pursuit of peace. Friar Ivo Markovic continues his work to this day, working, among other things, to promote post-conflict reconciliation and to build interreligious understanding. One of his current projects is organizing an interfaith international choir that travels the world spreading the message of reconciliation and forgiveness.

These are just three brief examples of the peacemakers highlighted in this book. While their techniques are unique to each individual, they are nevertheless replicable. There are several factors that explain the effectiveness of these leaders. One is that religion so permeates their lives. It is part of what moves them to act and very often is a tool upon which they draw. Another factor is that these peacemakers remain involved in their communities. They are connected to their communities, not simply coming for just two years and then leaving. They are authentic and fair, and they have a perceived authority in part because of their stature as religious leaders.

Finally, it is important to note that these peacemakers share certain common personal qualities. When they look at another person they see humanity. When they see an injustice, they cannot separate from it and are driven to correct it. Their emotional intelligence is extraordinarily high. Their empathy and capacity for experiencing the pain of the other is extraordinary. Unlike others who run from the horrible and the painful, they run toward it, feeling that they must do something to stop the injustice. It is a compulsion, one that helps them overcome the challenges and the difficulties of their work. Religious peacemakers are people from whom we can learn. More importantly, our diplomats and government officials need to collaborate with them. They serve as powerful resources, and they are necessary partners in stabilizing war-torn communities. As such, it is time for them to be recognized by our diplomatic corps.

Peacemakers in Action are remarkable men and women. They offer us reasons to hope.

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—Joyce S. Dubensky

Lessons in Forgiveness, Understanding, and Humility

by David Smock



DAVID SMOCK

Vice President, Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution, and Associate Vice President, Religion and Peacemaking Program, United States Institute of Peace

The Religion and Peacemaking Program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) often consults religious peacemakers in our peacebuilding efforts, believing that these individuals teach us important lessons in forgiveness, understanding, and humility. These are lessons that have wide application.

Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, both from Nigeria, have been close partners of USIP for the last four years and have worked with USIP on a range of projects. Probably the most informative and dramatic instance occurred in Yelwa in the Plateau State of Nigeria three years ago. One thousand people had been killed in outbreaks of interreligious violence. In the course of a week, despite the repeated intervention of the local police force fearful of renewed outbreaks of violence, the religious leaders were able to bring the antagonists together and mediate a peace settlement that continues to endure. The religious leaders were successful in this endeavor because of their particular methodology and techniques of mediation. One methodology of note included combining indigenous Nigerian peacemaking techniques, Western conflict resolution methodologies, and their shared religious exhortations and sensitivities. One of the most striking moments in Yelwa was when Ashafa quoted passages from the Bible and James responded with verses from the Qur'an in an effort to persuade the people of Yelwa to make peace and to live together in interreligious accord. The emphasis on forgiveness and understanding are, time and again, two of the hallmarks of religious peacemaking.

Rabbi Menachem Froman, the chief Rabbi of the Tekoa settlement in the West Bank, is another notable peacemaker. There are many stories to be told about this eccentric but effective peacemaker. When Sheikh Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, was imprisoned in Israel, Rabbi Menachem visited him regularly and the two established a bond of friendship based on their shared religiosity—one Jewish, the other Muslim. Setting aside their social and political differences, the two religious leaders were able to forge a common bond and respect each other as people of faith and people of the book. More recently, Menachem has been in touch with the Hamas leadership in Gaza and offered to be a communication channel to the Israeli government. Unfortunately, the Israeli government has not taken up the offer at present.

Almost three years ago, USIP, with support from Catholic University and the International Center for Religion, co-hosted a visit of nine Iranian religious leaders to the United States. The group was comprised of seven Muslims, a Christian, and a Jew. Originally, it had been planned that the group would meet with members of Congress to discuss several of the political issues dividing the two countries. However, the Iranians objected to the meeting and refused to go to any political offices in Washington. An impromptu meeting was arranged at the National Prayer Center on Capitol Hill and nine members of Congress were incidentally invited to join the meeting. The Iranian religious leaders welcomed the idea as long as the meeting was held within a religious context. Satisfied that the members of Congress were there as religious observers, the two groups were able to discuss all of the planned political issues dividing the US and Iran.

