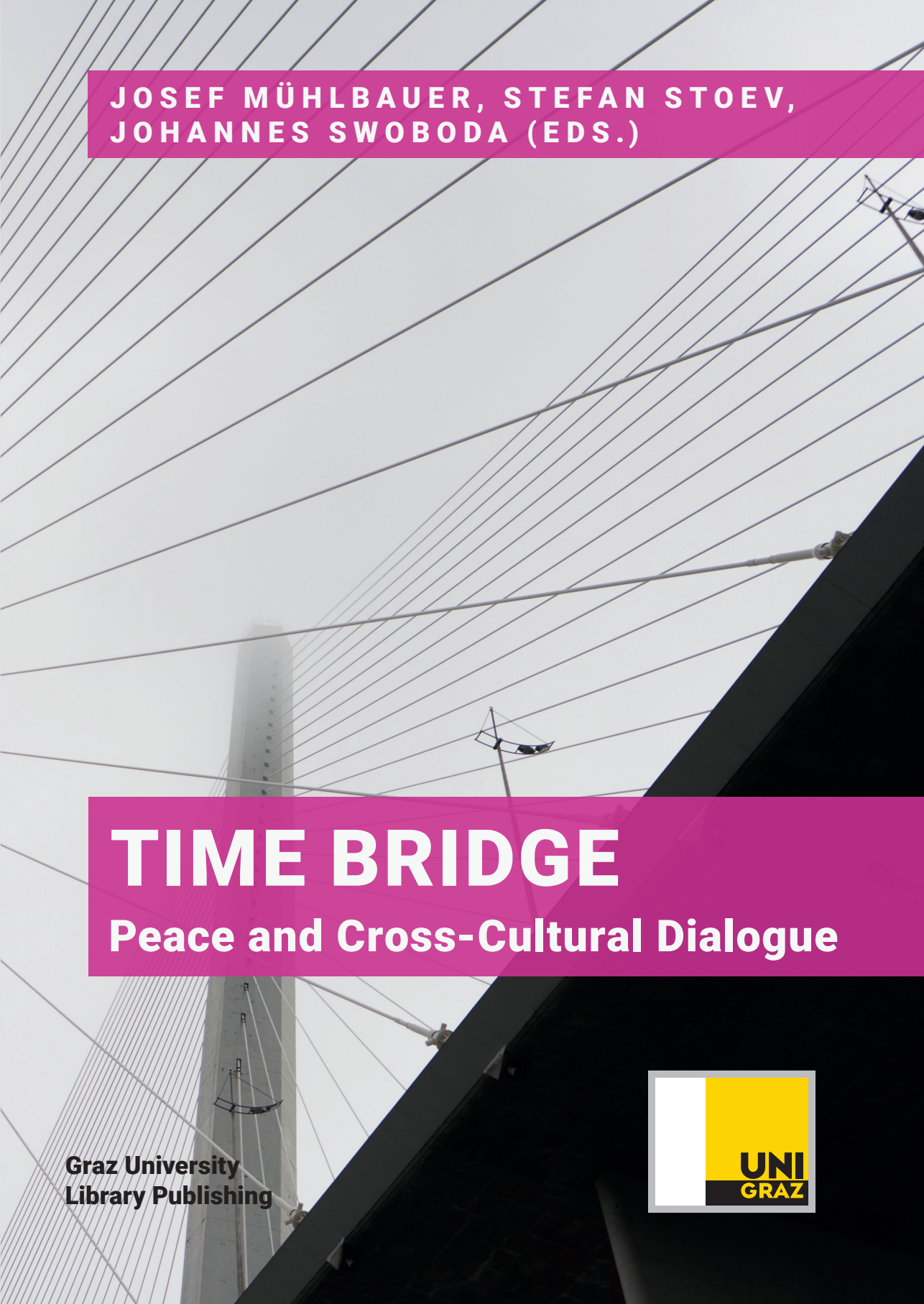
JOSEF MÜHLBAUER, STEFAN STOEV,
JOHANNES SWOBODA (EDS.)



TIME BRIDGE

Peace and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Graz University
Library Publishing

UNI GRAZ

Josef Mühlbauer, Stefan Stoev, Johannes Swoboda

Time Bridge. Peace and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

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Preface: Zeitbrücke after 20 Years

Returning to Washington

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Zusammenfassung

20 Jahre später – Die Rückkehr nach Washington verbindet persönliche Erinnerung mit gesellschaftspolitischer Reflexion. Zwanzig Jahre nach seinem Gedenkdienst am United States Holocaust Memorial Museum kehrt der Autor des Buches Zeitbrücke namens Stefan Stoev mit seinen Söhnen nach Washington zurück. Die Reise wird zu einer Begegnung zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart und eröffnet einen intergenerationellen Dialog über Holocaust-Erinnerung, historische Verantwortung und die Bedeutung von Menschenrechten. Zugleich reflektiert der Text aktuelle Herausforderungen wie politische Polarisierung, Populismus, Krieg, Migration und Klimakrise. Zeitbrücke steht dabei als Metapher für die Verbindung von Generationen, Kulturen und historischen Erfahrungen. Erinnerung erscheint nicht nur als Rückblick, sondern als Verantwortung und Grundlage für die Gestaltung einer demokratischen und menschlichen Zukunft.

Schlagwörter: Gedenkdienst, Intergenerationeller Dialog, Historische Verantwortung, Holocaust

Abstract

20 Years Later – Returning to Washington combines personal remembrance with socio-political reflection. Twenty years after completing his commemorative service at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the author Stefan Stoev returns to Washington with his two sons. The journey becomes an encounter between past and present and opens an intergenerational dialogue on Holocaust remembrance, historical responsibility, and the significance of human rights. At the same time, the narrative reflects on contemporary challenges including political polarization, populism, war, migration, and the climate crisis. Zeitbrücke serves as a metaphor connecting generations, cultures, and historical experiences. Remembrance is presented not merely as a reflection on the past, but as a responsibility and a foundation for shaping a democratic and humane future.

Keywords: Holocaust remembrance, intergenerational dialogue, historical responsibility, Holocaust

Zeitbrücke: A Journey Through Time

It was a sunny day in March 2026 when I arrived in Washington, D.C., with my two sons, Theo and Emil. Theo, the older of the two, was turning 20 that year, while Emil was 14. The city I had first encountered two decades earlier as a young Austrian commemorative-service volunteer welcomed us with the familiar charm of spring. The cherry blossoms of the Cherry Blossom Festival painted the streets in delicate shades of pink, while the air carried a mixture of anticipation and melancholy.

It was the second term of President Donald Trump, and the political atmosphere in the United States was tense. Yet for me, this journey was above all a return to the places that had shaped my life.

The journey began at a house at 15th Street and Corcoran. As we stood in front of the brick house at the corner of 15th Street and Corcoran, I was overwhelmed by a wave of memories. This was where I had moved into my first apartment in Washington in 2004—a small, modest flat on the third floor that, at the time, looked more like a construction site than a home. The rusty pipes, the broken toilet, the tiny kitchen—I had renovated all of it with my own hands, trying to create a small sense of home for myself. Back then, I was a young Austrian, far away from everything familiar, searching for meaning and a sense of responsibility. Theo, who was looking curiously at the façade of the building, asked, "Dad, did you really live here for a whole year?" I nodded and told him about those first days: how I had arrived with two heavily packed suitcases, how the heat and humidity of Washington had initially overwhelmed me, and how, little by little, I found my way around this unfamiliar yet fascinating city. Emil, the younger of the two, was more interested in the stories about the Amish families whose craft shops we had passed on our way there. "They live like they did 200 years ago!" he exclaimed excitedly. I smiled. Yes, the United States was a country of contrasts—between tradition and modernity, poverty and wealth, hope and despair.

The house on 15th Street was more than simply a place to live. It was a symbol of a new beginning. Here, I had learned to live independently, made my first friendships in Washington, and begun to understand the history of the Holocaust not merely as an abstract body of knowledge, but as a living memory. As we continued walking, I showed my sons Dupont Circle, just a few minutes away. "This is where we used to sit with friends, talk, debate, and laugh," I told them. "And over there, in that direction, is Georgetown—one of Washington's historic neighborhoods." Theo, who was already developing a keen interest in history, was

fascinated. Emil, meanwhile, had a more practical question: “And where can we get the best ice cream around here?”

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM): A Place of Remembrance and Transformation

Our next stop was the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. As we approached the imposing building, I once again felt that strange mixture of reverence and unease that had accompanied me during my first visit in 2004.

At the time, I had worked there as a commemorative-service volunteer in the Historical Research Department, under the direction of Dr. Peter Black, and had been part of a team dedicated to researching and documenting the history of the Holocaust.

In the twenty years since my service, the museum had continued to evolve. The permanent exhibition had been modernized, while new technologies—including interactive survivor testimonies and virtual reality—offered visitors more immersive ways of engaging with history.

Yet the heart of the museum remained unchanged: the Hall of Remembrance, with its eternal flame and the names of the concentration camps. I remembered sitting here many times during my year of service, reflecting in the silence of this limestone-framed space.

Theo was particularly moved by the children's exhibition “Daniel’s Story,” which tells the story of an eight-year-old boy who survived the Holocaust.

“It’s almost like a diary,” he whispered.

I nodded.

Yes, in a way, that was precisely what it was.

And that was also the purpose of this place: to ensure that the stories of the victims would not be forgotten. Emil, however, was fascinated by the flags of the liberating armies, which stood in orderly rows at the entrance to the museum. “They look like soldiers,” he said. I explained to him that each flag represented an army that had participated in the liberation of the concentration camps—the Americans, British, Soviets, French, and others. “This was a moment when the world stood together to put an end to injustice,” I added.

As we walked through the exhibitions, I found myself thinking about the many Holocaust survivors and witnesses to history with whom I had worked during my

time there. Hedi Pope, who had told me about her escape from Vienna. Charles Stein, who had been forced to flee the Nazis as a medical student. Gerald Schwab, who had served as an interpreter during the Nuremberg Trials. And Felix Yokel, who had told me about his life in Laa an der Thaya and his escape to Palestine. "Of all the survivors and witnesses with whom we worked on the book 'Zeitbrücke' back then, not a single one was still alive," I had noted in my brief report in 2026. It was true. Most of them had died over the preceding two decades. Yet their stories lived on—in books, in archives, and in the memories of those who had known them.

Zeitbrücke – A Bridge Between Generations

During my commemorative service in 2004–2005, I decided to document my experiences in a book. Zeitbrücke – Generationskontakte, Geschichtseinblicke, Freundschaften (Time Bridge – Intergenerational Encounters, Historical Insights, Friendships) was intended to be more than a collection of reports. I wanted it to serve as a platform for communication between generations. My aim was to connect the voices of Holocaust survivors with the questions, reflections, and experiences of young people like myself.

The idea took shape during my time at the USHMM. I had met so many remarkable people—survivors, historians, and volunteers—and I felt that their stories deserved to be preserved.

Several encounters were particularly formative:

My conversations with Dr. Peter Black, who supported me not only as my supervisor but also as a mentor.

My friendship with Vadim Altskan, a colleague in the archives with whom I spent countless hours discussing history, art, and politics.

My encounters with Austrian émigrés, including Susanna and Felix Yokel, who welcomed me as if I were a member of their family.

I still remember the moment I first met Felix Yokel. He was one of the many Austrian Jews who had been forced to flee the Nazis in the 1930s. His life had been an extraordinary journey—from Laa an der Thaya to Prague, then to Palestine, and eventually to the United States.

Yet despite all the hardships he had endured, he had remained a person of great warmth and humor.

"We never completely lost our connection to Austria," he had told me at the time. "Even though we had to leave, the country remains in our hearts."

His words deeply moved me. They were also one of the reasons I decided to write the book.

The book was divided into several chapters, each exploring different aspects of my commemorative service and my work at the USHMM:

- Active Remembrance – On the significance of cultures of remembrance and the role of commemorative service.
- A 360° Tour Through the Museum – An insight into the work of the Historical Research Department.
- Commemorative-Service Volunteers Have Many Friends – Accounts of encounters with survivors and émigrés.
- What a Person Knows of Themselves Is Their Reflection – Personal reflections on confronting the past.
- Journey into the Past – Reflections – Stories of survivors I had come to know.
- Connections – On the relationship between history, politics, and personal engagement.
- Returning to Austria – Reflections on returning home and passing on what I had learned.

Each chapter contained not only my own observations but also contributions from survivors, colleagues, and friends. In this way, the book became a mosaic of perspectives—a collage of memories illustrating how the past continues to shape the present.

The Role of Art and Culture

It was particularly important to me to include the cultural dimensions of my time in Washington. I had not only worked there; I had also visited art exhibitions, participated in discussions, and formed friendships with artists. One of them was Kurt Heinrich, a former Viennese who worked as a chemist but was also a passionate painter in his spare time. Kurt and I shared a special connection: we both loved art, and we both felt a deep connection to Austria. One day, we decided to organize an exhibition at St. Thomas Parish Church. Kurt presented several of his works, while I contributed some of my own drawings. The exhibition was a success—not merely because the artworks were well received, but because it created a bridge between generations and cultures. "Art can be a language that goes

beyond words," Kurt once told me. And that was precisely what I wanted to capture in Zeitbrücke: the idea that memory is transmitted not only through facts, but also through emotions, stories, and creative forms of expression.

As I walked through the USHMM with my sons in 2026, I often found myself thinking back to the words I had written in Zeitbrücke. In particular, I remembered a sentence by Christoph Meran, which appeared in the book's foreword:

"Commemorative service sharpens our sensitivity to every form of discrimination and exclusion and encourages resistance to dangerous political movements."

These words seemed more relevant than ever.

At a time when populism, nationalism, and xenophobia were once again gaining ground, it was more important than ever to remember the lessons of history.

Zeitbrücke was therefore not merely a personal reflection on the past. It was also a call to responsibility.

The Political Landscape in 2026: Trump, Iran, and the World

As we left the museum, we saw a large crowd gathered on the National Mall. A demonstration by supporters of Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's last Shah, had assembled there. Tensions in the Middle East had escalated again in recent years, and members of the Iranian diaspora were using the opportunity to call for democracy and human rights in their homeland.

The United States under President Donald Trump was (and is still) a country of extremes (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch 2024). On the one hand, his policies had strengthened the economic position of many Americans—the unemployment rate was low and the stock markets were thriving. On the other hand, his polarizing rhetoric had deeply divided American society. The Black Lives Matter movement had regained momentum, while debates over racism, immigration, and social justice dominated public discourse. Theo, who had already developed an interest in politics, asked me: "Dad, why is Trump so controversial?" I tried to give him a neutral answer: "He has reached many people who feel that they are not represented by the political establishment. But his way of conducting politics has also fueled many fears and conflicts." Emil, who was less interested in politics than in the protests taking place around us, asked: "And why are they protesting?" I explained that the demonstrations concerned the future of Iran. "Reza Pahlavi is

the son of the last Shah. Many Iranians hope that he might offer a democratic alternative to the current regime."

In the twenty years since my commemorative service, the world had changed profoundly: Europe was grappling with the rise of right-wing populist parties and with the question of how to address migration and integration. The Middle East remained a powder keg—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to simmer, while Iran remained at the center of international tensions. Asia had continued to develop economically and politically, while Africa continued to struggle with poverty, conflict, and climate change. The climate crisis had become one of humanity's most urgent challenges. Yet despite all these changes, certain constants remained: the power of remembrance, the importance of human rights, and the necessity of learning from history.

We were invited to dinner at the home of Vadim Altskan and his wife, Ljudmila. Vadim was one of the people I had met during my commemorative service and with whom I had developed a deep friendship. At the time, he worked in the International Archives Department at the USHMM and was an expert in Eastern European history. When we entered his home in Alexandria, Virginia, it felt as though time had stood still. The same bookshelves, the same conversations about history and politics, and the same warm smile with which he welcomed us.

"Stefan! You're finally back!" he exclaimed, embracing me warmly.

Then he looked at my sons.

"So these are the young men! Theo and Emil, right? You have a wonderful father."

Ljudmila had prepared a traditional Russian dinner: borscht, pelmeni, and blini. As we ate, Vadim told us about his current projects. He was still working at the USHMM, although now in an advisory capacity.

"The archival work continues," he said. "Every year, new documents come to light, and we have to preserve them before they are lost."

We talked about the old days—about the picnics in the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks, where we often painted with his sons; about the long discussions about history and art; and about the projects we had worked on together at the museum.

"Do you remember the translation project for the museum guide?" I asked.

Vadim laughed.

"How could I forget? You and Christoph corrected the German version until it was perfect. Bruce Tapper was thrilled."

Bruce Tapper, another close friend from that period, had been a Senior Editor in the museum's Publications Department. We had worked together not only on translations but also engaged in many philosophical discussions about the meaning and significance of remembrance.

"He once told me that history consists not only of facts, but of the stories of the people who experienced it," I told my sons. "And that is precisely what I wanted to preserve in Zeitbrücke".

Vadim was not only a historian but also a lover of art. Several paintings hung in his living room, including one by Kurt Heinrich, the Austrian émigré with whom I had once exhibited my work.

"Kurt once told me that painting was a kind of therapy for him," I recalled. "After all the horrors he had experienced, painting gave him a way to express beauty and hope."

Theo, who enjoyed drawing himself, was fascinated.

"That's almost like me! When I draw, I forget everything around me."

I smiled.

"That's exactly how it was for Kurt. And for many others I came to know."

As the evening came to an end, I realized just how deeply this friendship had evolved over the years. Vadim and Ljudmila had been more than colleagues; they had become mentors, friends, and almost family.

"We have experienced so much over the past twenty years," Vadim said as we said goodbye. "But one thing has remained unchanged: the importance of remembrance. As long as we remember the past, as long as we pass on the stories of those who are no longer with us, their voices remain alive."

The Next Generation: Theo and Emil Discover Washington

The following day, we decided to explore Washington from a different perspective. Theo was determined to visit the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, while Emil was more interested in wildlife and wanted to see the National Zoo.

At the Air and Space Museum, Theo was in his element. The Wright Flyer, the Apollo 11 command module, the Space Shuttles—all these exhibits sparked his curiosity.

“Dad, imagine what it must have been like when the first human landed on the Moon!” he exclaimed excitedly.

I told him about the technologies developed during the Second World War and how some of them were later used in space exploration.

“But we must not forget that many of these developments were also connected to the Holocaust,” I added. “The rocket technology developed by the Nazis was later used by both the Americans and the Soviets in their space programs.”

Theo was visibly impressed.

“That’s crazy. Something terrible led to something amazing.”

I nodded.

“That shows how complex history is. It cannot simply be divided into good and evil. There are always many layers.”

Emil, by contrast, was fascinated by the pandas, lions, and elephants at the National Zoo.

“They’re enormous!” he exclaimed as we stood in front of the elephant enclosure.

I took the opportunity to tell him about the threats facing endangered species.

“Many of these animals are at risk of extinction because their habitats are being destroyed. This is also one of the consequences of climate change.”

Emil listened attentively.

“And what can we do about it?”

“We can live more consciously, waste less, and work to protect the environment,” I replied. “Just as we work to protect human rights.”

That afternoon, we visited the Capitol, the seat of the U.S. Congress. Theo was particularly impressed by the architecture and the history of the building.

“This is where the laws governing the country are made,” I explained. “But democracy cannot be taken for granted. It must be defended again and again.”

We talked about the 2024 election, in which Trump once again ran against Joe Biden—and won.

“Why did so many people vote for him?” Emil asked.

I tried to give him a balanced answer:

“Some people feel that they are not represented by traditional politics. Trump speaks to their fears and hopes. But politics is complex, and not all of his solutions are necessarily good for the country.”

Theo, who already had a better understanding of political relationships and dynamics, asked:

“And what does this mean for the future of the United States?”

“That is a good question,” I replied. “The United States is a country of extremes—but also a country of possibilities. Much depends on how people respond to these tensions.”

That evening, as we sat in our hotel, I reflected on the past twenty years. So much had changed—in the world, in my life, and within me. And yet there were constants that had remained.

One of the most important things I learned during my commemorative service was that remembrance is not only about the past; it is also about the future.

As long as we remember the victims of the Holocaust, as long as we pass on their stories, we can help prevent such atrocities from happening again.

In Zeitbrücke, I had written:

“The significance of the past for the future lies in recognizing the connections between them.”

Those words seemed more relevant than ever. At a time when misinformation, populism, and hatred were once again gaining ground, it was more important than ever to remember the lessons of history.

When I undertook my commemorative service in 2004–2005, I was a young man searching for meaning. Twenty years later, I was a father seeking to pass on to my sons the values of tolerance, compassion, and responsibility.

Theo and Emil had grown up in a very different world from the one I had known. They were familiar with smartphones, social media, and artificial intelligence—things that had not existed during my youth.

And yet the fundamental questions of life remained the same:

What does it mean to be a good person? How do we deal with difference? How can we create a better future?

A New Chapter: Passing on the Memory

Before leaving Washington, I visited the USHMM one more time. This time, not as a commemorative-service volunteer, but as a father who wanted to explain the significance of this place to his sons.

In the Hall of Remembrance, we lit a candle—for the victims of the Holocaust, but also for all those who continue to suffer from oppression, war, and injustice today.

"Why are we doing this?" Emil asked.