Although his work is too recent to be included in the Tanenbaum Center's book, Azhar Hussein is another noteworthy "peacemaker in action." USIP has worked in close partnership with Azhar and his office, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, in Afghanistan and particularly Pakistan. The work focuses on partnering with local ulama to introduce new peace study materials that emphasize peace, tolerance, and pluralism in madrassas, so often discredited as hot beds of radicalism. Our work has revealed that there was, and continues to be, an enormous hunger on the part of madrasa administrators and students for new peacemaking materials.

Canon Andrew White, an Anglican priest from the UK, is someone that USIP has worked with in Israel and Palestine and currently in Iraq. He is currently running a conference in

Cairo that brings together Shiite and Sunni Muslims along with Christians and other religious minorities. Through these conferences, Sunnis and Shiites are preparing fatwas that can be issued by their highest clerics to emphasize the need for peace and condemn sectarian killing. While it is still too early to determine its success, these fatwas are a welcomed development in Iraq. The fact that religious leaders from both sides of the religious conflict in Iraq will meet together, and work together towards common statements with the authority of fatwas behind them, is a significant accomplishment and a marker of progress by itself.

Sant'Egidio's work in Mozambique is probably the most frequently cited example of religious peacemaking, and several related lessons can be drawn from their work. One is that if religious leaders are working on a national and international level, they are often ineffective in building peace on their own. They need to collaborate with secular political peacemakers and international organizations. Religious organizations gain their strength from their ability to bring people together, especially those that have previously been unwilling to come together. Sant'Egidio was able to achieve such collaboration with RENAMO (the Mozambican National Resistance Party) and the government of Mozambique. The Lutheran and Catholic Churches accomplished a similar feat in Guatemala. In both cases the United Nations and State Department got involved, and were probably the more important players in actually mediating the peace agreement, but it was the religious communities that were able to initiate the process and bring groups together when nobody else had been able to do so.

A second lesson, related to the first, was that these religious communities “knew what they did not know.” They were aware of their ability to bring people together yet equally aware of their limitations in negotiating disarmament and ceasefires. They were comfortable allocating such activities to other experts; that is one of the central lessons that religious peacemakers can teach us—to recognize the limit of our expertise and to be comfortable with turning to outsiders for support.

The final story that I would like to share relates to a week-long visit of five Saudi scholars that I was asked to organize by the Saudi Embassy three years ago. I accepted the task under the sole condition that I be allowed to dictate both the itinerary and topics to be discussed. The embassy agreed and a series of day-long meetings was arranged—with American Muslim intellectuals, with Christian leaders, and with Jewish leaders. The meetings with the Muslims and the Christians were of moderate interest. However, exaggerated civility and efforts to establish a shared humanity rendered the discussion cursory and the groups did not have the opportunity to address the harder issues. The Jewish rabbis, on the other hand, had no trouble getting to the hard issues. With civility and respect from both sides, the groups discussed anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, whether Saudis were able to criticize the Israeli government without being anti-Semitic, and whether the Saudis would be willing to accept the existence of a Jewish state in the Middle East. It was an eye-opening experience and helped illustrate that what look like the most contentious or volatile confrontations can often turn out to be the most productive.

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—David Smock

Not All Are Superheroes: Recognizing the Humanity of Religious Peacemakers

by Betty Oyella Bigombe



BETTY OYELLA BIGOMBE

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Religion has influenced my career in a number of ways. It has brought comfort in times of fear, guidance in times of doubt, and strength in times of trial. Through my involvement in the Ugandan peace process, I have gained valuable insight into the nature of religious peacemakers. I have been able to witness their fears and the way they work. On the one hand, religious peacemakers bring a unifying message, one that emphasizes unity in times of difficulty and shared suffering. On the other, religious peacemakers are in the end people themselves, with the same fears, worries, and anxieties as the rest of us.

In terms of my own religiosity, I do not consider myself a fanatic or zealot but rather an ordinary Christian with strong beliefs. When I was told that I was going to move to the conflict area in Northern Uganda and try to end the war by peaceful means, a terrible fear set in and I prayed that the president would forget about his request. Finally, the realization set in that I would have to carry out this mission and I turned to prayer to find comfort and focus. Through prayer I was able to recognize my newfound calling. If my effort would prevent the destruction I witnessed all around, then I had a duty to carry out this mission. Upon this realization, a great calm fell upon me and I prepared myself for the challenges of living in a war zone without any experience in dealing with war situations.

Throughout the process of trying to end the conflict, I had to move around internally displaced camps where people were living in squalid conditions surrounded by destruction. These journeys were never easy and we were constantly afraid of ambush. The roads to these camps were often nonexistent and always carried the threat of landmines. On one occasion, landmines intended for me blew up the car immediately ahead of mine in the convoy. It is difficult to describe the silence that befalls you when you witness such brutality. There is a tremendous sense of loneliness as you realize your own vulnerability and the phrase “every man for himself and God for us all” comes to mind. It is a personal experience, a moment in time in which, even if you were a “church dropout,” you call upon God: “It’s only you now. I’m in your hands, nothing else—nobody else can save me from this situation.”

However, religion can also be manipulated and corrupted. I witnessed firsthand such manipulation during my dealings with the Lord’s Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony. Kony’s followers were often children who had been abducted and turned into killing machines. I talked to them and saw how they were transformed from innocent children to brutal killers, achieving position and rank through pillage and murder. Such were the methods by which you earned your food, clothes, and rewards with some of the girls who had been abducted as sex slaves. Brutality simply became a way of life. It is difficult to understand how Kony has been able to convince his followers of his divine power despite his cruelty, but such was the extent of his manipulation. Even during interviews thousands of miles away from Kony, his followers continued to believe that he had the power to hear what they were saying about him. Perhaps this helps explain why Joseph Kony, in his craziness and brutality, has never had any substantial challenges to his rule. His followers dare not question anything he does. Sometimes I have asked his commanders and the children around him, “why is it that you believe that he has these supernatural powers, and yet, at the same time you are told to go and kill in the most brutal manner or to maim people before they are killed?” Most often, their response was simple and direct: “out of fear.”

When I was young, before I became involved in conflict resolution, I called religious leaders “supermen” and believed that they had no fear. When I eventually agreed to meet with Joseph Kony and other rebel leaders, I was faced with the question of who I should take with me, because their lives would be at risk. I decided that since Kony was a religious fanatic, I would ask religious leaders to accompany me to the negotiations. I went to an Anglican Bishop, a Catholic Bishop, and a Muslim leader to ask for their support. Later, when I arranged to have them picked up early in the morning, one suddenly developed diarrhea, the other developed malaria, and the third said

“God is with you. We will pray for you. It is time that peace comes.” I realized then that we are all human beings—that in times of difficulty and danger, religious leaders have exactly the same fears and worries as we do.

During a war, people are despondent. There is moral degeneration, and community conflict exists within the wider conflict. The arrival of religious leaders sends a strong message to the people. They stop looking at one another through different lenses. Religious leaders can stand by their side and with one voice, bring people together and try to provide protection. Not only that, but warring factions actually tend to listen to them as well.

Religious leaders can be more effective than secular leaders because they are believed to have no political agenda. Their interest is solely in bringing peace. I have witnessed this personally and noticed the difference that it made. I saw that people in difficulty always went to religious leaders, irrespective of which faith, to provide comfort, guidance, and support.

As peace looms, there is now the challenge of reconciliation. Unfortunately, the situation in Uganda is extremely complex. Repeatedly, boys were abducted from their villages and told to go back and kill either a member of their own community or a member of their family; girls (many of them as young as 14) have been abducted, turned into wives, and then return with children. The rebels abducted, killed, raped, and maimed members of neighboring tribes. And government troops have unleashed equally horrifying atrocities against the innocent population they were supposed to protect.

Religious leaders have a large role to play in the reconciliation process because they live in these communities. During the conflict, they tried to unite the communities and tried to provide counseling. It is these leaders who will have to bring people back together again. However, reconciliation is a process and does not happen overnight. War trauma is personal and dramatic. Those who have witnessed the butchering of their families will not learn to forgive simply by having passages from the bible preached to them. Forgiveness is based on how they feel and how they learn to deal with living side by side with their former enemies. Religious leaders have a comparative advantage in working with their communities to encourage reconciliation and forgiveness, and we will have to turn to their guidance to build a lasting peace.

“During a war, people are despondent. There is moral degeneration, and community conflict exists within the wider conflict. The arrival of religious leaders sends a strong message to the people.”