"Because we have to remember," I replied. "Because we have a responsibility to make sure that something like this never happens again."

Zeitbrücke had been the story of my time as a commemorative-service volunteer. But what if, twenty years later, I were to write a sequel?

A book that would incorporate not only my own experiences, but also the perspectives of my sons. A book about: How the world has changed—and what has remained the same? How the memory of the Holocaust is passed on today? How the next generation confronts the challenges of our time?

I thought about the survivors and witnesses to history I had known—Hedi Pope, Charles Stein, Gerald Schwab, and Felix Yokel.

They were no longer alive, but their stories continued to live on. And it was our responsibility to pass those stories on to the next generation.

I told my sons:

"You have seen and experienced a great deal over the past few days. But the most important thing is not what you have seen, but what you take away from it."

Theo, looking thoughtful, asked:

"And what is that supposed to be?"

"That you understand that history is not simply something written in books. History lives within us—in our memories, in our decisions, and in our responsibility."

Emil, still fascinated by the elephants at the zoo, asked:

"And what can I do?" I smiled.

"You can remain curious. You can ask questions. And you can always remember that every person has a story—and that these stories matter."

Twenty years after my commemorative service in Washington, I returned to Austria with a deep sense of gratitude. Gratitude for the experiences that had shaped me. Gratitude for the people who had enriched my life. And gratitude for the opportunity to pass these experiences on to my sons.

The world had change, but the fundamental values of humanity, tolerance, and responsibility had remained the same (see also the fundational principles of critical peace studies in: Mühlbauer/Moegling 2026). And it is up to us to keep them alive.

Zeitbrücke had not merely been the title of a book. It was a metaphor for what we all must do: build bridges—between generations, between cultures, and between the past and the future. And I knew that this bridge would continue to be built—by Theo, Emil, and all those who come after us.

Excerpts from "Zeitbrücke" – A Selection of the Most Influential Contributions

To better understand the context of my trip to Washington in 2026, I would like to summarize some of the most important passages from "Zeitbrücke" here. These excerpts illustrate how deeply the experiences during my commemorative service shaped my life—and why returning in 2026 was such an emotional experience.

Christoph Meran's Foreword – The Significance of Commemorative Service

The idea of creating a guide for Austrian commemorative service volunteers in the United States, which Stefan Stoev has realized with this publication, is excellent. His interviews with contemporary witnesses, compiled with great dedication, and his diary-like accounts convey a strong urge to preserve, process, and pass on what he has experienced. The approximately fourteen-month civil service that young Austrians undertake at various Holocaust memorial sites around the world—carried out with great commitment and limited financial means—is among the most formative experiences in the lives of these young volunteers. During my seven years as a staff member of the Austrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to meet five successive commemorative service volunteers who served at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. My encounters with them demonstrated that personal contact with contemporary witnesses and survivors of the Shoah, and learning about their individual stories, was a far more profound experience than a

purely theoretical engagement with the documentary materials of the Holocaust could ever be. (Stoev, 2005)

Christoph Meran emphasizes here what I experienced myself during my service at the USHMM: encounters with eyewitnesses are irreplaceable. Books and documents can convey facts—but the human dimension of history, the emotions and personal accounts of lived experience, can only be conveyed through direct contact. This realization led me to shape "Zeitbrücke" not as a dry academic treatise, but as a collection of living stories.

My first Meeting with Dr. Peter Black – A Mentor for Life

In April 1993, the Holocaust Museum in Washington opened its doors for the first time. Later that same year, cooperation with the Austrian Commemorative Service began, and shortly thereafter, the first commemorative service volunteer, Anton Legerer, officially began his civilian service in Washington. Today, twelve years later, I am the eleventh commemorative service volunteer to work—like all my predecessors—in the Historical Research Department under the direction of Dr. Peter Black. Dr. Black has been responsible for the commemorative service volunteers at the Museum since 1997. In a conversation we had together, he spoke about his experiences with and friendships with the volunteers: "I first met Helmut Prochart, the first commemorative service volunteer, shortly before he returned home," he recalls. "At that time, our department was still very small. There were no international research projects yet, and only a few staff members worked in our area. The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies had not yet been established, and we were a small team. The commemorative service volunteer was therefore an important member of the team, contributing to both academic research and administrative and organizational work. (Stoev, 2005)

Peter Black was not only my supervisor, but also an important mentor. He showed me how to combine historical research with human empathy. His approach to working with eyewitnesses—respectful, compassionate, yet scientifically rigorous—had a profound impact on me. When I returned to the USHMM in 2026, I often thought back to his words: "History is not only what is written in the archives. It lives in the people who experienced it.

Meeting Hedi Pope – "I Saw Him, Hitler, When He Marched into Vienna"

Hedi Pope has worked as a volunteer at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington since 1993. Every Friday, she works at the Information Desk. One day,

while I was speaking German with a visitor at the desk, a woman standing in the background suddenly joined our conversation. That was how I first met Hedi. She approached me and said, "I saw him—Hitler—when he marched into Vienna." We spoke briefly about Austria, her hometown of Vienna, and the GEDENKDIENST program. (Stoev, 2005)

Hedi Pope was one of the first eyewitnesses I met in Washington. Her story—the escape from Vienna, the loss of her parents, and her new life in the United States—showed me how diverse the experiences of survivors were. Not all of them had been imprisoned in concentration camps. Some had fled, rebuilt their lives, and created new futures—and yet they carried the scars of displacement with them throughout their lives. When I walked through Washington with my sons in 2026, I often thought of Hedi. "After all, they ONLY threw us out of our homeland," she had said at the end of our conversation. Those words deeply shook me at the time. They revealed something fundamental: trauma is not only what one has suffered, but also what one has lost.

Gerald Schwab – From Refugee to Interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials

Gerald Schwab has been working for several years as a volunteer in the Historical Research Department at the USHMM in Washington. It was there that I had the honor of meeting him. Gerry, as he is known by his friends and colleagues, was born in 1925 in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, under the name Gerd. In 1944, during his naturalization process in the United States, his military papers were issued, and he changed his first name to Gerald. Together with his family, who came from Breisach am Rhein, he moved briefly to Basel in 1933. His father was a businessman by profession and worked in several countries. Gerd's family then lived for some time in France, in the small town of Saint-Louis (St. Ludwig), near the Swiss border, where young Gerd attended school until the family moved back to Germany in mid-1935, settling in the city of Lörrach. (Stoev, 2005)

Gerald Schwab's story is an example of the complexity of refugee experiences during the Nazi era. He was not a conventional Holocaust survivor in the sense of having been imprisoned in a concentration camp—but his life was nevertheless profoundly shaped by persecution and flight. His work as an interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials showed me how important language and communication are in confronting and coming to terms with crimes. When I visited the exhibition on the Nuremberg Trials at the USHMM in 2026, I thought of Gerald. "We tried to be fair,"

he once told me. Those words have remained a powerful reminder to me: even in the darkest of times, there are people who stand up for justice and truth.

Susanna and Felix Yokel – Austria in Their Hearts

During my time in Washington, the Yokel family became especially dear to me. Together with Susanna, Felix, and the rest of their large family, I had the opportunity to celebrate various holidays and cherish many beautiful moments that have remained precious memories. On Saturday, April 23, Susanna and Felix invited me to celebrate Pesach (Passover) with them. That spring, several heavy rainstorms swept across the city. So much rain came through the ceiling of my apartment that it caused me quite a few headaches, along with the necessary repair work. (Stoev, 2005)

Despite their expulsion from Austria, they had never lost contact with their homeland. When I returned to Washington in 2026, I knew that Felix had already passed away. But his words—"Austria remains in our hearts"—continued to resonate with me. The unveiling of the memorial in Laa an der Thaya, which Felix helped organize in 2005, was an important moment of reconciliation. When I told my sons about it, they asked me: "Why is it so important to remember the expulsion?" My answer was: "Because only then can we understand what is at stake today. If we fail to understand the mistakes of the past, we may repeat them in the future."

Kurt Heinrich – Art as a Bridge Between Worlds

Meeting Kurt Heinrich was a great cultural enrichment for me. During our encounters, we talked about Austria, what life in Vienna had been like in those days, and what it is like today. But beyond history and geography, we also discovered another shared passion—the arts. Kurt Heinrich was born in Vienna on May 31, 1921. When his family moved to Hernals, Vienna's seventeenth district, he was still a child. The political circumstances forced the family to make arrangements to leave Austria. (Stoev, 2005)

Kurt Heinrich showed me how art can be a form of coming to terms with the past. After all the horrors he had experienced, painting offered him a way to express beauty and hope. Our joint exhibition at St. Thomas Parish Church was, for me, a symbol of how memory can also be passed on through creative expression. When I walked through the National Gallery of Art in Washington with my sons in 2026, I thought back to Kurt. "Art can be a language that goes beyond words," he once told me. And that is precisely what I wanted to preserve in "Zeitbrücke": the

understanding that history lives on not only through facts, but also through emotions, colors, and stories.

Final Remarks

The excerpts from “Zeitbrücke” demonstrate that the book was more than a documentation of my experience as a commemorative service volunteer. In retrospect, I understand it also as an expression of historical responsibility and an appeal to preserve the connection between remembrance, knowledge, and contemporary social responsibility. The testimonies of the survivors and eyewitnesses I encountered were not merely accounts of a completed historical past. They represented living forms of memory that continue to challenge the present and raise questions about how societies confront violence, persecution, displacement, and exclusion.

Returning to Washington in 2026, this dimension of the book became particularly tangible to me. Walking through the city with my sons, Theo and Emil, I realized that remembrance is not simply an act of looking backwards. It is also a social and intergenerational practice through which the meaning of the past is negotiated and transmitted to future generations.

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Stefan Stoev, has a PhD Degree in information technology and economics, a master's degree in international finance and economics, a bachelor's degree in international economic affairs, and a Professional Degree in foreign affairs and linguistics. Between 2004 and 2005, Stoev served as Austrian Gedenkdienst representative at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. During this time he was engaged in scientific research at the Center for Advanced and Holocaust Studies, maintained contact to Holocaust Survivors and wrote on the book Time Bridge/Zeitbrücke. In 2008 he initiated the international Art project Pangaea in support of UNICEF. For his contribution to the promotion of arts and culture Stoev was honored in 2012 with the award of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture.

Josef Mühlbauer

Introduction: Building Bridges

Peace Infrastructure

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Zusammenfassung

Der Band versteht die Brücke als zentrale Metapher für Friedensarbeit in einer zunehmend fragmentierten und multipolaren Welt. Im Mittelpunkt stehen verschiedene Formen des Verbindens, nämlich interdisziplinär als Brücke zwischen wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen, intergenerationell als Brücke zwischen Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft, interkulturell als Brücke zwischen Kulturen, intergouvernemental als Grundlage für Diplomatie und internationale Kooperation sowie interreligiös als Raum für Verständigung und gemeinsame ethische Prinzipien. Die Beiträge thematisieren positiven Frieden, Kulturdiplomatie, koloniale Kontinuitäten, religiösen Pluralismus, lokale Friedensansätze, Holocaust-Erinnerung, praktische Friedensarbeit und Europas Rolle als Friedensprojekt. Gemeinsam zeigen sie: Nachhaltiger Frieden entsteht dort, wo Dialog, gegenseitige Anerkennung und Kooperation über Grenzen hinweg ermöglicht werden.

Schlagwörter: Friedensforschung, Interkultureller Dialog, Zeitbrücke, Peacebuilding

Abstract

This volume explores the idea of the bridge as a central metaphor for peacebuilding in a fragmented and increasingly multipolar world. It brings together different forms of connection: interdisciplinary, bridging academic disciplines; intergenerational, connecting memory, historical responsibility, and the future; intercultural, fostering dialogue across cultural divides; intergovernmental, strengthening diplomacy and cooperation between states; and interreligious, creating space for mutual understanding and shared ethical principles. The contributions examine positive peace, cultural diplomacy, colonial legacies, religious pluralism, local and Indigenous approaches to peace, Holocaust remembrance, practical peacebuilding, and Europe's role as a peace project. Together, they argue that sustainable peace requires dialogue, mutual recognition, historical awareness, cooperation, and the courage to build bridges across differences.

Keywords: Peace Research, Intercultural Dialogue, Time Bridge, Peacebuilding

Building Bridges

A bridge is more than a structure connecting two points. It is an invitation to cross a distance—to encounter what lies on the other side, to overcome separation, and to create the conditions for dialogue. Bridges can connect places, but they can also connect people, experiences, generations, cultures, religions, political communities, and ways of thinking. In a world increasingly characterized by fragmentation, geopolitical rivalry, social polarization, and competing narratives, the idea of the bridge acquires a particular significance. Peace requires not only the absence of walls and divisions, but the deliberate construction of connections across them.

This volume is therefore guided by one central idea: peace is built through bridges.

Interdisciplinarity: a bridge between disciplines

Contemporary conflicts and peace processes cannot be adequately understood through a single academic perspective (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch, 2024; Mühlbauer/Moegling, 2026). Questions of peace and security intersect with political science, international relations, sociology, history, law, religious studies, cultural studies, and peace research (Moegling/Mühlbauer, 2025). The contributions gathered here reflect this diversity and demonstrate how different intellectual approaches can complement one another. Interdisciplinarity becomes not simply an academic principle, but a methodological bridge through which complex realities can be understood in their interconnectedness.

Intergenerational or Zeitbrücke: a bridge across time

Peace is always connected to memory, historical responsibility, and the experiences passed from one generation to another. The past does not disappear; it continues to shape identities, political narratives, and contemporary conflicts (Stoev, 2005). At the same time, each generation inherits the responsibility to transform these experiences into a more peaceful future. Remembering, learning, and transmitting knowledge are therefore essential elements of peacebuilding. A bridge across time connects historical experience with contemporary responsibility and future possibilities.

Stefan Stoev contributes a deeply intergenerational perspective through his return to Washington twenty years after completing his commemorative service at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accompanied by his sons, the journey becomes an encounter between past and present and an opportunity to reflect on

Holocaust remembrance, historical responsibility, human rights, and contemporary challenges. Zeitbrücke—the bridge of time—thus becomes a metaphor for connecting generations and transforming remembrance into responsibility for the future.

Intergovernmental – a bridge between political communities

In an increasingly multipolar international system, cooperation between states remains indispensable. Diplomacy, international law, multilateral institutions, arms control, common security arrangements, and regional integration all depend on the ability of governments to communicate and cooperate despite divergent interests. Intergovernmental bridges are particularly important at a time when geopolitical competition risks replacing dialogue with confrontation.

Heinz Gärtner examines in this book the concept of positive peace, moving beyond the mere absence of war towards questions of justice, equality, freedom, cooperation, and the overcoming of structural violence. His discussion of the security dilemma demonstrates how attempts to increase security through military means can paradoxically produce insecurity and escalation. Drawing on examples such as the CSCE and the Helsinki Final Act, he highlights the potential of diplomacy, neutrality, disarmament, and cooperative security as foundations for common security.

Hannes Swoboda examines in his book chapter Europe as a peace project in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world. His contribution reflects on the challenges posed by geopolitical rivalry, Russian aggression, transatlantic uncertainty, economic dependencies, and renewed militarisation. He argues for a European peace strategy that combines credible defence with diplomacy, arms control, international law, conflict prevention, and greater economic and technological sovereignty. His concept of "value-based realism" calls for a Europe capable of defending itself without reproducing the power politics of great powers, instead acting through multilateral cooperation, flexible coalitions, and dialogue with the Global South.

Interreligious and Cross-Cultural Dialogue – a bridge between different cultural communities

Religion has historically been both a source of division and a powerful resource for reconciliation. Understanding religious traditions in their historical and political contexts can help challenge narratives that portray conflict as the inevitable consequence of religious difference. Dialogue between religious traditions can

instead reveal shared ethical principles, including restraint, human dignity, justice, and the rejection of violence. The contributions to this volume approach these different bridges from diverse perspectives.

Josef Mühlbauer focuses on cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy as infrastructures of peace. His contribution demonstrates how conflicts are shaped not only by material interests but also by identities, historical narratives, perceptions, and enemy images. Cultural diplomacy, understood as reciprocal engagement rather than strategic influence alone, can create spaces for mutual recognition, trust, and sustained communication across political and cultural divides.

Vera Al Mawla and Mahdi Yahya provide a practical perspective from a decade of peacebuilding work by Peace of Art Lebanon in North Bekaa. Their contribution demonstrates how cross-cultural dialogue can be embedded in sustained organizational practices through youth civic education, civil-society coordination, and heritage documentation. Their four-stage framework—context mapping, participatory co-design, equal-status contact, and adaptive monitoring—shows how bridges between confessional, generational, and geographic communities can be built through repeated and intentional encounters.

Mudasser Awan, Gazi Md Nurul Islam, and Shafia Jamil turn to the historical relationship between religious pluralism, colonialism, and conflict. Their chapter challenges the assumption that contemporary religious conflicts are simply expressions of ancient hostilities. Through cases including Nigeria, Sudan, British India, and Sri Lanka, they show how colonial administrative and political practices constructed and reinforced religious divisions, offering important lessons for historically informed and inclusive peacebuilding.

In a related contribution, Mudasser Awan, Shamana Munawar, Iffat Khalid, and Shafia Jamil ask the fundamental questions: “Whose peace?” and “Whose culture?” Their analysis challenges the universalization of Western-liberal approaches to peace, justice, and reconciliation and emphasizes local ownership and Indigenous justice mechanisms. The chapter demonstrates that sustainable peace requires bridges between different conceptions of justice and legitimacy rather than the imposition of a single model.

Shafia Jamil, Gazi Md Nurul Islam, Hanna E. Kalbi, and Mudasser Awan explore an explicitly interreligious bridge, examining land covenants and the ethics of armed conflict in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Their comparative analysis argues that sacred texts are frequently instrumentalized to legitimize political violence, while also revealing shared ethical resources for restraint and peacebuilding. The chapter

reminds us that interpretation is not merely a theological exercise but can have profound political and human consequences.

Peace Begins Where Bridges Are Built

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that bridges are neither abstract metaphors nor simple solutions. They are political, social, cultural, intellectual, and ethical practices. They require openness, reciprocity, patience, and the willingness to encounter difference without immediately seeking to overcome it.

At a time when the language of division often appears stronger than the language of cooperation, building bridges becomes an act of political and intellectual responsibility. The bridges explored in this volume—between disciplines, generations, cultures, governments, and religions—are ultimately connected by a common aspiration: to create spaces in which difference does not inevitably become conflict.

Peace begins where bridges are built!

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Heinz Gärtner

Positive Peace

Cooperative security arrangements

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Zusammenfassung

Das Kapitel untersucht den Begriff des positiven Friedens und fragt, wie Frieden über die bloße Abwesenheit von Krieg und Gewalt hinaus gedacht werden kann. Ausgehend von der Unterscheidung zwischen negativem und positivem Frieden werden insbesondere Gerechtigkeit, Gleichheit, Freiheit, Kooperation und die Überwindung struktureller Gewalt hervorgehoben. Ein Schwerpunkt liegt auf dem Sicherheitsdilemma: Militärische Aufrüstung kann Sicherheit erzeugen wollen, zugleich aber Bedrohungswahrnehmungen verstärken und Eskalationsdynamiken auslösen. Demgegenüber werden politische und diplomatische Ansätze, Neutralität, nukleare Abrüstung sowie kooperative Sicherheitsordnungen als Möglichkeiten zur Reduktion von Bedrohungen diskutiert. Historische Bezugspunkte wie die KSZE und die Schlussakte von Helsinki verdeutlichen das Potenzial gemeinsamer Sicherheit. Frieden erscheint damit nicht als statischer Zustand, sondern als fortlaufender, politischer und gesellschaftlicher Prozess.

Schlagwörter: Positiver Frieden, Galtung, Sicherheitsdilemma, Friedensforschung

Abstract

This chapter examines the concept of positive peace and asks how peace can be understood beyond the mere absence of war and violence. Building on the distinction between negative and positive peace, it emphasizes justice, equality, freedom, cooperation, and the overcoming of structural violence. Particular attention is paid to the security dilemma: while military build-up may seek to enhance security, it can simultaneously intensify perceptions of threat and generate dynamics of escalation. In contrast, political and diplomatic approaches, neutrality, nuclear disarmament, and cooperative security arrangements are discussed as means of reducing threats. Historical examples such as the CSCE and the Helsinki Final Act demonstrate the potential of common security. Peace is thus understood not as a static condition, but as an ongoing political and societal process.

Keywords: Positive Peace, Peace, Galtung, Security Dilemma, Peace Research

What is Peace?

Dies When considering the question of what peace is, it has become customary to distinguish between negative and positive peace. Negative peace means the absence of violence and war, while positive peace emphasizes positive elements, such as equality and justice. In the following definition, peace is defined negatively: Peace "exists in an international system (System, international) when the conflicts taking place within it are dealt with continuously without the use of organized military violence" (Czempiel, 1998, 45). By referring to the importance of equitable distribution and welfare internally for external peaceful behavior, the positive dimension of the definition is added: Peace "can now be defined as a process pattern of the international system that is characterized by decreasing violence and increasing distributive justice" (Czempiel, 1986, 47; 1998; 1999; see also Müller, 2017).

If peace is not only defined negatively by the absence of violence and war, a number of positive aspects can be emphasized, such as social issues (distributive justice and equality) and personal freedoms (personal liberty, human creativity), but also ecological aspects (Jahn, 1984, 155; Galtung, 1971, 86).

Johan Galtung describes positive peace as the absence of personal and structural violence. It is a peace that consists not only in the absence of international violence, but in the absence of personal violence and structural violence in all spheres of society (Galtung, 1975, 33-35; Galtung, 1995, 385-418). Steps to positive peace are the creation of organizations that link governments and people across national boundaries and to integrate the states into a web of harmonious and cooperative relationships (Galtung, 1995, 388). Related to positive peace is the concept of nonviolence, which for Galtung (1995, 391-392) specifically means nonmilitary defense. For Sabine Jaberg (2023, 6) "peace and violence represent categorical opposites; while they are still intertwined, it is a matter of maximizing peace and minimize violence." The logic of peace is thus oriented toward the goal of preventing and reducing violence. It also relies on cooperative conflict management. It therefore strives for de-escalation, victim protection and non-violent (dialogue-compatible and process-oriented) conflict transformation. The argument of a part of peace research that only strength leads to peace ("If you want peace, prepare for war!"), would only take over the argumentation pattern of those strategic studies, against which peace research would have originally competed. Thus, the discipline's own aversion to violence would be lost and the security dilemma would (Security) be promoted.

This “strength-argument” was virulently discussed in peace research during the war in Ukraine after 2022: should Ukraine be supported militarily until there is peace through war and violence? A complex-oriented peace research would thus lose its multi-perspective character and its multi-causal conflict analysis (Mühlbauer/Moegling 2025). Although the arguments may be formulated specifically about the Ukrainian war, they would, according to Sabine Jaberg (2023, 8-9), be elevated to a general “law” within peace research, appearing “in the face of threatening mega-violence [...] any counter-violence would appear legitimized.”

Especially the “critical peace research” of the seventies emphasized the dimension of distributive justice. According to this, the “critical peace researchers ... defined themselves as scientific partisans of people who, as a result of the unequal distribution of social and economic life chances within and between nations (i.e. by structural violence): of the exploited, of the socially discriminated against, and of those whose physical existence is directly threatened” (Conference of “critical peace researchers” in Wannsee, April 24-25, 1971, cited in Wasmuht, 1998, 177 and Ruf, 2023, 3). This definition of “critical peace research” goes beyond the definition of peace between states and borrows from Johan Galtung's “structural violence”, thereby also posing the question of the cause of intra-societal violence.

Peace can also be defined as the ability to politically shape conflicts or conflict management: Peace “is not the state of complete absence of political conflict, but the sum of the abilities and instrumentalities to deal with them in other than violent ways” (Rendtorff, 1984, 42). A peace order “is a democratic order in which the danger of violent conflict does not (any longer) exist” (Lutz, 1999, 1); (Community, international; Society, international). Dieter Senghaas (2017, 33-41) extends the combination of negative and positive peace to four dimensions: protection from violence, the protection of freedom, the protection from hardship, and the protection of cultural diversity. From historical China to feudally fragmented medieval Europe, peace meant the prevention of warlike violence. This negative understanding of peace also shaped the modern territorial-state based peace debate. According to Senghaas, on the other hand, the four dimensions proved to be the peace-scientific basis of a lasting peace.

Almost Exclusively Military Responses

All too often, international conflicts lead to a quick resort to military responses. The ideas presented here do not reject military preparedness. However, they give priority to political and diplomatic initiatives. They are based on the observation

that security can be achieved not only by increasing military capabilities, but also by creating a less threatening environment.

The frequently observed multipolarity with multiple centers of power in the world does not in itself lead to a more peaceful world. Polarity always implies polarization and potential conflicts. In reality, however, this is a great power conflict between the U.S., China, and Russia. For now, this is being played out through mutual arms races. Alliances are being formed, ideologies articulated. The conflict could turn violent at any moment.

The excessive focus on military solutions leads to increases—indeed, disproportionate increases—in defense spending. The modernization of conventional weapons is accelerating, but nuclear capabilities are also being expanded. Current examples also demonstrate this: Russian President Putin's military attack on Ukraine, the conflicts in the Middle East are being waged with direct armed force.

The U.S. is the world's strongest military power. Although there have been periods of restraint and isolationism, the U.S. has always relied on its interventionist capabilities to often achieve its maximum objectives. Agreements are possible—but extremes cannot be ruled out either. Only if the U.S. were to view itself no longer as "exceptional" and "indispensable" but as a normal power would the swings toward one extreme or the other cease to exist.

Ideas for Breaking the Dilemma of Security and Violence

This focus on military solutions, even when intended for defense, creates a series of dilemmas. They are almost always perceived by others as a threat. The response to this is almost always military preparations and actions. This involves a delicate combination of defensive and offensive measures, interpretations of intentions, and one's own perceptions.

How can this dilemma of security and violence be interrupted? General calls for peace and the renunciation of violence are desirable, but by no means sufficient to create peaceful and less violent conditions. Peace can only be achieved by reducing the threat. Security in and of itself does not bring peace; rather, only peace leads to sustainable security.

Ideas and measures to break the security dilemma are also steps toward a "positive peace." It differs from "negative peace" in that it defines peace not only by the absence of war and violence, but also by adding positive elements such as cooperation, multilateralism, and justice.

Although tensions between the two blocs during the Cold War—the Warsaw Pact and NATO—had not disappeared and, with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, have risen again, these multilateral principles have had a lasting impact. They gave rise to independence movements in Eastern Europe, such as the Czechoslovak Charter 77 and the Polish Solidarity, which invoked them. Ultimately, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev used these principles to grant independence to the Eastern European states.

The reduction and eventual abolition of nuclear weapons, as envisaged in the 2021 Treaty on the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, aims to replace the norm of mutual nuclear threat with the norm of a world free of nuclear weapons. Even if nuclear-armed states and their allies have not acceded to the treaty, they could at least contractually agree not to threaten or use these weapons against non-nuclear-armed states.

Nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs) are regional efforts to avert the threat and use of nuclear weapons by nuclear-weapon states in these regions. Creative solutions could expand these initiatives by merging some of these zones. A nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East could not be realized because Israel wants to retain its nuclear weapons. The U.S. has repeatedly blocked such resolutions at the United Nations and in other international forums. Alternatively, the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (Semipalatinsk) could be expanded southwestward if Iran were to join, as it already shares much in common with these states historically. The North African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (Pelindaba) could be expanded northeastward if the Gulf states were to join. Israel's nuclear weapons would lose much of their purpose if it were surrounded by nuclear-weapon-free states. If the strip between Mongolia and Kazakhstan could be included, a nuclear-free belt would emerge stretching from Mongolia to Africa.

Small states may seek protection within an alliance. However, alliances' promises of protection also come with obligations. They also entail participation in war. To avoid this risk of becoming entangled in foreign wars, states can remain neutral. Neutrality can very often help reduce tensions. However, neutral states must credibly demonstrate their neutrality to the international community and also offer useful services as buffer states, mediators, or hosts in order to be taken seriously. Thus, neutrality is also a good security guarantee. History shows that neutral territory is violated almost exclusively in cases of mutual attacks by hostile states and military alliances. In any case, neutral states can avoid being drawn into the wars of military alliances through mutual defense obligations.

The Middle East is riddled with security rivalries, many of which are rooted in fundamental causes. The decades-long conflict between the U.S. and Iran is not solely about Iran's nuclear program, its support for militias in the region, or the alleged threat to Israel. At its core are narratives about the other side that shape mutual perceptions. For Iran, these include the CIA's involvement in the 1953 coup against the democratically elected President Mossadegh by the U.S., and U.S. support for Iraq in the war against Iran in the 1980s. Etched into the memory of the U.S. are the overthrow of the pro-American Shah by the 1979 revolution and the subsequent hostage-taking of American embassy staff. Reducing these mutual negative perceptions can contribute significantly to building trust.

Ultimately, a regional cooperative solution must be found in the Middle East and the Gulf region. A dialogue forum of Islamic states would have to complement the Abraham Accords that has to be based on the framework of the 2002 Arab Peace Plan, which stipulates recognition of Israel only upon the simultaneous establishment of a Palestinian state within these borders. It would have to include a sovereign Palestinian state.

From War to...

Dynamics of War Most wars follow a certain pattern. The Prussian major general, army reformer, military scientist, and ethicist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) observed that war can end not only when the enemy is completely defeated, but also when there are peace treaties or armistices. This observation also applies to modern warfare. All wars operate within this tension between military victory and a peace agreement. The warring parties strive for victory on the battlefield before considering a peace agreement. Between Carl von Clausewitz's observation that war pushes "to the extreme" and the defeat of the enemy or a peace settlement, there is considerable nuance. War takes place in an atmosphere of "twilight," in which not only the commander but, above all, the observers operate. Uncertainties are perceived as certainties. There are six structural reasons for this uncertainty. First, it is impossible to assess the enemy's resistance. Usually, the enemy is underestimated, while one's own strength is overestimated. No one starts a war when the enemy is considered decisively superior. "We'll be home by Christmas" was the slogan for the soldiers who went to war in August 1914, a war that would last another four years. Grand ambitions are proclaimed. "The war that will end all wars" was the cry before the First World War. Secondly, if the anticipated victory doesn't materialize immediately, minor gains on the battlefield are exaggerated and even believed, and proclaimed as "acts of annihilation." To explain losses, the delay of weapons delivery is being blamed. Thirdly, if the fighting intensifies, the image

of the enemy becomes increasingly negative, regardless of its previous perception. What Carl von Clausewitz called the trinity of war sets in: hatred, enmity, and violence increase. Killing is no longer a detriment, but a virtue! The only alternative is to kill or be killed. There is no choice. Killing is only self-defense. Thirdly, if the fighting intensifies, the image of the enemy becomes increasingly negative, regardless of its previous state. Fourth, the will to negotiate dwindles. Responsibility is attributed to the enemy: they supposedly don't want to negotiate at all! Compromises are labeled as treason, ceasefires as a trick to regroup forces. There is no alternative to fighting. In the further drive toward the “extreme,” fifth, other elements come into play. Civilian targets are attacked. Nuclear weapons are brought into play, either publicly or behind the scenes. Sixth, information is simplified, abbreviated, and reduced. There is no longer any doubt that evil is the cause and greed the reason for the war. Structural analyses of the war are rejected and ridiculed. Transparency and war are opposites!

Wars always develop a dynamic of their own that media coverage fails to anticipate, unleashing forces that even the warring parties themselves can no longer control. The costs of a war always exceed the expected gains. The security dilemma A driving force behind the course of wars, indeed often their very cause, is the “security dilemma.” A security dilemma arises from the pursuit of security against an attack, which in turn makes the other side feel more insecure, leading them to prepare for the worst, even for war. Each side claims to be acting defensively. According to the principle of the security dilemma, the other actors often perceive these actions as offensive. Frequently, missile deployments intended to increase one's own security are perceived by other countries as offensive and threatening. This leads to an escalation of rhetoric, with both sides accusing each other of aggressive behavior. The security dilemma is more than just mutual military buildup. It is a delicate balance between arms efforts, threat perceptions, and intentions. The Greek observer of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, described this dilemma with the complex of motives “fear, honor, and benefit (or interest).” A large part of international politics is thus driven by fear and uncertainty. The fear of war prompts states to prepare for it. The security dilemma can therefore escalate into war. The Cold War was significantly shaped by the security dilemma. Both sides were constantly preoccupied with defending themselves or building up their defense capabilities. One or both sides feared that the other was engaged in, or planning, aggressive action. Often, a state views membership in a military alliance as an improvement to its own defense. However, such a decision has consequences for other states.

... Positive Peace

Security cannot be achieved solely by increasing military capabilities; rather, the environment in which threats can develop can be altered. Threats can be mitigated by creating the right political, social, and economic conditions. This is how the security dilemma can be overcome. Peace can only be achieved by reducing threats. Security does not bring peace, but peace leads to sustainable security. An attempt to break the security dilemma was undertaken with the process of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The first high point was the Helsinki Conference in 1975. The Final Act of the CSCE is arguably the most historically significant document of postwar Europe. The document did not question the postwar territorial order and recognized the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, but at the same time formulated a catalog of values concerning human rights and fundamental freedoms. In contrast to contemporary security strategies, this document avoided terms like enemy, adversary, competitor, challenger, and rival. The focus was on cooperative and shared security. It emphasized the indivisibility of security, the inviolability of borders, and the necessity of cooperative security and the renunciation of force. These principles were intended to break the "security dilemma" that arose at the height of the Cold War, resulting in rearmament, mutual distrust, accusations of expansionist activities, and ideological differences.

Another model could be a conference of states—similar to the Congress of Vienna after 1815—that negotiates a realignment of the security order for renewed stability. This Concert of Europe, following the Napoleonic Wars, was intended to secure peace between the European powers of Austria, Prussia, Russia, the United Kingdom, and later France. The idea behind the Concert of Europe was based on the principle of the balance of power, in which no single power could be stronger than all the others combined. In addition, common norms of cooperation, such as free trade, were established. Colonial interventions were explicitly excluded. These principles were disrupted by the European Wars of Unification around the mid-19th century, beginning with the Crimean War. This was followed by the Austro-Italian War, the Austro-Prussian War, and the Franco-Prussian War. Peace continued afterward until the formation of alliances (between Austria-Prussia and France-Russia-Great Britain) before the First World War.

One could, for example, develop principles of peace, drawing on Kant, that are derived from his definitive article: international organizations based on Kant's right of hospitality, peaceful Kantian republics, and economic interdependence through trade. The CSCE is a historical example of a "positive peace." The idea is to create a system of common security in which security is seen as indivisible. This system

would be a counter-model to the security dilemma. Lasting and positive peace is more than the negatively defined absence of violence and war. It relies on cooperative international structures between states and organizations, as well as on social justice within states. Such peace will likely not be achieved quickly and completely. Peace is a process and can only be partially realized. One can therefore speak of a "proportional peace." Moreover, there are numerous wars and military conflicts. Therefore, there must also be numerous forms of peace. Peace is never absolute, but always relative.

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The European Union

Successes and Failures of a Peace Project

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Europäische Union als Friedensprojekt in einer zunehmend fragmentierten und multipolaren Welt. Er zeigt, wie Europas historischer Erfolg bei der Überwindung von Nationalismus und Krieg durch politische und wirtschaftliche Integration heute durch geopolitische Rivalitäten, den russischen Angriffskrieg, transatlantische Unsicherheit, wirtschaftliche Abhängigkeiten und neue Militarisierung herausgefordert wird. Eine europäische Friedensstrategie muss daher glaubwürdige Verteidigungsfähigkeit mit Diplomatie, Rüstungskontrolle, Abrüstung, internationalem Recht und Konfliktprävention verbinden. Zugleich gilt es, wirtschaftliche und technologische Souveränität zu stärken und Klimawandel, soziale Ungleichheit und Migration zu bewältigen. Der Beitrag plädiert für einen pragmatischen „wertebasierten Realismus“: Europa sollte weder Großmächten untergeordnet sein noch deren Machtpolitik reproduzieren, sondern als verantwortungsvolle Mittelmacht durch Kooperation, flexible Bündnisse und Dialog mit dem Globalen Süden handeln.

Schlagwörter: Europäische Integration, Peacebuilding, Strategische Autonomie, Internationale Ordnung

Abstract

This article examines the European Union as a peace project in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world. It argues that Europe’s historical success in overcoming nationalism and war through political and economic integration is increasingly challenged by geopolitical rivalry, Russian aggression, transatlantic uncertainty, economic dependencies and renewed militarisation. A European peace strategy must therefore combine credible defence and deterrence with renewed commitment to diplomacy, arms control, disarmament, international law and conflict prevention. At the same time, Europe must strengthen its economic, technological and energy sovereignty while addressing climate change, social inequality and migration. The article advocates a pragmatic form of “value-based realism”: Europe should neither subordinate itself to great powers nor seek to reproduce their power politics, but act as a responsible middle power through flexible coalitions, multilateral cooperation and dialogue with the Global South. European peace requires both the capacity to defend itself and the political courage to pursue cooperation, reconciliation and a sustainable international order.

Keywords: European Integration, Peacebuilding, Strategic Autonomy, International Order

Introductory Remarks

This article is the result of my experiences as a politician working primarily in Europe, as well as my reading of and engagement with the writings of social scientists and commentators on current events. As such, the article reflects an inherently subjective perspective shaped by my personal experiences and choices. From the early stages of my engagement with political thought and practice, the prevention and resolution of conflict have been central concerns. My approach has not been guided by illusions, but rather by a combination of realism and hope. When Martin Wolf, chief economist of the Financial Times, who has Austrian roots, was asked to name the summer "that made him who he is," he replied:

> *My choice of life-changing summer is 1946. I was born in August of that year (…) it was the first year after the end of the Second World War." He elaborated: "So many men and women in my parents' generation chose life because they trusted in a better future. They were right to do so: their children have lived in a golden age of peace and plenty. My life began with optimism. We need such optimism again (Financial Times 2026).*

I, too, was born in 1946 and grew up with the same sense of optimism. Although the present moment makes optimism difficult, it is precisely optimism what we need—tempered by a strong dose of realism. This approach serves as the guiding principle of my contribution.

From War to Peace and Back

The history of the European continent can largely be understood as the history of war. Wars fought on European soil, but also wars waged by Europeans in foreign territories. As Margaret MacMillan writes in her book How Conflict Shaped Us: "Greed for what others have, whether it is food for survival, women for servitude or procreation, precious minerals, trade or land, has always motivated war". Greed was at the origin of many wars in European history. In connection with curiosity and Christian missionary ideology, it also led also to colonialism around the globe. European countries were involved in violent competition to gain a large share of foreign territories, natural resources, and even slaves. (MacMillan 2020)

Again and again, efforts were undertaken to establish peace, especially when countries and their armies were exhausted. Emperors, kings, queens, dukes and their ministers tried to agree on the borders of 'their' territories in Europe as well as on foreign continents. Sometimes they decided even on the religion of 'their' people. But basically, the greedy interests of leaders and delegated entities like the

Dutch and British East India Companies were the main issues they pursued. Only secondarily were they interested in the economic and social conditions their subjects had to live with. And so, the agreed peace treaties were overthrown when the monarchs or their prime ministers, chancellors etc., feared losing relative power and influence or when they expected to gain new territories and resources by starting a war.

The Paris Peace Treaty

The last century had two World Wars starting in Europe, with devastating effects for its societies. After the horrible consequences of World War I, H.G. Wells called this war the "War that ends all Wars" a phrase later adopted by US President Woodrow Wilson. Unfortunately, however, World War I was not the end of all wars. And it was President Woodrow Wilson who—despite many good intentions—was part of a group of 'peacemakers' who, unintentionally, laid the ground to the next war. At least, that was the conclusion of John Maynard Keynes in his analysis of the Paris Peace Conference. (Wells 1914; Keynes 1919)

The famous economist wrote a detailed analysis of deliberations in Paris and the probable consequences of what had been agreed upon. He argued that the dismantling of the empires and the demand for extremely high reparations from the losers had disastrous consequences. In The Economic Consequences of Peace, published in 1919, he concluded: "Those who controlled the Conference may bow before the gusts of popular opinion, but they will never lead us out of our troubles" (p. 215). And in Chapter VI, he stated: "The Treaty includes no provisions for the economic rehabilitation of Europe - nothing to make the defeated Central Empires into good neighbors, nothing to stabilize the new States of Europe, nothing to reclaim Russia; nor does it promote in any way a compact of economic solidarity amongst the Allies themselves, no arrangement was reached at Paris for restoring the disordered finances of France and Italy, or adjust the systems of the Old World and the New"(p. 218). (Keynes 1919, 215, 218)

The basic ideas of the 14 Points presented by Woodrow Wilson concentrated on the right of self-determination of the different European peoples but did not include ideas of a new cooperative Europe. Wilson himself proposed establishing a League of Nations; however, as the United States was not ready to join the League, it was weak from the very beginning. Moreover, the European leaders who won the war were not interested in designing a new Europe. They struggled to preserve their own power, including by resisting any form of decolonization. They rejected the idea of granting sovereignty and independence to the colonized peoples. Regarding

the European continent, it was a dangerous illusion to believe that the destruction of some empires and creating a multitude of independent small states would, by itself, lead to peace. Leaders did not envision that small and weak states could hardly maintain their independence in the neighborhood of larger, greedy, and expansionist states. As a result, small states often became the first victim of their aggressive and more powerful neighbors. Wilson's instance on breaking up some existing empires—without creating a cooperative framework—met the interest of the major victorious powers in Europe, which sought to maintain or even extend their spheres of influence. (Wilson 1918; League of Nations 1919)

New Ideas for a European Community

It was rather inside the United States administration that one could find several officials who developed interesting and forward-looking concepts for a renewed Europe. One of them was the diplomat William Bullitt, who underlined the necessity of constructing a Europe capable of overcoming narrow-minded nationalism. In his letters to President Roosevelt he reiterated: "An integrated democratic Europe, pacific but armed, is a vital element for the creation of world peace". And: "Europe is to be organized as a democratic unit which will take place along with the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China as one of the great guarantors of world peace". However, neither the US nor European powers listened to rational arguments presented by some American experts. Germany's right-wing forces—as had been foreseen by John Maynard Keynes—used the severe peace conditions to gain support for a revanchist policy, a policy which lead to war. (Bullitt 1946)

William Bullitt and some of his colleagues also pleaded that the Western powers should develop positive relations with the new government in Russia. However, the predominantly European Western powers feared the export of the Russian Communist Revolution to their own countries. One cannot know whether a more cooperative attitude towards Russia would have resulted in common efforts to establish a peace-oriented Europe. However, it was certainly not helpful to leave it to a revanchist Germany to initiate military cooperation with Russia. This very cooperation culminated in the shameful Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It sought to define and divide Europe into German and Russian spheres of influence before Nazi-Germany, driven by its extreme greed for expansion, attacked the Soviet Union.