—Betty Bigombe

The Role of the US Government and its Responses to Religious Conflict

by Deborah Schneider



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Religion is a vital consideration in many aspects of US foreign policy, from the promotion of religious freedom to the analysis of political and social issues, global security, conflict resolution, and outreach to religious communities. The Office of International Religious Freedom at the Department of State is deeply involved in these issues and believes in the utility of religious responses to conflict. Religious language can provide a critical lens for interpreting and resolving social conflicts, even for those rooted in secular origins. Religious communities often act as the bellwethers of the larger communal response to conflict.

Religiously motivated individuals have extraordinary power and play a critical role in the resolution of conflict. Religion holds a primacy in people's lives and influences them in a variety of ways, whether personally, socially, culturally, or politically. For those charged with achieving diplomatic solutions to conflicts around the world, religious leaders and religiously motivated peacemakers present both an opportunity and a challenge. Policymakers are challenged with determining how to approach these religious peacemakers, who possess such influence and respect. Should they work to magnify the effect of the work of religious leaders and peacemakers? Should they safeguard the conditions needed for the peacemakers to do their work? Or should policymakers simply get out of the peacemakers' way?

The passage by Congress of the International Religious Freedom Act, in 1998, made the promotion of religious freedom a central US policy goal. Religious freedom is a cornerstone for many issues, including security, and the absence of religious freedom can be profoundly destabilizing around the world. Repressing the rights of one group or imposing one's religious doctrine on all sows the seeds for fierce political conflict. US policy has thus been dedicated to the opening of political forums to religious thought and discourse, protecting the diversity that makes it more difficult to corner the market on religion.

Evidence indicates that religious affiliation is growing around the world. Sociologist Peter Berger used to declare the waning of religiosity. He now insists that the world today is "as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever." Global polling indicates a growth in religious affiliation, and in the desire of religious leaders to become more involved in politics. As purported by Tom Farr, the former director of our office, studies in religious demography have indicated that even with conservative estimates of conversions and defections, in 200 years, 80 percent of the world's population will be affiliated with religious visions of the world.

Dealing with states that do not respect religious freedom or resist the trend towards greater religiosity presents a complex diplomatic challenge. Paul Marshall of the Hudson Institute recently released a report on world trends in religious freedom, in which he showed that violations of religious freedom worldwide are massive, widespread, and in many parts of the world intensifying. In too many cases, these violations lead to religious believers being imprisoned, physically abused, or killed, simply for the courage of their convictions.

What can be done in response to these adversities? The State Department can work both bilaterally and multilaterally. One of the questions often asked is whether the State Department's commitment to religious freedom is simply an attempt to export an American value. In fact, the State Department relies heavily on international standards. It works in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Specifically, the Office of International Religious Freedom engages in a wide range of activities to promote and to implement US foreign policy on religious freedom. Office experts work either directly on negotiations with foreign officials or in coordination with other bureaus in the State Department and all US embassies and consulates abroad to advocate for actions such as policy changes, prisoner releases, reporting and monitoring on situations, and to look for technical assistance when needed.

More broadly speaking, the State Department holds that freedom of religion is intricately intertwined with all of the other universal human rights. Freedom of religion encompasses freedom of association, speech, assembly, and conscience, all of the rights which together form the foundation for respect for the individual and democratic governance. So as the US government works to protect and promote these rights abroad, it recognizes that religious leaders, NGOs, and religiously motivated peacekeepers are invaluable allies in the effort to accomplish those goals. When religiously motivated peacemakers delve into spiritual texts and practices to try to uncover some constructive responses to conflict, drawing from their stores of empathy, humility, and compassion, they can really shape the community's response to a conflict.

Religious leaders also have an important role to play in condemning terrorism, which has torn hundreds of innocent victims of all races and creeds from their families in places around the world. Examples of religious leaders reaching across the boundaries of communities in Israel, Iraq, and Afghanistan serve as important reminders that holistic approaches to peacebuilding should be pursued—ones that look for political, diplomatic, and religious solutions to conflict and tragedy.

NGOs, like the Tanenbaum Center, can play a vital role in US efforts in conflict resolution and post-conflict stabilization. With their access to unofficial actors and institutions, NGOs provide much-needed feedback for diplomatic efforts. In turn, the State Department often raises local issues at a diplomatic level, advocating for NGOs when local activists' concerns are stymied domestically. The State Department recognizes that NGOs, international and local, are important to the development of a healthy civil society, which is essential to conflict resolution. So the State Department and the US Agency for International Development have made capacity-building support for local civic activists a mainstay of their foreign assistance.