So, the 'Road not Taken' after World War I was the road towards a united Europe. It required another terrible war and the Holocaust to give more Europeans the

courage and the strong conviction to build a united Europe, or at least to begin laying the foundations for peace on the continent and to contribute to world peace. However, we remain far from Immanuel Kant's concept of 'perpetual peace' (Kant 1795/2006). Even today, when the differences between a Europe shaped of nationalism—which led to war—and a common Europe committed to peace can be clearly seen, some on the extreme right continue to long for a Europe consisting of sovereign, independent nations. Some even view the Russian leadership, which destroyed peace through its clear aggression against Ukraine, as an ally for their extreme nationalist aspirations. Similarly, the greedy ambitions of the US President Donald Trump have received considerable sympathies, at least until he started his war against Iran and demanded to acquire Greenland.

New Ideas for a European Community

The main question in 1945 was if Europeans, especially their leaders, could learn from the disastrous consequences of the failed Paris Peace Treaty. As Tony Judd wrote in Post War: A History of Europe Since 1945, some conditions of the political landscape were different in comparison to 1918: "At the conclusion of the First World War it was borders that were invented and adjusted, while people were on the whole left in place. After 1945 what happened was rather the opposite: with one major exception boundaries stayed broadly intact and people were moved instead." (The exception was—again—Poland). Tony Judd continues: "There was a feeling among Western policymakers that the League of Nations, and the minority clauses in the Versailles Treaties, had failed and that it would be a mistake even to try and resurrect them". (Judt 2005)

The main question was rather the question "which history had placed upon the agenda in 1945, and which had quietly but insistently dislodged or outlived all other claims upon Europeans' attention. What future was there for separate European nation-states? Did they have a future"? The answer given by most European leaders in 1945 was: yes, there is a future for European nation-states—but only if peace in Europe could be maintained. This, however, required European steps towards integration to overcome the extreme nationalism that had led to war.

But how far should this integration go? Again, the idea of constructing the 'United States of Europe' was promoted. But basically, there was no strong popular support for that idea. And one should not forget that the United States of America were founded by a colonial expansion in connection with expulsion and cleansing of the native population. Europe, on the other hand, was and is a continent of different countries with different and often contradicting historical experiences. The partly

antagonistic history of the different European countries, together with the respective ideologies and prejudices, cannot be wiped out and just simply be forgotten. As Brendan Simms explains in The Return of the Grate Powers: "The European Union has deep historical roots because it is so recent. It was founded against its own past". (Simms 2019)

Rebuilding Europe After Catastrophe

It is a principal question—in personal life as well as in relations between nations—how to begin a new future after a brutal and violent aggression 'ended'. Should the victorious powers after 1945 have waited until the defeated aggressors had shown repentance and paid more or less full compensation for all the damage caused? Would that have even been possible? And who was the aggressor? Was it only Hitler and Mussolini and their immediate followers? To what extend were those who voted for them and those who executed their orders responsible for the war crimes committed? And what about the collaborators in occupied territories?

Yes, in relation to some perpetrators, the legal situation was clear. A few were sentenced to death and some others to long terms of imprisonment. But justice can never be complete. Even today, there are discussions in Poland about if and to what extend Poles were actively involved in the killing of Jews.

All these issues should and must be addressed, given the atrocious crimes that were committed. However, justice and reconciliation must always be complemented by a forward-looking perspective. The courageous decisions made by leaders after World War II to establish a new European reality made a decisive contribution to peace among former adversaries. A perpetual pursuit of revenge and reparations poisons a shared future and lays the groundwork for new conflicts. Naturally, the total defeat of Nazi and Fascist regimes and their armies served as the essential prerequisite for true reconciliation. (Judt 2005; Mazower 2013)

That will mark a fundamental difference in how Russian aggression ends—whenever that day comes. At the end of World War II, Nazi Germany was not only military defeated, but its domestic fascist regime also collapsed. Conversely, negotiations with Putin to end his aggression against Ukraine might only consolidate his hold on power. In any case, the European Union and its leaders must draw lessons from the aftermath of both World Wars. They must avoid repeating past mistakes and actively open pathways toward a shared future—however difficult that may be.

The Role of Economic Integration

The initial steps of post-World War II integration focused on the economy, beginning with the integration of the European steel and coal industries. Many argue that these early steps prove the European Union is a predominantly economic organization, with critics on the left contending it demonstrates a fundamentally capitalist nature. However, one must recognize that integrating the production of key resources necessary to wage was fundamentally an essential political necessity. In the wake of two devastating European wars fueled by competing power interests, pooling these economic resources was paramount—not only to prevent future conflict, but also to strengthen the economic foundation of a cooperative Europe. Indeed, John Maynard Keynes had already emphasized the necessity of a sound economic basis for lasting peace in Europe. (European Coal and Steel Community 1951; Monnet 1978)

Indeed, even during World War II, thinkers and statesmen were envisioning a postwar Europe that would not repeat the mistakes of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the aftermath. One of them was Jean Monnet. On August 5, 1943, he declared in front of the French Committee of National Liberation:

"There will be no peace in Europe if the States are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty, with all that that entails in terms of prestige politics and economic protectionism. The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their people the prosperity that modern conditions make possible and consequently necessary. Prosperity for the States of Europe and the social developments that must go with it will only be possible if they form a federation or a 'European entity' that makes them into a common economic unit."

Across the arguments of thinkers from Keynes to Monnet, there is a clear thread linking the preservation of peace and overcoming of nationalism by economic cooperation and social well-being. Peace cannot be simply wished into existence, nor does it emerge purely through the goodwill of enlightened leaders. Where coal and steel were once necessary to wage war, today it is primarily new technologies which are necessary to building an effective defense. Furthermore, sustainable energy has become a vital resource for all modern economic activity. Consequently, sound energy and technology strategies—including securing critical natural resources—are essential assets that a strong political entity must cultivate. In this regard, the European Union must step up its efforts, as the United States remains a formidable competitor and China presents a rising rival with a clear competitive strategy. (Monnet 1978; Keynes 1919)

Neoliberal Europe

Turning to the European economy, it is also worth examining the role of the European Union as a vast single market and a participant in the global neo-liberal transformation. Because the European Union is not a traditional sovereign state with direct regulatory authority over a defined population, its primary task was to establish a common market for business. This step was essential to prepare Europe for international competition, as economic interdependence and market scale remain vital prerequisites for global competitiveness. Indeed, during the initial phase of constructing the Common Market, the regulatory framework served precisely this purpose.

Furthermore, liberal trade relations were seen as instrumental to fostering peace by diverting countries away from nationalistic policies. Rather than securing public support through aggressive foreign policies, governments could deliver economic prosperity and also social welfare for their citizens. Francis Fukuyama clearly articulated this philosophy in "The end of History?", arguing that permanent peace and the global rise of liberal capitalism were inextricably linked:

"The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism (…) What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post war history, but the end of history as such: the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (…) there are powerful reasons for believing that it is the ideal that will govern the material in the long run." (Fukuyama 1989)

In some way, this faith in a liberal ideal and order defining both the economic and political relations served as a foundational pillar of the European Union's philosophy.

What was overlooked, however, is that liberal economic and trade policies do not benefit all citizens equally. Such relations inevitably produce winners and losers, both globally and domestically. While globalized trade helped lift millions out of poverty—most notably in China—it has left other regions vulnerable. On the flip side, this means that relative welfare gains in China are closely connected with losses in Europe. For too long, these domestic costs and strategic risks were neglected, resulting in eroding public support for the European Union. This declining support, in turn, compromises the Union's global standing and its capacity for international peace-building. (Rodrik 2011; Milanovic 2016)

What Europe requires today is a Union capable of invigorating its economies, particularly in key technological sectors. Two high-level reports to the European Commission—the Letta report and, most notably the Draghi report— have laid the groundwork for a rejuvenation of Europe's Single Market. Without strengthening the competitiveness of European companies, Europe risks lagging behind the major economic competitors. (Letta 2024; Draghi 2024)

In his speech to the European Parliament on September 17, 2024 Mario Draghi stated:

"The core problem in Europe is that new companies with new technologies are not rising in our economy (...) The innovation gap is at the root of Europe's slowing productivity growth relative to the U.S. So we must bring back innovation to Europe."

But the report also underpins the necessity of decarbonization and frames it rightfully as an opportunity for Europe's industry. Draghi also supports Europe as a peace project: "Peace is the first and foremost objective of Europe, at home and abroad. And we must continue in these steadfast efforts. But security threats are rising and we must be prepared." The report asks for securing and diversifying critical value-chains for materials which underpin the European industry and a genuine 'foreign economic policy' in which security interests, European values, and support for middle and low-income countries should be reconciled. In addition, the report argues that Europe needs to step up investments into science and education, the infrastructure, and defense. An innovative, decarbonized, and internationally competitive economy is the backbone necessary to overcome economic crises and coercion. Only with an innovative, competitive, and balanced economy Europe can sustain its agency when it comes to upholding peace in the world. (Draghi 2024)

Besides economics, political and ideological interests may create new conflicts or reopen old ones. It was again Francis Fukuyama who feared himself, that there could even large-scale conflicts evolve in which "large states still caught in the grip of history" will be involved. Today, we can see how the 'post-historical' Europe is confronted by an aggressive Russia which is in the grip of its imperial past. In support, right wing forces inside the European Union also express a "powerful nostalgia for the times when history existed". In addition to these disruptions, the mixture of economic threats – especially concerning the supply of energy and critical materials such as rare earths – and political disruption by major powers like Russia, the U.S., and China are an enormous challenge for Europe and worldwide peace.

Smaller States are the Main Beneficiaries

In many circumstances, peace is closely linked to sound economic development and robust institutions. But one has to recognize the importance of people's perception of an economically efficient and just society. What is often neglected is the fact, that economic cooperation is helping to achieve that condition for all nations regardless the strongest ones. Especially smaller and middle powers are profiting—economically and politically—of being part of a bigger community. All too often, they have been the victims of expansionist policies of big powers. These do not hesitate to launch military operations against smaller states when it is of use for gaining an advantage in their competition with other regional or world powers.

Even to declare neutrality did in many cases not prevent such an attack. There were many cases in Europe which testify the fragility of the concept of neutrality in preventing an armed aggression. Sometimes opponent big powers agreed to divide small countries between themselves as in the case of Poland and the Baltic countries. Also, bilateral alliances were not efficient in preventing an attack by a big neighbor in comparison to multilateral organizations like NATO and communities like the European Union—at least this is the experience so far.[KS3.1]

Of course, the role and influence of small states and even middle powers inside a community of states depends on the legal construction of the community. The European Union is built on a voting system based on proportionality, combined with additional rights for smaller states. This concerns the voting procedures in the Council but also the distribution of seats in the European Parliament. Citizens of smaller states are 'overrepresented' in relation to citizens of bigger states. This is often criticized as unfair and in contradiction to key principles of democracy. However, also the United States have an equal number of representatives of the individual states in the Senate, unlike in the House of Representatives.

The granting and protection of minority rights can, in itself, be seen as a violation of a purely numerical interpretation of democracy: one person, one vote. However, democratic communities need such minority protections to function effectively. And given the experience of European history, in which large states have repeatedly misused their power to occupy and absorb small and middle powers, this advantage given to small states can be justified. One could even argue that this balance between majority rule and minority rights contributes to the maintenance of peace.

Peace Strategies Without Common Foreign and Defense Policy?

The foundations for the development of a common Europe were laid through several successful treaties. In 1951, Belgium, France, Western Germany, Italy,

Luxemburg, and the Netherlands founded the European Coal and Steel Community. The same six countries established the European Economic Community with the Treaty of Rome. The European Union was created with the Maastricht Treaty, which entered into force in 1993. The Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in 2009, gave the European Union a more constitutional structure. (European Coal and Steel Community 1951; European Economic Community 1957; European Union 1992, 2007)

Two questions remained unresolved in all the discussions about strengthening the European Union's capacity to act. The first was—and is still—whether the European Union can contribute to peace without an agreed foreign and security strategy and a designated representative who can speak and act on its behalf. The second concerns its capacity for military deterrence and defense.

With regard to foreign and security policy, there were several attempts to establish a common European Foreign and Security Policy and to create the position of a European 'Foreign Minister'. All these attempts had limited success, although the Lisbon Treaty created the position of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who leads the External Action Service and acts also as Vice-President of the European Commission. However, the President of the European Council and the Commission President also speak and act on matters of European foreign and security policy. In addition, there are the individual foreign ministers of the Member States. Furthermore, most foreign policy decisions must be taken unanimously by the Member States, although certain forms of abstention are possible. (European Union 2007)

Defense as such was never a competence of the European Union. NATO was seen by most EU member states—which are at the same time NATO member states—a prerogative of NATO. This was also shared by the United States. Nevertheless, there was one attempt by former rivals and enemies on the initiative of the French Prime Minister Pleven to establish a defense cooperation outside of NATO. The European Defense Community Treaty was signed in Paris in May 1952. However, just two years later, in August 1954, the French National Assembly failed to approve the establishment of a European Defense Community. (Pleven 1950; European Defence Community 1952)

The recent efforts to give the European Union—even in a limited capacity—a role in defending European countries such as Ukraine cannot compensate for the missed opportunity to establish a European defense structure. Such a Defense Community could have given the European Union additional support and strength. The relationship between the European Union and the United States would be much

more balanced if the Defence Community had been accepted by the French Parliament. Trump's aspirations concerning Greenland might never have been expressed or could have been rejected immediately and convincingly.

Such a defense community could have been a separate organization but closely linked to the 'civilian' European Union. Neutral or non-aligned countries could still have joined the European Union, but they would have had to accepted that its defense counterpart would play an important role in the integration process. The growing importance of defense for European integration must also be recognized today, even without the existence of a parallel European Defense Community. The idea of a Defense Community allied with, but not identical to, the European Union was recently taken up by the German economist Hans-Werner Sinn in his book "Trump, Putin und die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa".

Yes, European countries had the opportunity to benefit from the collapse of the Soviet empire and its military alliance, the Warsaw Pact. But the peace dividend could only be enjoyed as long as peace was neither threatened nor brutally violated. With Russian aggression, that is now the case. It is therefore a fundamental misunderstanding of defense and deterrence to equate them with militarism or an eagerness to go to war. Defense is about preventing wars—even if this can be very costly. Yet the most expensive and destructive option is war itself. Effective defense should and must not preclude a willingness to engage in disarmament negotiations and pursue arms-control efforts. The Cold War demonstrated how these two approaches could be combined and how the risk of a hot war could be drastically reduced. (Schelling 1966; Freedman 2003)

Breakdown of Soviet Union and the Eastern Block

The development of the European Economic Community (EEC), including its Southern enlargement through the accession of Greece, Spain, and Portugal and its Northern enlargement through the accession of the United Kingdom and Denmark, took place against the backdrop of Europe's political and ideological division between East and West. European integration was therefore largely a Western European project, with only a minority in West Germany continuing to envisage reunification as a distant political possibility.

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the subsequent establishment of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) represented, for many participating states, an attempt to consolidate the existing European security order while creating limited opportunities for improving civil and political liberties in the Eastern Bloc. Western states emphasized the commitments of communist

governments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, while the Soviet Union and its allies valued Western recognition of the existing territorial order and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. (OSCE 1975)

The Helsinki process contributed significantly to European stability by providing a framework for dialogue, cooperation, and conflict management. Yet civil resistance movements and dissidents in Eastern Europe were not primarily concerned with preserving the existing political order; they sought to transform it. They increasingly used the principles and commitments of the Helsinki Final Act as normative and political resources in their struggle for civil liberties and human rights. Their persistence, combined with growing political and economic support from the West, contributed to the erosion of communist rule. (Thomas 2001; OSCE 1975)

The transformation of the political systems of Eastern Europe nevertheless did not result in a major military confrontation between East and West. Although the upheavals challenged the political status quo established during the Cold War, neither side had a clear interest in escalating the transformation into a direct war. Even when Soviet-led Warsaw Pact forces intervened militarily in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 to suppress political reforms and popular resistance, Western governments ultimately refrained from direct military intervention.

Following the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and, subsequently, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, the question of how to construct a new European security order became unavoidable. Considerable controversy remains over what Western governments and Soviet representatives actually discussed or agreed upon concerning the future security architecture of Europe and, in particular, the future role of NATO. What is less contested is the asymmetry of power between the Western states and the Soviet/Russian leadership during this period. The Western governments could draw on substantial political, economic, and institutional support from the newly independent states and the former Soviet satellites.

Countries such as Poland and the Baltic states strongly advocated NATO membership, viewing the Alliance primarily as a source of security and protection against potential future Russian domination. Their strategic orientation was shaped profoundly by historical experiences of Soviet occupation and political subordination. At the same time, these states also sought membership in the European Union. However, EU accession required compliance with extensive political, economic, and institutional criteria and was therefore a more demanding and protracted process. NATO membership, by contrast, offered a comparatively

immediate security guarantee, particularly through the presence and military capabilities of the United States. (Sperling and Webber 2017)

This raises a fundamental question for the subsequent evolution of the European security order: Could the long-term consequences of NATO enlargement have been anticipated, and could an alternative security architecture have provided the security guarantees sought by the Central and Eastern European states without reproducing a division between insiders and outsiders?

The issue can also be understood from the perspective of smaller states seeking security through multilateral institutions. Having experienced domination by a great power, many Central and Eastern European states sought to embed themselves within institutional frameworks that would constrain unilateral power and provide collective security. Their decision to seek protection under the NATO umbrella was therefore not simply imposed from the outside; it was also driven by their own security preferences and historical experiences. The subsequent deterioration of relations between NATO and Russia demonstrates, however, the enduring dilemma of European security: measures perceived by one group of states as defensive and stabilizing can simultaneously be perceived by another great power as threatening and destabilizing. NATO, and subsequently the European Union, provided the security guarantees and institutional frameworks that the Central and Eastern European states had sought. For a considerable period, these arrangements appeared to provide a relatively stable basis for the European security order.

In his "Homelands: A Personal History of Europe", Timothy Garton Ash offers an important perspective on the relationship between the West and Russia. He argues that, properly understood, the enlargement of the West did not necessarily entail the political or strategic marginalization of Russia. Rather, the Western states made considerable efforts to accommodate post-Soviet Russia within the institutions and norms of the liberal international order. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, for example, envisaged extensive cooperation, an aspiration that was subsequently institutionalized through the NATO-Russia Council, inaugurated with Vladimir Putin's participation. According to Garton Ash, it was only during the second half of the 2000s that Russia's relationship with the West shifted decisively towards confrontation. (Garton Ash 2020; NATO 1997)

Nevertheless, an important question remains as to whether NATO and the European Union could have developed more substantial mechanisms for integrating Russia into a cooperative European security architecture. The Charter of Paris for a New Europe, adopted in 1990, and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum

already articulated principles of cooperation, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and a common European security order. Yet these commitments remained largely declaratory and were not translated into a sufficiently robust institutional framework capable of accommodating the divergent security interests of Russia and the expanding Euro-Atlantic community. (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe 1990; United States et al. 1994)

At the same time, it is necessary to question whether a substantially different relationship would ultimately have been acceptable to the Russian leadership, particularly under Vladimir Putin. The political system that emerged under Putin, characterized by increasing executive centralization and authoritarian consolidation, as well as an economic system marked by the concentration of wealth and political influence among powerful oligarchic networks, increasingly diverged from the political and economic principles underpinning European integration. Consequently, even extensive economic interdependence between Russia and individual European states—including Germany and Austria—proved insufficient to prevent the deterioration of relations and, ultimately, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. (Galeotti 2020)

What is particularly important is that there was no immediate military threat to Russia that can reasonably be regarded as providing a legitimate justification for its aggression against Ukraine. Russian security concerns and perceptions of strategic encirclement may help explain the Kremlin's threat perception, but they do not constitute a legal or moral justification for the use of force against a sovereign state.

At the same time, the ambiguity surrounding NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit was strategically problematic. The declaration that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO" at some unspecified point in the future created a form of strategic uncertainty: it offered neither an immediate security guarantee nor a clear pathway to membership. This ambiguity arguably contributed to an unstable security environment in which expectations, commitments, and deterrence signals were insufficiently aligned. (NATO 2008)

More broadly, both NATO and the European Union underestimated the complexity of managing their relationship with a resurgent and increasingly revisionist Russia. A more coherent, sophisticated, and forward-looking European security strategy might have reduced some of the risks associated with this deteriorating relationship. At the same time, such an alternative cannot be assumed to have prevented Russian aggression.

The failure of NATO and the European Union to develop a more effective long-term strategy towards Russia must therefore be critically examined. However, these

failures should not be conflated with responsibility for Russia's decision to wage war. Whatever the shortcomings, ambiguities, or strategic mistakes of Western policy, they cannot serve as a justification for Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The US: an Obstacle or an Amplifier of EU Peace Efforts?

The construction of a common political, economic, and military order in the Western Hemisphere after the Second World War rested fundamentally on two pillars: the predominance of the United States and the gradual political and economic integration of Western European states. The United States emerged from the war as the pre-eminent Western economic and political power and assumed a leading role in the emerging transatlantic order. The establishment of NATO in 1949 institutionalized this asymmetrical relationship. While the European allies retained political sovereignty, their military security remained heavily dependent on American capabilities and, above all, on the U.S. commitment to collective defence. The United States thus became the principal security guarantor of Western Europe vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. (NATO 1949; Lundestad 2003)

This transatlantic security relationship, however, should not be understood exclusively as a burden imposed by the United States on Europe. It also served important American strategic interests. The U.S. military presence in Europe provided Washington with substantial influence over European security policy while simultaneously anchoring the European allies within a broader U.S.-led international order. At the same time, European states benefited from the American security commitment and consequently had comparatively weak incentives to develop fully autonomous defence capabilities. The failure of the European Defence Community in the 1950s further constrained the development of an integrated European defence structure. Although European defence cooperation subsequently developed in various forms, it never produced a military capability capable of replacing the central role of the United States within the European security architecture.

This structural dependence became increasingly apparent after the end of the Cold War. With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, European states had even fewer incentives to develop independent strategic and military capabilities. The resulting situation created a persistent asymmetry: Europe possessed considerable economic and political resources, but remained dependent on the United States for key elements of strategic deterrence, intelligence, logistics, force projection, and advanced military capabilities.

The gradual reorientation of U.S. strategic priorities towards the Indo-Pacific therefore generated concern among European allies. The Obama administration's so-called "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia signaled that the strategic importance of Europe within U.S. grand strategy could no longer be taken for granted. During the Trump administration, these concerns intensified. Trump's repeated questioning of aspects of the transatlantic relationship, including the U.S. commitment to European allies, contributed to growing uncertainty regarding the reliability of the American security guarantee. His statements concerning Greenland, including his refusal to exclude the use of coercive measures to acquire the territory, further illustrated the extent to which Washington itself could become a source of strategic uncertainty for European actors. (Obama 2011; The White House 2022)

Nevertheless, the transatlantic security relationship cannot easily be dismantled. European armed forces remain deeply integrated with U.S. military capabilities, command structures, intelligence systems, logistical networks, and defence-industrial supply chains. European states also rely extensively on American technologies and weapons systems, particularly in areas such as satellite intelligence, strategic airlift, missile defence, precision-guided systems, and advanced information and communications technologies.

Consequently, European strategic autonomy cannot be achieved simply by replacing American weapons systems with European alternatives. It would require the development of a broader European capacity for independent strategic assessment, technological innovation, defence production, intelligence, logistics, and military power projection. The central challenge is therefore not merely whether Europe should remain dependent on the United States, but whether it can develop sufficient capabilities to exercise meaningful strategic agency while preserving the benefits of transatlantic cooperation.

The fundamental question for the future of European security is thus whether the transatlantic relationship can evolve from a structurally asymmetric security dependency towards a more balanced partnership—or whether Europe's historical reliance on American power will continue to constrain the development of a genuinely autonomous European security architecture.

A Changed Global Environment

The European Union has endured successive regional and geopolitical crises without disintegrating. Its transatlantic alliance contributed significantly to this resilience, but European stability also depended on an international order that, despite frequent violations by major powers, provided a framework of rules,

institutions, and legal commitments. Russia's aggression against Ukraine represents a fundamental challenge to this order. At the same time, the return of great-power competition, the transactional approach of the Trump administration, and China's increasingly assertive regional policy indicate that the previous liberal order can no longer be taken for granted.

The central question is therefore what kind of international order is emerging and how the EU should respond. Maurizio Molinari (2026) identifies three possible trajectories: renewed great-power conflict, a new division into spheres of influence, or the gradual erosion of international norms into a more Hobbesian order. Brendan Simms similarly describes the "return of the great powers" while emphasizing Europe's continuing lack of political and military independence. The challenge for the EU is therefore not simply to become a "great power", but to acquire sufficient strategic capacity to shape its external environment. (Molinari 2026; Simms 2019)

This requires moving beyond the ambition to design a comprehensive global order. As Mark Leonard argues, Europe should develop greater adaptability and resilience, acting as an "artisan" rather than an architect of international order. Alexander Stubb and Mark Carney likewise advocate flexible, issue-based coalitions and a form of "variable geometry". Such an approach could enable the EU to cooperate more effectively with middle powers such as Canada and to build pragmatic coalitions around specific challenges. (Leonard 2021; Stubb 2024; Carney 2024)

However, strategic pragmatism requires internal capacity. The EU's ability to act internationally remains constrained by fragmented decision-making, national sovereignty, divergent strategic interests, political polarization, and the rise of Eurosceptic movements. Moreover, great powers possess forms of military, economic, and political leverage that the EU cannot easily reproduce. European strategic agency therefore depends not on emulating great-power politics, but on combining greater capacity with the EU's distinctive normative and institutional resources.

The same logic applies to sanctions. Their effectiveness is context-dependent: sanctions contributed to international pressure against apartheid and played a role in the diplomatic process surrounding Iran, while their effects in relation to Russia remain contested. Sanctions can be an important instrument of coercive diplomacy, but they cannot substitute for diplomacy itself. Conversely, diplomacy does not eliminate the need for coercive measures. A credible European foreign policy therefore requires a differentiated combination of diplomacy, sanctions,

economic incentives, development cooperation, peace building, and, where necessary, deterrence. (Pape 1997; Hufbauer et al. 2007)

The decisive criterion should be effectiveness in achieving clearly defined political objectives, applied consistently and without selective double standards. If the EU claims to defend international law and human rights, its responses to violations must be sufficiently coherent to retain normative credibility. The contrast between European responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank illustrates the political and normative difficulties created by perceived inconsistency.

Europe therefore faces a strategic dilemma: it must become more pragmatic without abandoning the principles that constitute its political identity. Strategic autonomy should not mean isolation, militarization, or the imitation of great-power politics. It should mean developing sufficient political, economic, diplomatic, and security capabilities to act autonomously where necessary, cooperate where possible, and contribute credibly to conflict prevention, peace building, and the preservation of international law.

Defence and Disarmament

Europe's future role requires a reassessment of its military, economic, and normative capacities. Although the EU is not a military alliance, its support for Ukraine and efforts to strengthen European defence capabilities increasingly give its foreign policy a significant security dimension. A credible European peace strategy therefore requires both sufficient defence capabilities and renewed commitment to disarmament, arms control, and nuclear non-proliferation. Europe must also adapt to a more contested international order. The erosion of the post-1945 security architecture, renewed great-power rivalry, and blurred boundaries between war and peace challenge the assumption that European peace can be taken for granted. Ivan Krastev, drawing on Jürgen Habermas's observation that "we are all children of May 8, 1945," identifies Europe's greatest achievement as having made war "unthinkable"—but also as having thereby created a strategic vulnerability. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the fragility of European peace and the increasingly blurred boundary between war and peace. As Herfried Münkler argues, the clear legal distinction between war and peace characteristic of the European order of the past is increasingly obsolete. Europe must therefore reconcile its post-1945 commitment to peace with the need for credible capabilities of deterrence and defence. (Krastev 2017; Münkler 2023)

A second dimension of Europe's transformation concerns its economic model. Sustainable energy, digitalization, responsible applications of artificial intelligence, and deeper financial integration should form the basis of a European innovation strategy. Economic openness should be combined with measures against unfair competition, while climate policy and social cohesion remain central. At the same time, trade, development policy, labour-market policy, and migration require greater coordination at the European and multilateral levels.

Europe must also learn to exercise power responsibly. It will not match the material capabilities of the United States or China, but it can develop a distinctive role as a middle power. Gallip Dalay argues that middle powers can influence global order by reshaping priorities and norms through collective action. This requires Europe to engage the Global South not by exporting European standards, but by participating in their reciprocal construction. (Dalay 2024)

Such an approach corresponds to Alexander Stubb's concept of "value-based realism": maintaining commitments to freedom, fundamental rights, and international rules while recognizing cultural, historical, and geopolitical diversity. European influence should therefore rely increasingly on persuasion, cooperation, and compromise rather than coercion. (Stubb 2024)

Europe's political maturity also requires a consistent engagement with its past and present. "Never again" must apply universally: combating antisemitism and historical injustice must go hand in hand with opposing contemporary discrimination, war crimes, and violations of international law, irrespective of the actor responsible. Historical memory should inform present action rather than substitute for it.

Finally, Europe needs a broader public debate about its global role. Defence and peace building, economic openness and social protection, technological innovation and cultural identity should not be treated as mutually exclusive objectives. A sustainable European strategy requires connecting external action with citizens' interests and demonstrating that European security and prosperity are inseparable from peace beyond Europe's borders.

Intellectual and Political Background – Final Remarks

Our political opinions and analytical perspectives are shaped by a multitude of personal, historical, and intellectual influences. Reflecting on these origins can be valuable both for the author and for readers, particularly when analytical arguments lead to political conclusions. In my case, these conclusions have been

shaped by my upbringing, by encounters with political actors ranging from presidents and prime ministers to activists and ordinary citizens across Europe, particularly in Austria, and by extensive engagement with the work of social and political scientists. Throughout my career, I have not regarded political engagement and political analysis as mutually exclusive. Rather, I have sought—sometimes successfully, sometimes less so—to combine critical analysis with political practice.

I was born in the year following the end of the Second World War. Its consequences remained tangible throughout my childhood, particularly because I grew up near the Czechoslovak-Austrian border, close to Bratislava—a border that subsequently became part of the Iron Curtain. At one point, following an invitation from the local Soviet forces, I crossed the Danube by boat on the Caucasus. I still remember that journey with remarkable clarity.

My family had roots in Hungary and Bohemia, a heritage of which I was proud. I valued the fact that my country had historically been embedded within a broader Central European community. This was not incompatible with a strong sense of patriotism, which was firmly shaped by an explicitly anti-Nazi outlook. The narratives of the Second World War that I encountered as a child included the experiences of relatives who opposed the war and were killed during its early days, as well as the evacuation of our village from the war zone, which my father, a medical doctor, was responsible for organizing.

Soviet troops were a visible presence in our village. They sometimes sought medical treatment from my father and, on one occasion, invited us as primary-school children to attend a Russian circus. Later, as a student—and particularly during my tenure as Secretary-General of the United Nations Student Association (UNSA)—I developed close contacts with Russian and other Eastern European students. I understood these relationships as a modest personal contribution to peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, I experienced the collapse of the Iron Curtain with profound enthusiasm.

As a Vienna City Councillor responsible for urban development and planning, I immediately established contacts with counterparts in Bratislava and Budapest. Shortly before the political transformations of 1989–1990, I had also been involved in preparing a World Exhibition that Vienna was planning jointly with Budapest. The project was ultimately abandoned following the political changes in the region and a negative referendum in Vienna.

My eighteen years in the European Parliament were likewise guided by the objective of building political bridges. Supporting European Union enlargement

was a central priority of my work in the Foreign Affairs Committee. I served as the European Parliament's first rapporteur for what was then officially known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and later as rapporteur for Croatia's accession to the European Union. My engagement with the Western Balkans repeatedly brought me into contact with the consequences of conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was similarly involved in the Parliament's relations with the South Caucasus.

I also worked to strengthen parliamentary and social-democratic relations with Russia and Ukraine. Over time, however, I came to recognize the limits of these efforts. Neither the Russian political party Just Russia nor Ukraine's Party of Regions was prepared to embrace a genuinely social-democratic orientation. More broadly, I concluded that Russia was unlikely to develop into the kind of "strategic partner" that I had envisaged when I began preparing my report on Russia for the European Parliament.

My engagement with the Middle East provided another important dimension to this experience. I visited Israel and Palestine on numerous occasions and held discussions with political representatives, including Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat. Their political positions were far apart, but I believed that an agreement might have been achievable under sufficiently strong and sustained international support, particularly from the United States and the European Union. Crossing checkpoints controlled by Israeli soldiers, I was repeatedly struck by the patience of ordinary Palestinians confronted with restrictive and often humiliating conditions. I also witnessed developments that, in my assessment, progressively undermined the viability of a two-state solution, particularly the expansion and political support of Israeli settlements.

I was similarly engaged in strengthening relations between the European Union and Turkey and in promoting dialogue between the Turkish authorities and Kurdish representatives, including Kurdish mayors in eastern Turkey. The Turkish authorities were frequently unwilling to pursue a meaningful path towards reconciliation, while some Kurdish representatives were themselves insufficiently prepared to compromise. I strongly supported Turkey's aspiration to join the European Union, a position that at times brought me into conflict with my own party leadership. At the same time, independently of President Erdoğan, whom I met several times in Ankara and Brussels, I increasingly recognized the difficulties posed by Turkey's reluctance to fully embrace and respect fundamental European principles and political standards.

Across these experiences, I repeatedly encountered the same fundamental problem: opportunities for reconciliation and peace were often available but remained unrealized. Responsibility lay primarily with the actors directly involved, but also with the limited unity, political courage, and consistency of the international community. The European Union itself frequently struggled to reach agreement on whether and how to act. Initiatives developed by European parliamentarians across political groupings often failed to achieve their intended objectives, as did some initiatives undertaken by the European Union as an institution.

Nevertheless, political engagement can create opportunities for those struggling for human rights, social justice, and peaceful transformation. Such efforts require patience and should not be evaluated exclusively according to their immediate outcomes. Political action should remain consistent with one's principles even when success cannot be guaranteed. I have therefore tried to follow the spirit of Václav Havel's well-known insight: we should act not because we are certain that our actions will succeed, but because we believe that they are meaningful and necessary in themselves, regardless of their eventual results.

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Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy

Infrastructure for Peace

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Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht die Bedeutung interkulturellen Dialogs und kultureller Diplomatie für die Friedensförderung in einer zunehmend fragmentierten und geopolitisch umkämpften Weltordnung. Ausgehend von Ansätzen der Friedens- und Konfliktforschung, der Konflikttransformation sowie der Forschung zu kultureller Diplomatie und Soft Power wird argumentiert, dass geopolitische Spannungen nicht allein durch materielle Interessen, sondern auch durch Identitäten, historische Narrative, Wahrnehmungen und Feindbilder geprägt werden. Interkultureller Dialog kann solche antagonistischen Konstruktionen durch gegenseitige Anerkennung, Perspektivwechsel, Vertrauensbildung und kontinuierliche Kommunikation über politische und kulturelle Grenzen hinweg hinterfragen. Kulturelle Diplomatie kann dabei als institutioneller Raum für solche Begegnungen dienen. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass beide Ansätze strukturelle Konflikte nicht allein lösen können, jedoch als Infrastrukturen des Friedens dazu beitragen, die kulturellen und relationalen Bedingungen von Konflikt und Verständigung nachhaltig zu verändern.

Schlagwörter: Friedensforschung, Interkultureller Dialog, Kulturdiplomatie

Abstract

This article examines the role of cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy in promoting peace in an increasingly fragmented and geopolitically contested world order. Drawing on Peace Research, conflict transformation theory, and scholarship on cultural diplomacy and soft power, it argues that geopolitical tensions are shaped not only by material interests but also by identities, historical narratives, perceptions, and enemy images. Cross-cultural dialogue can challenge these antagonistic constructions by fostering mutual recognition, perspective-taking, trust, and sustained communication across political and cultural divides. Cultural diplomacy, when understood not merely as strategic influence but as reciprocal engagement, can provide institutional spaces for such encounters. The article argues that these practices cannot resolve structural conflicts alone, but can function as infrastructures of peace by transforming the relational and cultural conditions under which conflict is reproduced and managed.

Keywords: Peace Research, Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Cultural Diplomacy

Peace in a Fragmented World Order

The contemporary international system is characterised by increasing geopolitical fragmentation, intensifying great-power competition and the erosion of shared frameworks of international cooperation. While conventional approaches to international security tend to focus on military capabilities, economic interests and institutional arrangements, Critical Peace Research highlights the importance of human relationships and perceptions beyond the security dilemma and zero-sum assumptions, human centered peace and security approaches in international relations and the deconstruction of dichotomies (Mühlbauer/Lakitsch, 2024; Mühlbauer/Moegling, 2026). In this context, cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy acquire particular significance. The central question is therefore: How can cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy overcome geopolitical tensions in a fragmented world order? This contribution argues that they cannot eliminate structural conflicts or substitute for political negotiations. They can, however, contribute to peace by transforming the relational, cultural and epistemic conditions through which geopolitical antagonisms are produced and reproduced.

The importance of Culture in Peacebuilding

A fundamental starting point is the recognition that culture is not external to conflict. Rather, political conflicts are interpreted through historically situated systems of meaning, collective identities and narratives. Bräuchler's (2018) account of the “cultural turn” in Peace Research demonstrates why culturally specific understand ings of conflict, security, justice and peace need to be incorporated into peacebuil ing theory and practice. Similarly, Bräuchler (2020) argues that peacebuilding needs to engage more seriously with anthropology and ethnography because co cepts such as reconciliation and peace acquire different meanings in different s cial and cultural contexts. Culture should therefore neither be treated as an imm table source of conflict nor reduced to a superficial instrument of intercultural co munication. It is a constitutive dimension of how actors understand both the selves and their political environment. This perspective connects directly to John Paul Lederach's (1996) conception of conflict transformation. Rather than understanding peace merely as the termination of direct violence, conflict transformation seeks to alter the relationships, structures and social patterns that sustain antagonism. From this perspective, dialogue is important because it creates relational spaces in which adversaries can encounter one another beyond established enemy images. Lederach's later work further emphsises the significance of relationships, imagination and social networks in constructing sustainable peace (Lederach, 2005). Cross-cultural dialogue can consequently be

understood as a form of relational peacebuilding: it does not require actors to abandon their identities or political interests but creates possibilities for recognizing difference without converting difference into antagonism. This is particularly important because geopolitical competition frequently produces simplified binary narratives. The division of the world into “East” and “West”, “democracies” and “autocracies”, or “the Global North” and “the Global South” can obscure internal diversity and encourage the construction of homogeneous images of political and cultural others. Huntington's (1996) The Clash of Civilizations r mains one of the most influential formulations of the argument that cultural and civilizational identities could become major sources of international conflict. Yet an alternative reading is possible: cultural difference is not inherently conflictual. Its political consequences depend substantially on whether difference is institutionalized through exclusion and securitization or through dialogue, recognition and cooperation.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy – Soft Power Tools of Great Powers or Peacebuilding Infrastructure?

The concept of intercultural or cross-cultural dialogue is particularly relevant here – as we see in the coming articles in this book. UNESCO's conceptual framework defines it as a reciprocal and sustained process through which people from different cultural backgrounds engage with similarities and differences, develop mutual understanding and critically reassess their own assumptions (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO 2022). Such dialogue is therefore more demanding than cultural exchange alone: it requires listening, reflexivity and a willingness to recognise the legitimacy of perspectives different from one's own. Research commissioned by UNESCO (2019) similarly identifies intercultural dialogue as a potential mechanism for preventing conflict, strengthening social cohesion and creating conditions for sustainable peace.

Cultural diplomacy provides an institutional framework through which such dialogue can take place across borders. Traditionally, cultural diplomacy has been understood as the use of cultural resources and exchanges in the pursuit of foreign-policy objectives (Cummings, 2009). Its conceptual development is closely connected to the literature on public diplomacy and soft power. Nye (2004) argues that states can influence others not only through coercion or material incentives but also through attraction, values and culture. Melissen (2005) subsequently emphasised the transformation of public diplomacy towards more networked and dialogue-oriented forms of international engagement. Rather than communicating exclusively to foreign publics, contemporary diplomacy increasingly involves

communicating with them. For Peace Research, however, cultural diplomacy should not be reduced to an instrument of strategic influence. If culture is employed merely to improve a state's international image or to generate political legitimacy, cultural diplomacy risks becoming indistinguishable from sophisticated propaganda. Its peacebuilding potential emerges instead when it facilitates reciprocal interaction and creates relatively autonomous spaces for communication. As Schneider (2005) demonstrates in the context of public diplomacy, cultural activities can establish forms of international engagement that are difficult to achieve through conventional diplomatic channels. The emphasis should therefore be placed on mutuality rather than persuasion. This distinction is especially significant in periods of geopolitical crisis. When formal diplomatic relations deteriorate, cultural and societal networks can sometimes preserve channels of communication. Universities, museums, cultural organisations, artists, journalists, students and civil-society organisations can function as intermediary actors connecting societies even when relations between governments become confrontational. Nye (2008) consequently stresses the importance of networks and credibility in contemporary soft power, while Melissen (2005) identifies the growing significance of non-state actors and dialogue in modern diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy can thus operate as a form of preventive diplomacy below the level of formal interstate negotiations. Its effectiveness nevertheless depends on several conditions. First, dialogue must be sustained rather than reduced to symbolic encounters. Second, it must be based on a degree of reciprocity; one-sided cultural projection is unlikely to produce genuine mutual understanding. Third, cultural diplomacy must acknowledge asymmetries of power. Not all cultures possess equal international visibility, institutional resources or representational authority. A genuinely peace-oriented approach therefore requires attention to postcolonial critiques of international cultural relations and to the voices of actors historically marginalised within dominant diplomatic structures (Ang/Isar/Mar, 2015). The role of cultural diplomacy is consequently best understood not as resolving geopolitical conflicts directly but as transforming the social conditions under which such conflicts are interpreted and managed. It can reduce stereotyping, facilitate perspective-taking, develop interpersonal trust and preserve relationships across political divides. UNESCO similarly emphasises the contribution of culture to conflict prevention, reconciliation, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, while stressing the importance of protecting cultural diversity and cultural rights (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

Conclusion: Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy as Infrastructures for Peace

Cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy cannot overcome geopolitical tensions and wars by themselves. But they can, however, contribute to overcoming the antagonistic logics through which geopolitical tensions become culturally and socially entrenched. Their principal contribution is relational and epistemic: they create opportunities for recognition, mutual learning and the transformation of enemy images. In a fragmented international order, this makes cultural diplomacy more than an accessory to conventional foreign policy. Properly conceived, it constitutes an infrastructure of peace—one that keeps communication, relationships and possibilities for cooperation alive when geopolitical structures are increasingly characterised by division.