Other State Department programs also support these goals, giving NGOs the foundation and resources they need to engage effectively. Many of the State Department's exchange, study, and visitor programs support advocates of nonviolence and encourage religious dialogue and tolerance. The State Department offers technical assistance to new democracies dealing with religious issues. In Afghanistan, the State Department supported a women's radio program that discusses human rights and democratic values within the context of Islam and also sponsored a conference focusing on the role of religious leaders in the modernization and development of the country.

Mainstreaming religion is probably one of the greatest challenges at the State Department. Our office provides extensive training, and we are joined in this goal by the Foreign Service Institute, which has continually tried to update its training and has recently introduced a new course on Islam in Iraq that brings up issues of regionalism, sectarian loyalty, political affiliations, and class. Looking around the world, US ambassadors have a mandate to promote religious freedom. However, the US government's work would be incomplete and misinformed without a close partnership with NGOs, religious groups, and individuals committed to defending individual human rights and utilizing religion as a means to solve conflicts.

"Examples of religious leaders reaching across the boundaries of communities in Israel, Iraq, and Afghanistan serve as important reminders that holistic approaches to peacebuilding should be pursued—ones that look for political, diplomatic, and religious solutions to conflict and tragedy."

—Deborah Schneider

ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP PROJECT

The Project on Leadership and Building State Capacity, launched in June 2005, expands upon the work of the former Conflict Prevention Project and responds to the growing demand for leadership training directed at both the prevention of violent conflict and the reconstruction of war-torn societies.

There is an emerging awareness of the importance of leadership training in achieving sustainable peace. On a technical level, the art of building democratic state capacity is well understood. But the harder political task—helping the leaders of warring factions achieve their objectives, to work collaboratively in avoiding war or supporting postwar reconstruction and to build democratically accountable links between the governors and the governed—requires a careful examination of the underappreciated “leadership factor” in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.

Under the leadership of former Congressman and Presidential Special Envoy Howard Wolpe, the Leadership Project seeks to promote more sustainable approaches to international conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction, first, by conducting in-country training programs designed to strengthen the trust, communication, and negotiation skills among key leaders in countries under stress or emerging from violent conflict; and, second, by stimulating analysis and discussion of ways to achieve more effective and holistic strategies for peacebuilding and strengthening state capacity.

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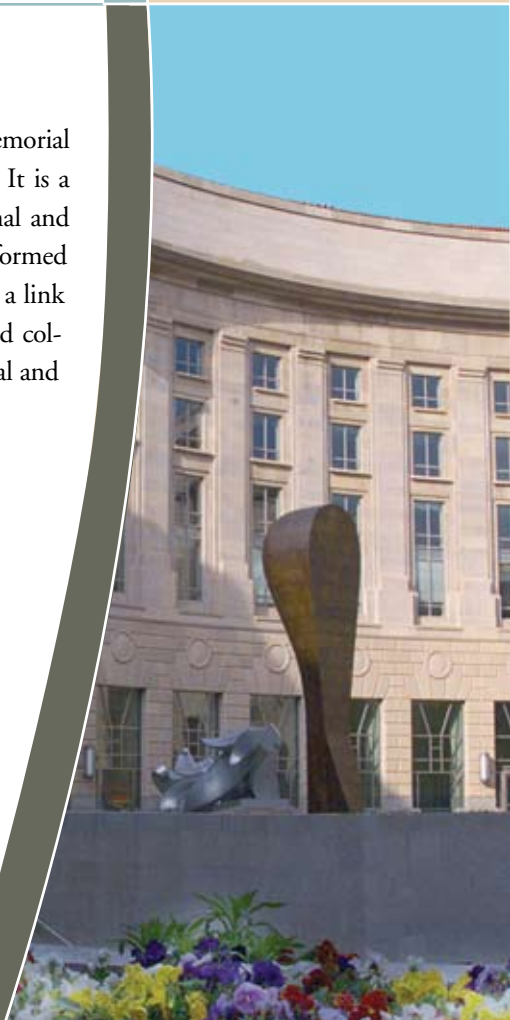
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