For Peace Research, this implies that peacebuilding should move beyond a narrow focus on formal institutions and conflict settlements and pay greater attention to the cultural and relational environments in which peace becomes possible. Sustainable peace requires not the elimination of difference, but the capacity to manage difference without transforming it into violence. Cross-cultural dialogue and cultural diplomacy can contribute precisely to this capacity: they do not promise a world without disagreement, but they can help construct a world in which disagreement does not inevitably become confrontation.

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Stitching the Bridge

Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Civic Imagination, and the Practice of Peace in North Bekaa

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Zusammenfassung

Dieses Kapitel reflektiert ein Jahrzehnt der Friedensarbeit von Peace of Art Lebanon in der nordbekaanischen Region des Libanon. Ausgehend von relationalen und kontaktbasierten Ansätzen untersucht es interkulturellen Dialog anhand von drei Praxisfeldern: politischer Bildung mit Jugendlichen, der Koordination zivilgesellschaftlicher Akteure und der Dokumentation von kulturellem Erbe. Daraus entwickelt das Kapitel einen vierstufigen methodischen Rahmen aus Kontextanalyse, partizipativem Co-Design, strukturiertem Kontakt auf Augenhöhe und adaptivem Monitoring. Es argumentiert, dass interkultureller Dialog in langanhaltenden Krisen keine punktuelle Intervention, sondern eine nachhaltige Organisationspraxis ist, die durch wiederholte Begegnungen über konfessionelle, generationelle und geografische Grenzen hinweg entsteht und durch bewusst entwickelte, übertragbare Methoden getragen wird.

Schlagwörter: Interkultureller Dialog, Friedensförderung, Zivilgesellschaft, Frieden

Abstract

This chapter reflects on a decade of peacebuilding by Peace of Art Lebanon in North Bekaa, Lebanon. Drawing on relational and contact-based approaches, it examines cross-cultural dialogue through youth civic education, civil-society coordination, and heritage documentation. From these practices, it develops a four-stage framework of context mapping, participatory co-design, equal-status contact, and adaptive monitoring. The chapter argues that in protracted crises, cross-cultural dialogue is not a discrete intervention but a sustained organizational practice, built through repeated encounters across confessional, generational, and geographic divides and supported by deliberate, replicable methodologies.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Peacebuilding, Civil Society, Peace

Writing from the Border

Peace of Art Lebanon was founded in 2016 as a Lebanese, locally rooted non-governmental organization with a mandate spanning youth empowerment, civic education, peacebuilding, intercultural dialogue, and creative expression. It is, today, one of three member organizations of the Peace of Art International Network (POAINTL), a collaborative international network that brings together the legally registered Peace of Art organizations in Lebanon, the United States, and Germany under a shared vision of promoting peace, human dignity, creativity, dialogue, education, and sustainable community development. Rather than a separate legal entity, POAINTL functions as the strategic framework connecting its member organizations through formal cooperation, allowing them to share expertise, strengthen institutional capacities, develop joint initiatives, pursue international partnerships, and support one another toward greater collective impact, while fully respecting the legal independence, governance, and national responsibilities of each member. Through this cooperation, the network aims to connect local action with global partnership, fostering inclusive solutions that empower communities and contribute to lasting peace across borders.

North Bekaa, and the villages of Al-Ain and Al-Fakiha in particular, sit at one of Lebanon's most layered borders: a confessional border between Sunni, Shia, and Christian communities; an administrative border between the Baalbek-Hermel and Bekaa governorates; and a literal, porous state border with Syria that has shaped the region's economy, its kinship networks, and its experience of conflict for generations. To work on peace and cross-cultural dialogue from this location is to work without the luxury of distance: the communities Peace of Art Lebanon serves are not a case study selected from afar but the villages in which the organization's staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries live, raise children, bury their dead, and rebuild after each new shock.

Over the period examined in this chapter, Peace of Art's work expanded beyond North Bekaa through partnerships with organizations including PAX for Peace, UNESCO, Search for Common Ground, Perspectivity, United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), European Endowment for Democracy (EED), Human Security Collective (HSC), and multiple national and regional civil society networks. These partnerships provided opportunities to compare locally developed practices with broader regional peacebuilding approaches and informed the methodological reflections presented here.

That connection between the very local and the increasingly international is itself part of the story this chapter tells. As a reflection of the growth and recognition of POAINTL's peacebuilding work, the network is now legally registered in Lebanon, the United States, and Germany, and is establishing an office in Syria to further expand its regional presence, an expansion shaped less by ambition than by the cross-border character of the region Peace of Art Lebanon has always worked in. In recognition of these efforts, and of his broader contribution to the field of peacebuilding, Peace of Art co-founder Mahdi Yahya received the Bremen International Peace Award 2026 from the Die Schwelle Foundation[1], in the category of Pioneering Peace Work. Over nearly a decade, Peace of Art Lebanon's programming has moved fluidly between long-term programmatic initiatives and emergency response, tracking the rhythm of a region where calm is punctuated by displacement, ceasefire violations, and economic shock. This chapter is written jointly by two members of the organization who, between them, have carried roles spanning project design, field facilitation, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, and direct community engagement, a structural feature of small, rurally based NGOs rarely theorized in the peacebuilding literature, but one that, we argue, fundamentally shapes how cross-cultural dialogue is practiced on the ground.

Our intention is not to present a polished success narrative but an honest, theoretically situated account of what cross-cultural dialogue looks like when pursued not as a single intervention but as an organizational habit, sustained across multiple programmes and crises, in one of Lebanon's most historically marginalized regions. In doing so, the chapter speaks directly to several of the themes this volume takes up: intercultural communication and conflict transformation, the place of religion and identity in dialogue, digital spaces as sites of cross-cultural exchange, and the educational and academic partnerships through which local practice and international scholarship meet. We do not write from South Asia, and make no claim to that region's transregional peace initiatives; what we offer instead is a companion vantage point from another protracted-crisis borderland, in the hope that the parallels prove useful.

"Our understanding of dialogue did not emerge from observing projects from a distance. It developed through years of facilitating difficult conversations, revising programs after setbacks, responding to crises, and returning repeatedly to the same communities. The chapter therefore reflects both institutional learning and the

[1] Mahdi Yahya received the International Bremen Peace Award 2026. https://dieschwelle.de/en/peace-award-2026/mahdi-yahya.

gradual transformation of our own understanding of what sustained peacebuilding requires." — Vera Al-Mawla

Theoretical Orientation: Dialogue as Relationship, Not Event

Our reading of cross-cultural dialogue draws on four complementary strands of peacebuilding scholarship, synthesized here rather than treated in turn. John Paul Lederach's relational account of conflict transformation holds that sustainable peace is produced not by agreements alone but by the slow accumulation of changed relationships, sustained over time and embedded in a place's social fabric; his later work on the "moral imagination" locates the capacity for constructive change in everyday, local practice rather than elite negotiation (Lederach 1997, 2005). Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis supplies the operational complement: prejudice between groups is reduced not by mere proximity but by structured contact under conditions of equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport 1954). Taken together, these two premises shape our starting assumption: dialogue is a disposition to be cultivated and re-cultivated, and the conditions of an encounter must be deliberately engineered rather than left to goodwill.

Séverine Autesserre's critique of internationally led peacebuilding sharpens this further, arguing that durable peace is built more through everyday, local interaction, habits, narratives, routine encounters, than through the macro-level interventions privileged by international actors and donors (Autesserre 2014). Writing from inside a small, village-based organization rather than observing one from outside, we take this as license to make visible the kind of "everyday peace" practice that rarely survives translation into a project report because it does not map cleanly onto a single indicator. Roger Mac Ginty's work on hybrid and everyday peace supplies a final, cautionary lens: peace in practice rarely conforms to the clean, liberal-institutional template assumed by international frameworks, but emerges instead through hybrid arrangements in which local custom, informal authority, and international norms interact, sometimes uneasily, to produce locally legitimate order (Mac Ginty 2011). This framing has kept us from importing dialogue methodologies wholesale from international templates without adapting them to North Bekaa's specific confessional, kinship, and political texture; the bilingual conceptual translation work described in Section 4 is, in effect, a hybridization exercise, reworking internationally codified categories until they function within, rather than against, the village's own normative vocabulary.

None of these four theorists, on their own, anticipated a small organization operating simultaneously as curriculum designer, crisis responder, and civil-society convenor. Our contribution, developed across the sections that follow, is to show what their combined premises look like when practiced under exactly those conditions.

Context: North Bekaa as a Borderland of Layered Vulnerability

Baalbek-Hermel, the governorate encompassing North Bekaa, has long ranked among Lebanon's most underserved regions in terms of state investment and access to services, a structural marginalization that predates the country's current crises by decades and has left the population's relationship to the central state mediated instead by informal networks, cross-border kinship and trade with Syria, and a patchwork of confessional and political affiliations. Proximity to the Syria-Lebanon border has meant the region has absorbed successive waves of displacement, first from Lebanon's own conflicts and then from the Syrian war, layering displaced and host populations within the same small towns, often through kinship ties that complicate any simple host-refugee binary.

We want to be precise about what this region has lived through, because precision matters to the communities we write about: this is a place that has experienced war repeatedly, not abstractly, including within the period this chapter covers. Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war left legacies, internal displacement, fragmented state authority, confessional power-sharing frozen rather than renegotiated, that continue to structure life in North Bekaa today, periodically reopened by political assassination. Between roughly 2014 and 2017, the spillover of the Syrian war brought direct confrontation with ISIS and other armed groups into Baalbek-Hermel itself; for North Bekaa, that was never a distant humanitarian emergency but a war that arrived at the edge of the villages where Peace of Art Lebanon works. Chronic political paralysis has corroded trust in state institutions across generations, pushing communities to rely on informal structures of authority and mutual aid, including organizations such as our own. The economic collapse that began in 2019, among the most severe globally in over a century by World Bank assessment, wiped out savings and pushed most of the population below the poverty line within a few years; the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the middle of that collapse, and the Beirut port explosion of August 2020, though physically concentrated in the capital, registered nationally as a further demonstration of the state's inability to protect its own citizens. Since 2024, a renewed war involving sustained Israeli strikes has reached Baalbek-Hermel directly; a November 2024 ceasefire has been violated on a near-daily basis since, alternating periods of calm

with sudden escalation, including strikes in the weeks immediately preceding this chapter's writing. The war is, at the time of writing, neither clearly over nor predictably active, chronically intermittent, close and recent enough that no programming calendar or child's sense of safety can be built on the assumption that calm, once achieved, will hold.

We set out this sequence because its cumulative, layered nature is itself analytically important, and too often lost in project documents that treat each shock as discrete and bounded. No single crisis in this list, civil war, assassination, border fighting, political deadlock, economic collapse, pandemic, port explosion, renewed war, has been allowed to fully resolve before the next arrived. Families in North Bekaa have therefore not experienced "a crisis" in the singular, recoverable sense assumed by humanitarian planning cycles, but a continuous, overlapping accumulation of harm spanning, for our youngest participants, the whole of their conscious lives. Trust, in institutions and in the predictability of daily life, has been depleted by a more sustained process than any single intervention can repair, and the reserves communities draw on to absorb one shock are, in North Bekaa, very often already spent before the next arrives. Programming that treats each phase of work as starting from a stable baseline is, in our experience, programming built on fiction.

It is within this context that Peace of Art Lebanon has built its programming logic around proximity rather than projection. The organization is structurally embedded in the villages it serves: its staff are residents, its institutional memory is the community's memory, and its credibility rests on continuity of presence through good periods and bad. This is not a claim we make abstractly: it is visible, for instance, in the fact that Kulluna Muwatinun facilitators are themselves former programme participants, and that WARD's founding members are organizations Peace of Art Lebanon has worked alongside, in various configurations, for the better part of a decade. Dialogue work led by outsiders can be paused or relocated when conditions deteriorate; dialogue work led by residents cannot be relocated, because the practitioners themselves have nowhere else to go, both the chief vulnerability and the chief asset of locally rooted peacebuilding organizations in protracted-crisis borderlands. Economic collapse has compounded this further by eroding the schools, health centres, and municipal services that might otherwise buffer displacement shocks, so that "peacebuilding" and "survival" are rarely analytically separable in practice, however cleanly formal project terminology distinguishes them. A civic education session on nonviolent communication cannot be insulated from the fact that some of the teenagers in the room lack reliable electricity, that the road to the session may pass through a checkpoint, or that the session itself may be interrupted by news of renewed strikes elsewhere. Designing

for this context has required us to treat resilience to interruption, the capacity of a curriculum, a partnership, or a relationship to survive being paused and resumed, sometimes repeatedly, as a first-order design consideration rather than an operational footnote.

Digital Storytelling as Civic Pedagogy: The Kulluna Muwatinun Programme

Kulluna Muwatinun, "We Are All Citizens", is implemented by Peace of Art Lebanon in partnership with PAX for Peace, the Dutch peace organization. Its current phase builds a digital storytelling capacity among youth, using video production as a vehicle for civic education across five interlinked domains: peacebuilding, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), nonviolent communication (NVC), the Youth, Peace and Security agenda (YPS), and citizenship. In developing this component, the team produced a bilingual master list of twenty-six core concepts across seven thematic categories, giving facilitators and youth a shared, accessible vocabulary for terms often treated, in formal civic education, as abstract or technical.

"We kept writing definitions that were correct and useless. A term could be legally precise and still land as nothing to a sixteen-year-old in Al-Fakiha. The breakthrough was always the same: stop explaining the concept, and ask the young people to make something that needed it." — Vera Al-Mawla, recalling on the curriculum's early drafts

The choice of digital storytelling as a pedagogical method is not incidental. Video production requires a sustained series of small, concrete decisions, whose story to tell, which images to use, how to sequence a narrative, what to leave out, that together constitute structured, cooperative contact closely aligned with Allport's conditions for prejudice reduction: participants from different confessional or displacement backgrounds occupy equal-status roles around a shared creative goal, with institutional support from facilitators trained in NVC and conflict-sensitive pedagogy. The civic concepts embedded in the curriculum are not delivered as lectures but encountered through the practical work of deciding how to represent them on screen, the cultivation of moral imagination through situated practice rather than abstract instruction (Lederach 2005).

The Youth, Peace and Security framework, formalized through UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015), recognizes young people as agents in peacebuilding rather than merely its beneficiaries. Kulluna Muwatinun operationalizes this structurally: youth participants produce media that circulates within their own communities, giving them narrative authorship over how peace, citizenship, and belief are

represented locally, authorship that matters in a region where national civic curricula are often perceived, not without justification, as distant from lived confessional and political realities.

The programme has evolved beyond classroom-based civic education into a wider ecosystem of experiential learning. As documented through Peace of Art's programme records, participants have engaged not only in leadership training but also structured debate workshops, stakeholder visits to municipal authorities, participatory research, round tables, and community social projects. These activities create multiple opportunities for repeated interaction between young people and public institutions, allowing civic learning to extend beyond workshop settings into local governance and community engagement. Furthermore, Peace of Art has served as a regional coaching partner supporting organizations across multiple countries in the region in adapting Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) approaches to their own contexts, illustrating how locally developed pedagogical practices can circulate across national settings rather than remaining confined to North Bekaa.

This is not a frictionless process. Terms like "freedom of religion or belief," carrying specific legal weight in international human rights discourse, do not map cleanly onto everyday Arabic usage in a multi-confessional rural setting, where religious identity is often inseparable from kinship, land, and political alignment. Considerable time in the programme's development went not into technical video production but into this conceptual translation work, finding language simultaneously faithful to the international framework, intelligible to a sixteen-year-old in Al-Fakiha, and not itself a source of confessional friction. This labour, largely invisible in formal project reporting, is, in our experience, the actual substance of cross-cultural dialogue work at the programme-design stage, before any encounter between participants takes place.

"One of the most difficult moments as a project manager was realizing that disagreement itself was not the problem. Young people were often willing to speak honestly; what they lacked was confidence that disagreement could occur without humiliation or exclusion. Our role gradually shifted from delivering training to protecting a space where difficult conversations could continue." — Mahdi Yahya.

Coordination as Dialogue Infrastructure: The WARD Network

In October 2025, Peace of Art Lebanon launched WARD, the Working Assembly for Rights and Dialogue, a civil society coordination platform that now brings together more than twenty-five civil society organizations, activists, and NGOs from across

Lebanon. Its founding rationale reflects a structural observation familiar to anyone working in Lebanese civil society: the country hosts a dense ecosystem of local and international NGOs, but coordination among them, particularly across confessional or geographic constituencies, remains thin, often limited to ad hoc information-sharing rather than sustained joint planning.

Even during its initial phase, the platform generated observable outputs beyond the establishment of the network itself. The inaugural assembly convened thirteen NGOs representing different regions of Lebanon, while subsequent expansion increased membership to more than twenty-five organizations. Early activities included joint newsletters, cross-organizational meetings, collaborative advocacy discussions, and coordination through broader civil society working groups. These outputs should not be interpreted as evidence that inter-organizational trust had been fully established; rather, they provide measurable indicators that repeated opportunities for institutional contact and collaboration were successfully created.

We position WARD as a dialogue intervention in its own right, even though conventional peacebuilding taxonomies rarely classify it that way, reserving "dialogue" for interventions involving direct interpersonal contact between conflict-affected individuals. That taxonomy is, in our view, too narrow. Coordination platforms bringing together organizational leadership from different confessional and geographic constituencies around shared operational problems, overlapping beneficiary lists, complementary service gaps, joint advocacy opportunities, produce exactly the kind of structured, equal-status, cooperative contact Allport identifies as conducive to reduced intergroup prejudice, except that the unit of contact is the organization rather than the individual. Civil society coordination, on this reading, is a meso-level analogue to interpersonal dialogue: it builds working trust between institutional actors who might otherwise interact only through competition for the same limited pool of resources.

The Network's inaugural newsletter, produced shortly after its October 2025 launch, was deliberately designed to model the cross-organizational visibility the platform seeks to build, profiling multiple member organizations side by side regardless of denominational or political base within a single shared communications product. In a media environment where civil society visibility is itself often filtered through confessional or political channels, co-presenting diverse organizations as equally legitimate, equally newsworthy actors is not a neutral editorial choice, it is itself a small act of cross-cultural dialogue practice.

It is worth being candid about the limits of this work. A platform bringing organizations together across confessional and political lines does not, on its own,

resolve the underlying competition for scarce resources that often structures relationships between Lebanese civil society actors more powerfully than any shared commitment to coordination. WARD's early experience confirms what the broader coordination literature would predict: trust between organizations builds incrementally, through repeated small acts of reciprocity, a beneficiary referral, a co-signed statement, covering a partner's session during a security closure, rather than through the platform's formal existence alone. The infrastructure creates the conditions for accumulated reciprocity; it does not substitute for it.

Heritage as Bridge: The Woven Memory of Fakiha

The Woven Memory of Fakiha is a heritage documentation initiative, under our project "Weaving Resilience" recording the carpet-weaving tradition of Fakiha village, a craft historically practiced by women across generations and increasingly at risk as younger generations migrate toward urban centres or abroad. The resulting catalogue documents techniques, patterns, and oral histories, situating the craft within the village's broader economic and cultural life.

Heritage documentation of this kind occupies a distinctive position within cross-cultural dialogue practice because its primary axis of bridging is generational and gendered rather than confessional or political. The tradition is held disproportionately in the embodied knowledge of older women, knowledge at acute risk of loss not through deliberate erasure but through the ordinary attrition of migration, economic pressure, and time. Elise Boulding's notion of a "culture of peace," sustained through cultivated practices, narratives, and intergenerational transmission rather than the absence of violence alone, is a useful frame here (Boulding, 2000): documenting and re-circulating a craft tradition strengthens exactly the intergenerational connective tissue, between grandmothers and granddaughters, between a village's past and its imagined future, that protracted crisis and out-migration steadily erode.

The project also functions as a vehicle for economic empowerment, complementing parallel work undertaken with UNESCO on the documentation and safeguarding of Fakiha's weaving heritage (further details on our website). Cultural documentation and livelihood support are conceived here as mutually reinforcing: a craft that generates income is more likely to be transmitted to the next generation than one preserved only in an archive. The Woven Memory of Fakiha therefore resists a purely commemorative framing of heritage, heritage as something looked back upon, in favour of a generative one, in which documentation is the first step

toward making a living tradition economically viable, and therefore more likely to remain a living tradition at all.

Beyond documentation, the initiative incorporated practical training workshops for women between the ages of eighteen and fifty, combining heritage preservation with skills development and livelihood opportunities. Workshop activities focused on traditional carpet-making techniques, local symbolism, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, providing observable indicators of participation alongside the project's broader cultural objectives.

Although the initiative predates the explicit articulation of the four-stage framework in Section 8, its design followed the same underlying logic: context mapping to determine which weavers, techniques, and family histories carried village-level sensitivity before any recording began; participatory co-design in letting weavers themselves decide what could be documented publicly and what remained private knowledge; and structured, equal-status contact in the intergenerational pairing built into the training sessions themselves. Read retrospectively, the project is less an exception to the methodology than one of the experiences from which it was distilled.

"Working alongside women documenting traditional weaving reminded me that heritage is carried less through objects than through relationships. Every conversation about a pattern or a technique became a conversation about memory, identity, and belonging. I began to understand heritage preservation as another form of dialogue. And as a young woman coming from this context myself, I could relate to how these forms of dialogue shape a window for us to access opportunities where we could honestly reflect and share and amplify our identities, our stories... especially in underprivileged contexts." — Vera Al-Mawla.

Dialogue Under Duress: Programming Through War and Displacement

No account of peacebuilding practice in North Bekaa over the past several years can responsibly omit the experience of operating through actual war and mass displacement. At various points since 2024, Peace of Art Lebanon's programming has required a rapid shift from longer-term civic education toward emergency response, as the renewed Israeli campaign and its near-daily ceasefire violations displaced families in waves that have continued, on and off, into the period in which this chapter is written. The shift was neither smooth nor planned in advance; it was,

like much of the organization's history, an adaptive response to conditions that left little room for deliberation.

The toll is not adequately captured by displacement figures alone, significant as those are. It includes the loss of homes and, in some periods, of family members and neighbours; the destruction of agricultural land and livelihoods in a region where farming remains a primary income source; the disruption, more than once, of an entire school year for children who had already lost instructional time to the pandemic and economic collapse; and a more diffuse erosion of any sense that calm, once it arrives, can be trusted to last. We have observed this last effect directly: youth participants who, in calmer periods, engage readily in the forward-looking work Kulluna Muwatinun is built around become visibly more guarded and less willing to commit to multi-session activities during periods of renewed strikes, even distant ones. Planning a six-week storytelling curriculum means something different to a sixteen-year-old who has already watched two "normal" periods collapse without warning than it does to a designer working from a stable external timeline.

"The most difficult lesson came during periods of renewed violence. We had designed programmes assuming continuity, yet communities were living through interruption. Instead of asking how to keep projects on schedule, we learned to ask how relationships could survive disruption. That shift changed our understanding of peacebuilding more than any single training methodology." — Mahdi Yahya

We want to resist two easy narratives about this period: that the pivot to emergency response was a temporary interruption of the "real" dialogue work, to be resumed once conditions normalized; or that emergency response was itself dialogue practice by definition, simply because it involved cross-confessional, cross-displacement-status assistance. Neither captures what actually happened. What we observed instead was that the relational capital accumulated through years of prior dialogue and civic programming, trust built through Kulluna Muwatinun's youth cohorts, institutional relationships built through WARD, credibility built through sustained presence in the villages, became the very infrastructure which appeared to facilitate the delivery of emergency response by providing pre-existing channels of communication and trust. Displaced families were received, in part, into networks of trust built years earlier for an entirely different purpose. We record this not to claim credit for foresight, none of the three initiatives was designed with emergency response in mind, but because the alternative conclusion, that

relational capital built for one purpose cannot be redirected to another, is not what our experience supports.

This aligns with Lederach's argument that peacebuilding capacity is cumulative rather than project-bound: relationships built through one cycle of programming become the latent infrastructure available when the next, unanticipated crisis arrives (Lederach, 1997). It lends empirical weight, too, to Autesserre's claim that the everyday, accumulated social fabric of a place, rather than any single intervention, determines whether a community can absorb shock without fracturing further along existing lines of division (Autesserre, 2014). For an organization like ours, the practical implication is that dialogue and civic programming should be evaluated not only against their own stated objectives, but against their latent function as a reserve of relational capacity for crises that have not yet occurred, a function now tested repeatedly rather than hypothetically.

A further dimension of this period deserves mention: our own communications and advocacy work during it. Contributing a podcast episode to the Peace Corner Podcast platform and a script for a 2026 protection campaign addressing threats faced by young peacebuilders required articulating, in a more public register, lessons that had until then circulated only internally as field experience. Translating lived, often improvised crisis response into rigorous, non-sentimental advocacy language, resisting both bureaucratic flattening and emotive appeal, proved to be its own form of cross-cultural translation: rendering a specific North Bekaa experience legible to an international peacebuilding audience without losing its specificity. This illustrates a further, often unacknowledged layer of dialogue practice: dialogue not only across confessional or generational lines within a community, but across the register of local field experience and that of international policy discourse, each with its own vocabulary, evidentiary expectations, and audience.

Not every dialogue objective proved equally achievable. Maintaining continuity of participation during periods of intensified conflict remained difficult despite careful planning. Some youth who participated enthusiastically during periods of relative stability became unable or unwilling to commit to multi-session activities once security deteriorated, reflecting the practical limits of programme continuity under conditions of displacement and repeated violence. Similarly, although WARD created new opportunities for coordination, competition for limited funding among Lebanese civil society organizations did not disappear simply because a collaborative platform existed. Nor did heritage initiatives automatically attract

younger generations, whose migration, educational commitments, and economic pressures continued to challenge long-term transmission of traditional practices. These experiences reinforced a practical lesson: dialogue methodologies can create conditions conducive to cooperation, but they cannot eliminate the structural political and economic constraints within which communities continue to operate.

Methodology in Practice: A Four-Stage Framework for Cross-Cultural Dialogue Programming

The framework presented below was not designed prospectively as a formal research protocol. Rather, it emerged inductively through comparative reflection across multiple programmes implemented between 2016 and 2026, each addressing different thematic priorities but encountering similar operational challenges. The stages therefore represent an analytical synthesis of organizational practice rather than a prescriptive model developed independently of implementation experience.

The preceding sections describe what Peace of Art Lebanon's cross-cultural dialogue work has produced, curricula, networks, an archive of a craft tradition, and the theoretical commitments informing it. This section turns to a question we are asked more often by fellow practitioners than by academic reviewers: concretely, how is it done? Across Kulluna Muwatinun, WARD, and The Woven Memory of Fakiha, despite differing thematic content, a recurring four-stage methodological sequence has, with adaptation, structured each initiative. We present it not as a rigid model but as a practical, transferable framework other organizations in comparable protracted-crisis, multi-confessional settings may find useful to adapt.

Stage 1: Conflict-Sensitive Context Mapping

Before any curriculum, platform, or documentation initiative is designed, we conduct a structured mapping exercise covering three layers: the confessional and political fault lines relevant to the specific village or cluster of villages; the existing informal authority structures (municipal councils, religious leaders, mukhtars, influential families) whose tacit endorsement or opposition can determine whether an activity is locally viable; and the displacement and livelihood profile of the target population, including the proportion of displaced versus host-community participants and the economic pressures likely to affect attendance and retention. This mapping is conducted through short, semi-structured conversations with a deliberately diverse set of local interlocutors rather than a single formal survey, on the premise that confessionally or politically sensitive information is rarely

volunteered accurately in a standardized questionnaire in this context. The practical output is a one- to two-page internal risk-and-opportunity brief per village, updated whenever conditions shift materially, a security closure, a new displacement wave, a change in local leadership, rather than fixed once at project start-up.

Stage 2: Participatory Co-Design

Curriculum and platform content is never finalized before the people who will use it have shaped it. In Kulluna Muwatinun, this took the form of iterative co-design workshops with youth participants to develop and pressure-test the bilingual conceptual vocabulary before it was locked into the final twenty-six-concept list: draft definitions were tested verbally with small mixed groups, revised where terms produced confusion or discomfort, and only then incorporated into the written curriculum. The same logic shaped The Woven Memory of Fakiha, where weavers themselves determined which techniques, stories, and patterns were appropriate to document publicly and which were private family or village knowledge, a boundary an externally designed documentation protocol would have been unlikely to anticipate. The practical instrument here is simple but, in our experience, frequently skipped under external timeline pressure: a minimum of two rounds of participatory review built explicitly into the project workplan and budget, not treated as an optional extension.

Stage 3: Structured, Equal-Status Contact

Drawing directly on Allport's conditions for effective intergroup contact, every dialogue-bearing activity is built around a shared, cooperative production task rather than open-ended discussion alone (Allport, 1954). In practice: facilitators are paired across confessional or geographic background wherever feasible, so no single facilitator is seen as representing only one community; small working groups for any joint task, a short film, a mapped village timeline, a documentation interview, are composed to ensure no group is dominated by participants from a single background; and every session includes an explicit, named cooperative goal, a product to be finished by session's end, rather than an unstructured dialogue circle, which our field experience suggests is more vulnerable to domination by the most confident or senior participants present. Facilitators are trained in basic nonviolent communication so that disagreements surfacing during joint production can be named and processed in the moment rather than suppressed to finish the task.

Stage 4: Adaptive Monitoring and Crisis-Resilience Protocols

Standard project logframes, built around fixed indicators and timelines, are poorly suited to a context where activities may pause for weeks without warning. In response, we track two parallel sets of indicators: the conventional output and outcome set required for formal reporting, and, tracked internally regardless of that requirement, a lightweight set of relational indicators, whether named cross-confessional contact pairs from previous cohorts remain in touch six months on, whether WARD partner organizations have initiated unprompted collaboration outside the platform's formal activities, whether displaced families have been received into existing village networks built through prior programming during a new displacement event. Every activity plan also includes a written pause-and-resume protocol agreed with participants and partners in advance: what minimal communication will be maintained during an interruption, who checks in with participants during a pause, and the criteria for judging it safe to resume. This protocol, more than any single curriculum decision, is what determines whether trust built over a programme cycle survives an interruption intact or has to be rebuilt from scratch.

Tab. 1: Adaptive Monitoring

Stage	Core Question	Practical Instrument	Indicator of Success
1. Context Mapping	Who holds influence, and what divides this community right now?	Short internal risk-and-opportunity brief, updated on material change	No activity launched without local interlocutor sign-off
2. Participatory Co-Design	Does the content reflect participants' own boundaries and vocabulary?	Minimum two budgeted rounds of participatory review	Content revised, not merely approved, after review
3. Equal-Status Contact	Is the encounter structured to prevent dominance by one group?	Cross-background facilitator pairing; named joint production task per session	Mixed-background groups complete shared product together
4. Adaptive Monitoring	Will trust survive an unplanned interruption?	Written pause-and-resume protocol; relational indicators tracked alongside logframe	Contact and trust persist after a crisis pause

From this accumulated methodological experience, we offer the following transferable, action-oriented recommendations to practitioners and donors working in comparable protracted-crisis, multi-confessional settings:

- Budget and schedule for interruption from the outset. Build pause-and-resume protocols and contingency timelines into the original workplan and budget rather than treating disruption as an unforeseeable exception requiring a no-cost extension after the fact.
- Fund the translation work, not only the content. Allocate dedicated time and budget to bilingual conceptual translation and participatory review; this is substantive technical work, not a pre-implementation formality, and frequently the difference between a curriculum that lands and one quietly ignored.
- Design contact around shared production, not discussion alone. Anchor cross-group encounters in a concrete, finishable joint task rather than an open dialogue format, and pair facilitators deliberately across the lines the activity is meant to bridge.
- Track relational indicators alongside standard logframes. Maintain a lightweight, internally owned set of trust and contact indicators that persist across project cycles and donors, since the relational capital they measure routinely outlives any single grant.
- Treat civil society coordination as dialogue infrastructure in its own right, and resource it accordingly, rather than as an unfunded extra expected of already over-stretched local organizations.
- Recognize and credential the multi-role competency of local practitioners. Donors and academic institutions alike should develop pathways to formally recognize the layered technical, facilitative, and managerial skill sets locally embedded practitioners accumulate, rather than assuming such competencies require separate, externally delivered training.
- Build flexibility into budget allocation itself, not only into timelines. Beyond scheduling for interruption, project budgets should allow a margin that can be redirected toward new, urgent activities that still serve the overall goal of the project, so that a programme can be adapted in real time to changing circumstances rather than waiting on a formal amendment process.

Reflections from the Field: What Carrying Multiple Hats Teaches About Dialogue

A structural feature of small, rurally based NGOs such as Peace of Art Lebanon, rarely addressed directly in the peacebuilding literature, is that the same individuals move across multiple functional roles, programme design, field

facilitation, grant writing, monitoring and evaluation, organizational communications, direct community engagement, often within the same week, sometimes the same day. This is usually treated, when discussed at all, as a resource constraint: a symptom of insufficient funding for adequately staffed teams. We do not dispute that reading, but we want to suggest, from direct experience, that this structural condition also produces a distinctive epistemic vantage point on cross-cultural dialogue worth naming.

When the person designing a dialogue curriculum is the same person who will sit in the room facilitating it, who will later write the report accounting for its outcomes, and who will field the late-night call from a participant's family during a displacement crisis, the gap between dialogue as designed and dialogue as lived closes considerably. Theoretical commitments about equal-status contact or moral imagination are tested not in the abstract but against the concrete, often inconvenient texture of a specific village, a specific family's history, a specific funding deadline. This proximity carries costs, among them, the difficulty of maintaining clear boundaries between professional and personal life where colleagues, beneficiaries, and neighbours are frequently the same people, but it also carries an epistemic advantage that more compartmentalized structures may lack: the impossibility of mistaking a well-designed curriculum for an automatically successful intervention, because the same person who designed it also has to watch, in real time, whether it actually works. We flag this less as a grievance than as a methodological observation: any framework for evaluating cross-cultural dialogue practice that assumes a clean separation between the person who designs an intervention and the person who lives with its consequences will, in settings like ours, systematically misdescribe how the work is actually done.

This vantage point deserves more sustained theoretical attention than it currently receives within the cross-cultural dialogue literature, which has tended to privilege either the perspective of international programme evaluators or that of dialogue participants themselves, with comparatively little written from the position of the local practitioner who occupies both design and delivery roles simultaneously, across a sustained, multi-year trajectory rather than a single project cycle.

This same proximity is, we suspect, partly why practitioners in settings like ours often find it difficult to render their own competence legible to formal academic or credentialing structures, even after years of substantive, technically demanding work. Skills developed through this kind of layered practice, conflict-sensitive curriculum design, bilingual conceptual translation, compliance and reporting work, crisis-adaptive project management, cross-organizational coordination,

rarely map onto the discrete course units of a conventional academic transcript, even though their cumulative sophistication may exceed what a transcript alone could suggest. One of us has spent considerable effort in parallel to this chapter's writing on exactly this problem: seeking formal academic validation, within a Lebanese university informatics programme, for years of applied technical and organizational experience accumulated through Peace of Art Lebanon's work. That process is, in its own modest way, a further illustration of the chapter's central argument, that the competencies built through sustained, multi-role, locally embedded peacebuilding practice are real and rigorous, and nonetheless frequently invisible to the institutional frameworks, academic or institutional alike, meant to recognize and credential them.

Conclusion: Dialogue as Organizational Disposition

We have argued that, in a protracted-crisis borderland such as North Bekaa, cross-cultural dialogue is best understood not as a discrete activity bounded by a project's logframe but as an accumulated organizational disposition, built through digital storytelling curricula, civil society coordination infrastructure, and heritage documentation, and tested, unexpectedly but repeatedly, by the demands of emergency response. None of the initiatives described here, Kulluna Muwatinun, the WARD Network, The Woven Memory of Fakiha, was designed in isolation as a freestanding dialogue project. Their cumulative effect has been to build and rebuild, across confessional, generational, and institutional lines, the relational and cultural infrastructure that Lederach and Autesserre, from different theoretical vantage points, each identified as the substrate of durable peace.

We do not claim this organizational model transfers wholesale to every conflict-affected context; Transferability should be understood as adaptation of design principles rather than replication of programming models. North Bekaa's confessional composition, border proximity, displacement history, and dense kinship networks are highly specific. What appears transferable, we suggest, are the underlying design principles distilled in Section 8: equal-status contact organized around shared production rather than dialogue alone, participatory design grounded in local vocabulary, and monitoring that anticipates interruption rather than assumes continuity, wherever chronic instability and weak state presence obtain. Peace of Art's own trajectory offers preliminary support for this proposition. Practices originally developed within North Bekaa have since informed regional coaching activities supporting partner organizations across multiple countries in the region, suggesting that elements of the methodology travel when adapted to local conditions rather than mechanically replicated.

The structural reality of small, locally rooted organizations, in which the same practitioners design, deliver, and live alongside the consequences of their own dialogue interventions, constitutes not merely a resource constraint to be lamented but a distinctive, currently under-theorized vantage point on what cross-cultural dialogue actually requires, methodologically, not only culturally, to take root in places that cannot be left once the funding cycle ends.

What this chapter ultimately offers, beyond three organizational case studies, is a claim about method: that locally rooted institutions build cross-cultural dialogue not project by project, but through the slow, deliberate accumulation of relational infrastructure, infrastructure that reveals its full value precisely when crisis arrives and everything else stops.

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Colonial Legacy, Religious Pluralism, and Post-Colonial World

Religion, State Formation, and Communal Violence in the Post-Colonial World

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Zusammenfassung

Religiöser Pluralismus prägte viele Gesellschaften bereits vor der europäischen Kolonialisierung. Kolonialmächte veränderten diese Formen der Koexistenz jedoch grundlegend, indem sie religiöse Identitäten administrativ kategorisierten und zur politischen Kontrolle nutzten. Das Kapitel argumentiert, dass heutige religiöse Konflikte in postkolonialen Gesellschaften daher nicht primär auf „uralte Feindschaften" zurückzuführen sind, sondern auf koloniale Prozesse, die religiöse Trennlinien rechtlich, politisch und administrativ konstruierten und verfestigten. Anhand von Nigeria, Sudan, Britisch-Indien und Sri Lanka werden Strategien wie Klassifizierung, indirekte Herrschaft und getrennte Repräsentation untersucht. Abschließend werden daraus Konsequenzen für historisch reflektierte, inklusive und kontextsensible Friedensförderung abgeleitet.

Schlagwörter: Religiöser Pluralismus, Kolonialismus, Postkolonialismus, Peacebuilding

Abstract

Religious pluralism characterized many societies long before European colonization. Colonial powers fundamentally transformed these forms of coexistence by categorizing religious identities administratively and using them as instruments of political control. This chapter argues that contemporary religious conflicts in postcolonial societies should therefore not primarily be attributed to "ancient hostilities," but understood as the outcome of colonial processes that constructed and reinforced religious divisions through legal, political, and administrative measures. Drawing on case studies from Nigeria, Sudan, British India, and Sri Lanka, the chapter examines strategies such as classification, indirect rule, elite co-optation, and separate political representation. It concludes by highlighting the implications for historically informed, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding and sustainable peace in religiously plural societies.

Keywords: Religious Pluralism, Colonialism, Postcolonial Conflict, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Religious pluralism, understood as the coexistence of multiple religious traditions within a single political territory, is a defining feature of most societies that were once under European colonial administration. Long before colonial contact, many of these societies already contained considerable religious diversity, and in numerous cases communities of different faiths lived under systems of accommodation, syncretism, or negotiated coexistence. Colonial rule did not simply encounter this pluralism; it actively reorganized it. European powers governed vast and diverse populations with limited personnel and resources, and religion became one of the principal instruments through which colonial administrations classified subjects, allocated privileges, and delegated authority.

Public and policy discourse often attributes conflict between faith communities in the post-colonial world to inherent religious incompatibility or to "age-old" hatreds. This framing obscures the structural and historical role that colonial governance played in constructing, hardening, and institutionalizing religious division. This chapter traces the specific administrative and legal mechanisms through which colonial rule transformed religious pluralism into a source of structural conflict, and it translates that historical understanding into practical implications for post-colonial peacebuilding. The discussion draws on a qualitative synthesis of secondary literature, historical scholarship, and comparative case analysis of Nigeria, Sudan, colonial South Asia, and Sri Lanka three colonial administrative traditions chosen to reveal both context-specific dynamics and cross-cutting patterns of governance. The chapter is organized thematically rather than chronologically or country by country, so that the recurring administrative logics of empire, classification, elite co-optation, constitutional design, and separate representation, can be traced as they appear across otherwise very different colonial settings.

Empire and the Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism

Scholars of empire have shown that British, French, and Dutch colonial administrations frequently co-opted religious elites into structures of indirect governance, using existing religious authority to control local populations while simultaneously constraining reformist or anti-colonial religious movements. In Sudan and Nigeria, for example, British administrators governed through existing Islamic leadership structures while restricting movements that threatened colonial authority (Metcalf, 1995). Elsewhere, colonial administrations reinforced sectarian divisions as a strategy of control, granting political privileges to some religious

communities while marginalizing others, a pattern most visible in French-administered Lebanon and British India (Makdisi, 2000; Pandey, 1990).

In Nigeria, British indirect rule divided the territory into protectorates and regions administered through local elites, entrenching religious and ethnic favoritism that shaped access to education, land, and political representation, an influence that continues to structure the country's sociopolitical environment (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). In Sudan, the post-colonial state inherited a bifurcated administrative structure that had separated the Muslim north from the largely Christian and animist south, a division that scholars identify as a direct root of the country's prolonged civil wars and the later conflict in Darfur (Bassil, 2015). In Sri Lanka, the British consolidated a unitary constitutional structure that privileged the Sinhalese Buddhist majority over the Tamil Hindu and Muslim minorities, a legacy that later fed decades of civil war between the state and Tamil separatist movements; much of the island's post-independence pluralist contestation traces directly to the organization of the British unitary constitutional model (Harris, 2018).

A recurring theme across these cases is that colonial administrations did not merely observe religious identity; they codified it. Census categories, legal codes, and administrative boundaries transformed what were often fluid and locally negotiated identities into fixed, mutually exclusive categories that could be counted, ranked, and mobilized (Pandey, 1990). This process is sometimes referred to in post-colonial scholarship as the “hardening” of religious and communal boundaries, whereby the colonial state's bureaucratic need for classification produced social categories with lasting political consequences (Pandey, 1990). Independence movements inherited these categories along with the state apparatus built to manage them, and newly formed governments frequently continued to use religion as a basis for political mobilization, patronage distribution, or electoral competition, reproducing colonial-era hierarchies under a nominally sovereign flag (Mamdani, 1996).

Understanding this colonial genealogy of religious conflict matters because it reframes many post-colonial religious conflicts not simply as ancient hatreds erupting into modern violence, but as the product of specific, traceable administrative decisions (Said, 1978). This reframing carries direct implications for policy and peacebuilding: if conflict lines were constructed through governance choices, they can, in principle, be reconstructed through different governance choices. The remainder of this chapter develops that proposition through a qualitative, comparative examination of colonial administrative mechanisms and their post-colonial afterlives.

A Note on the Methodological Approach

This chapter adopts a qualitative, document-based, and interpretive approach rather than statistical or experimental methods. Qualitative inquiry suits questions of meaning, historical process, and the social construction of identity categories, phenomena not readily reducible to numerical measurement (Lanka et al., 2021). The analysis draws entirely on secondary sources, peer-reviewed articles, scholarly monographs, working papers, and historical analyses, examined through thematic coding for recurring patterns: religious classification, elite co-optation, legal pluralism, and the post-independence political mobilization of religious identity. Nigeria, Sudan, and Sri Lanka were selected purposively to represent distinct colonial administrative traditions: British indirect rule, British and Anglo-Egyptian condominium administration, and British unitary governance, respectively, so that the analysis can identify both context-specific dynamics and cross-cutting patterns. As a literature-based study, its findings are interpretive rather than causal in the statistical sense; triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple independent sources for each case and cross-checking historical claims against more than one scholarly account. Its principal limitation is a reliance on secondary literature rather than original archival or field research, an avenue future work could usefully pursue through oral history and archival methods.

Machanisms of Colonial Religious Division

Classification and the Hardening of Identity

Across the cases examined, a consistent pattern emerges: colonial administrations converted fluid, often locally negotiated religious identities into fixed administrative categories. Census-taking, legal codification, and the demarcation of provinces along religious or ethnic lines gave religious identity a new political weight it had not previously carried in the same form. Colonial administrations institutionalized and bureaucratized religion in ways that persist today, often hardening boundaries that had previously been far more fluid (Ullah, 2025). In British India, this classificatory logic contributed directly to the entrenchment of Hindu-Muslim communal categories that later shaped the violence of Partition (Pandey, 1990).

Indirect Rule and the Empowerment of Religious Elites

A second recurring mechanism is the colonial strategy of governing through religious elites, which simultaneously legitimized certain religious authorities and

delegitimized others. In Nigeria and Sudan, the British maintained and strengthened existing Islamic leadership structures to facilitate low-cost administration, a strategy that consolidated religious hierarchy while marginalizing competing reformist or minority religious voices. This selective empowerment created long-term imbalances in political representation that outlasted colonial withdrawal (Mamdani, 1996; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Constitutional and Territorial Legacies

In Sri Lanka, the unitary constitutional model imposed by British colonial administration left the post-independence state with few institutional tools for accommodating minority claims, contributing to the escalation of Sinhalese-Tamil tensions into prolonged civil conflict (Harris, 2018). Similarly, in Sudan, the colonial administrative separation of the northern and southern regions produced two starkly different governance trajectories that independence could not easily reconcile, culminating in decades of civil war and, eventually, the secession of South Sudan (Bassil, 2015).

Separate Electorates and the Partition of British India

The 1947 Partition of British India offers one of the clearest illustrations of how colonial administrative choices produced religious conflict on a massive scale. British colonial governance introduced separate electorates and community-based political representation, requiring Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs to vote within their own religious categories rather than as members of a shared political community. This system compelled political leaders to build power by appealing to narrow religious constituencies rather than cross-communal coalitions, and over decades it froze fluid, locally negotiated identities into rigid, competing blocs (Pandey, 1990). The result, at independence in 1947, was a partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan accompanied by mass population transfers and communal violence in which an estimated fifteen million people were displaced (Britannica, 2026). Historians note that provinces subject to the most direct colonial administration and census-based communal categorization, such as Punjab and Bengal, experienced dramatically higher levels of violence than princely states that had been governed more indirectly, a pattern consistent with the broader argument that the intensity of colonial classification correlates with the intensity of subsequent communal conflict.

The Post-Colonial Political Economy of Religious Identity

Beyond these direct institutional legacies, post-colonial elites frequently found it politically advantageous to continue mobilizing the religious categories inherited from colonial rule, since these categories offered a ready-made basis for building patronage networks and electoral coalitions (Horowitz, 1985). This dynamic helps explain why religious conflict in many post-colonial states has often intensified around moments of political competition, such as elections or constitutional reform, rather than remaining constant over time.

At the same time, the colonial legacy of religious division is not deterministic. Comparative research on communal violence in India shows that where cross-cutting civic associations, business networks, and local institutions bridge religious communities, cities have proven considerably more resistant to riot and mobilization than cities where associational life remains segregated along colonial-era communal lines (Varshney, 2002). This finding matters for the argument of this chapter because it suggests that local institutional choices made well after independence can either reinforce or counteract inherited colonial cleavages — which is to say that the structures colonialism built are durable, but not immutable.

Towards Post-Colonial Repair: Institutional and Communal Pathways

If colonial governance choices constructed the conflict lines examined in this chapter, then different governance choices can, in principle, help dismantle them. Six interlocking interventions follow from the analysis above.

The first is inclusive constitutional and federal design. States should review constitutional and administrative structures inherited from the colonial period to ensure that power-sharing arrangements do not privilege one religious community over others, drawing on federal or devolved models that give minority religious communities genuine political voice. The second is reform of colonial-era legal pluralism. Where colonial administrations left behind parallel religious or customary legal systems, as in Sudan's north-south divide or Nigeria's regional legal frameworks, states should pursue harmonization processes that protect religious freedom while reducing the potential for legal fragmentation to reinforce communal boundaries.

The third is investment in interfaith and intercommunal dialogue institutions. Structured, sustained dialogue platforms involving religious leaders, women's groups, and youth can rebuild trust across communal lines and counter the political incentive to treat religious identity as a zero-sum resource. The fourth is education

reform and shared historical narratives. Curricula should present the colonial origins of religious division honestly, helping citizens understand communal conflict as a historical and political construction rather than an immutable religious fact, which can reduce the perceived inevitability of conflict.

The fifth is truth-telling and historical acknowledgment. Formal mechanisms that acknowledge how colonial policy shaped present-day inequalities between religious communities can help post-colonial states address grievance without requiring one community to accept blame for outcomes rooted in earlier administrative decisions. The sixth is equitable resource and representation policy. Because colonial-era favoritism often produced lasting disparities in education, employment, and political representation among religious communities, targeted policies to close these gaps can reduce the material grievances that make religious mobilization politically attractive.

Conclusion

Religious conflict in many post-colonial societies cannot be adequately understood without reference to the administrative choices made under colonial rule. Colonial governments did not simply preside over pre-existing religious pluralism; they actively reshaped it through classification, selective elite empowerment, and constitutional design, producing institutional legacies that independence movements inherited along with the state itself. The cases of Nigeria, Sudan, and Sri Lanka illustrate distinct but structurally similar pathways from colonial governance to post-colonial conflict, suggesting that these are not isolated national tragedies but the outcome of a broader pattern in colonial statecraft.

Recognizing this pattern carries an important implication for peacebuilding: because these conflict structures were built through specific governance decisions, they are, at least in principle, amenable to being reformed through equally deliberate governance and institutional change. Sustainable peace in religiously plural, post-colonial societies is therefore likely to depend not only on grassroots reconciliation and interfaith dialogue but also on the harder work of revisiting constitutional structures, legal systems, and representational arrangements that still bear the imprint of colonial rule.

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Whose Culture, Whose Peace?

Power, Representation, and Identity in Cross-Cultural Conflict Resolution

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Zusammenfassung

Das Kapitel untersucht kritisch die kulturellen und machtpolitischen Annahmen dominanter Ansätze der Konfliktlösung und fragt: „Wessen Frieden?“ und „Wessen Kultur?“. Es argumentiert, dass westlich-liberale Konzepte von Frieden, Gerechtigkeit und Versöhnung häufig als universell gelten und dadurch lokale sowie indigene Vorstellungen marginalisieren können. Die Übertragung externer Modelle kann bestehende Machtasymmetrien reproduzieren und die Legitimität und Nachhaltigkeit von Friedensprozessen schwächen. Aufbauend auf postkolonialer Friedensforschung, local ownership und indigenen Gerechtigkeitsmechanismen entwickelt das Kapitel einen kontextsensiblen Bezugsrahmen. Vier vergleichende Fallstudien zeigen, wie inklusive und lokal verankerte Ansätze zu nachhaltigerem Frieden beitragen können.

Schlagwörter: Konflikt Resolution, Postkoloniale Friedensförderung, Lokale Mitsprache

Abstract

This chapter critically examines the cultural and power-related assumptions underlying dominant approaches to conflict resolution and asks: “Whose peace?” and “Whose culture?” It argues that Western-liberal concepts of peace, justice, and reconciliation are often presented as universal, thereby marginalizing local and Indigenous understandings. The transfer of externally developed models can reproduce existing power asymmetries and undermine the legitimacy and sustainability of peace processes. Drawing on postcolonial peace research, local ownership, and Indigenous justice mechanisms, the chapter develops a context-sensitive analytical framework. Four comparative case studies demonstrate how inclusive and locally grounded approaches can contribute to more sustainable peace.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Postcolonial Peacebuilding, Local Ownership, Indigenous Justice

Introduction

This chapter critically examines the cultural assumptions embedded within dominant approaches to conflict resolution, asking whose understanding of peace, justice, and reconciliation is privileged when external actors intervene in culturally distinct conflict settings. While conflict resolution as a field presents itself as a neutral, technical practice applicable across contexts, this chapter argues that its conceptual vocabulary drawn largely from liberal, Western political traditions frequently marginalizes local understandings of harm, accountability, and restoration. Drawing on postcolonial and critical peace studies perspectives, the chapter contends that the imposition of externally derived frameworks onto culturally different societies can reproduce the very power asymmetries that conflict resolution claims to address. The chapter is guided by two research questions: first, how do dominant conflict resolution frameworks represent and incorporate or fail to incorporate non-Western cultural understandings of peace and justice; and second, what are the consequences of this representational imbalance for the legitimacy and durability of peace outcomes in culturally diverse societies. Adopting a qualitative, document-based comparative case study design across four cases, the chapter synthesizes literature on postcolonial critique, local ownership, and indigenous justice mechanisms to build an integrated analytical framework. It concludes that durable cross-cultural peacebuilding requires a fundamental rebalancing of whose cultural knowledge counts, and offers suggestions for future.

Cross-cultural conflict resolution has increasingly evolved beyond conventional diplomatic approaches to embrace participatory, context-sensitive, and locally grounded peacebuilding strategies. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that sustainable peace depends not only on dialogue but also on the equitable representation of diverse communities and the recognition of unequal power relations that shape conflict and reconciliation processes. Questions of identity are central to this framework, as religious, ethnic, and cultural identities influence both the causes of conflict and the prospects for peaceful coexistence. From a postcolonial peacebuilding perspective, externally imposed models of conflict resolution are often criticized for overlooking local histories, cultural traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, greater emphasis is placed on local ownership, whereby communities actively participate in designing and implementing peace initiatives that reflect their own social and cultural realities. This approach also acknowledges the value of indigenous justice mechanisms, which frequently incorporate restorative practices, communal reconciliation, and culturally embedded forms of dispute resolution. Methodologically, scholars

increasingly employ qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to examine how different combinations of social, political, and institutional factors contribute to successful peacebuilding outcomes across diverse contexts. Collectively, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how cross-cultural conflict resolution can foster inclusive, contextually relevant, and sustainable peace.

Conflict resolution as an academic field and a professional practice has long presented itself as a universally applicable toolkit, offering models of mediation, dialogue, and reconciliation that can, in principle, be transplanted from one cultural context to another (Lederach, 1995). Yet a growing body of scholarship has questioned this claim to universality, arguing that the concepts at the heart of mainstream conflict resolution individual rights, formal negotiation, legal accountability, and reconciliation through truth-telling are themselves products of a particular cultural and historical trajectory rooted in Western liberal thought (Brigg & Bleiker, 2011). When these frameworks are applied in societies with different cosmological, religious, or communal understandings of harm and restoration, the result is not a neutral transfer of technical expertise but an encounter between unequal cultural systems, in which one system is treated as the standard against which the other is measured. This observation establishes the central concern of this chapter: the politics of representation embedded within cross-cultural conflict resolution itself.

Building on this concern, the chapter proceeds from the premise that questions of 'whose peace' and 'whose culture' are not peripheral to conflict resolution but are constitutive of it: every peace process embodies assumptions about what counts as a legitimate grievance, an acceptable remedy, and a credible peacemaker, and these assumptions are never culturally neutral (Richmond, 2011). The chapter therefore situates the analysis within a broader pattern of representational asymmetry, in which externally designed frameworks are presented as universal while local frameworks are treated as particular, traditional, or in need of reform. The remainder of the chapter is organised into seven further sections: a clarification of key terms; the problem statement; the research questions, objectives, and scope; the methodology; the literature review and four-case comparison; the conclusion, divided into implications for research and for practice; and a closing note on positionality. The next section defines the key concepts used throughout the chapter.

Key Terms

Three terms recur throughout this chapter and are defined here to ensure conceptual clarity. First, a cultural framework of justice and reconciliation refers to a coherent set of beliefs, procedures, and symbols through which a community understands harm, assigns responsibility, and restores relationships; this may be codified in formal law or embedded in custom, ritual, and oral tradition (Lederach, 1995). Second, representation refers to the way in which a cultural framework is described, categorised, and positioned within a peace process — whether it is presented as a universal standard, a local variant, a supplementary addition, or an obstacle to be managed (Sabaratnam, 2013). Third, local ownership refers to the degree of authority that local and indigenous actors hold over the design, implementation, and evaluation of a peace process, as distinct from mere participation or consultation within a process whose core structure remains externally determined (Donais, 2012). A final clarification concerns the relationship between 'indigenous' and 'local': this chapter uses 'indigenous' in the more specific sense recognised in international and constitutional law, denoting peoples with a distinct claim to self-governance predating the modern state, as in the Colombian case, whereas 'local' is used more broadly for community-based practices that may or may not carry this formal status, as with Rwanda's gacaca tradition. These three concepts, together with this terminological distinction, form the analytical vocabulary used to compare the cases examined later in the chapter, and the next section uses them to specify the problem this chapter addresses.

Problem Statement and Methodological Approach

Despite decades of critique from postcolonial and critical peace studies scholars, mainstream conflict resolution practice continues to rely on frameworks — liberal peacebuilding, transitional justice modelled on truth commissions, and formal mediation procedures — that originated in specific Western institutional contexts and are then exported to culturally diverse settings (Mac Ginty, 2011). Local mechanisms for managing conflict, such as customary courts, communal reconciliation rituals, or religiously grounded forgiveness practices, are frequently incorporated only in a subordinate or supplementary capacity, framed as 'traditional' additions to a fundamentally externally designed process rather than as alternative frameworks in their own right (Shaw & Waldorf, 2010). The result is an analytical and practical gap: the conflict resolution literature has extensively documented the existence of local justice mechanisms, but has been less successful at explaining how the relative status accorded to different cultural frameworks — which is treated as universal and which as particular — affects the legitimacy and

durability of the resulting peace. This chapter addresses that gap by treating representational hierarchy itself as a variable that shapes peace outcomes, asking how the relative positioning of cultural frameworks within a peace process affects its acceptance by the population it is meant to serve. Having identified this gap, the chapter now specifies the research questions, objectives, and scope that follow directly from it.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do dominant conflict resolution frameworks represent — and incorporate or fail to incorporate — non-Western cultural understandings of peace, justice, and reconciliation?

RQ2: What are the consequences of this representational imbalance for the legitimacy and durability of peace outcomes in culturally diverse and post-colonial societies?

Research Objectives:

RO1: To critically examine how mainstream conflict resolution frameworks position local and indigenous cultural understandings of justice and reconciliation relative to externally derived models.

RO2: To compare cases of cross-cultural peacebuilding in order to identify recurring patterns of representational asymmetry and their effects on local legitimacy.

Scope and Delimitations: This chapter is delimited to the analysis of representational hierarchies between externally derived and local or indigenous frameworks of justice and reconciliation, as documented in secondary scholarly and institutional sources. It does not address the gendered dimensions of representation in peace processes, which constitute a substantial and related literature in their own right, nor does it provide primary empirical data collected through fieldwork. The chapter is also delimited to four illustrative cases Rwanda, Timor-Leste, Northern Ireland, and Colombia selected for their documentary richness and geographic diversity, rather than a representative sample of all cross-cultural peace processes. With these boundaries established, the next section explains how the four cases will be analyzed methodologically.

Methodology

This chapter adopts a qualitative research design, employing a comparative case study approach to examine how cultural frameworks are represented and ranked within cross-cultural conflict resolution processes (Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research questions concern meaning, representation, and legitimacy — dimensions that are interpretive in nature and not amenable to quantification, requiring instead close reading of how cultural frameworks are described, positioned, and evaluated within texts (Bryman, 2016). Three criteria informed the purposive selection of the four illustrative cases. First, each case involves a peacebuilding or transitional justice process in which an externally derived framework was introduced alongside pre-existing local or indigenous mechanisms. Second, each case has generated sufficient documentary and scholarly record to permit analysis of how the two frameworks were represented relative to one another. Third, the four cases span distinct cultural and geographic contexts — Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and Latin America — allowing the chapter to assess whether patterns of representational asymmetry recur across markedly different settings (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). This rationale for case selection leads directly into the data sources and analytic procedure described next.

Data for this chapter are drawn entirely from secondary qualitative sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, reports from international organizations and non-governmental bodies involved in peacebuilding, and documentary records of transitional justice and reconciliation processes. These sources were analyzed using qualitative document analysis, a method that involves the systematic interpretation of textual material to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships across the dataset (Bowen, 2009). Thematic analysis was used to code the material according to three categories derived from the literature review: first, the language used to describe externally derived frameworks compared with local frameworks; second, the institutional role and degree of authority assigned to local mechanisms within the overall process; and third, documented responses from local populations regarding the legitimacy of the resulting peace. These categories were then used to construct the cross-case comparison summarised in Table. One limitation should be noted: reliance on secondary sources means the analysis is shaped by the interpretive choices of the original authors, and the absence of primary fieldwork limits the chapter's ability to capture local perspectives directly and in their own terms. Nonetheless, this design is well suited to the comparative, theory-building aims of the chapter, and it provides the basis for the literature review that follows.

Theoretical Framework

The Liberal Peace and Its Cultural Assumptions

A substantial body of scholarship has documented how the dominant model of post-conflict peacebuilding often termed the 'liberal peace' rests on a specific set of institutional assumptions, including multiparty democracy, market-based economic reform, and formal rule of law (Paris, 2004). Scholars working within critical peace studies have shown that this model is frequently presented as a technical, apolitical template for reconstruction, even though it embodies a particular historical and cultural trajectory associated with Western state formation (Richmond, 2011). In post-conflict societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific, this dynamic is especially visible: institutions modelled on Western parliamentary or judicial systems have been introduced with limited adaptation to existing political cultures, often producing institutions that function on paper but lack local legitimacy (Mac Ginty, 2011). This literature establishes that the liberal peace model is not a neutral technical framework but a culturally specific one whose assumptions shape what counts as a successful peace. Building on this foundation, the next section considers how local and indigenous frameworks are positioned relative to this dominant model.

The Liberal Peace and Its Cultural Assumptions

The concept of 'local ownership' has become central to peacebuilding discourse, reflecting an apparent commitment to ensuring that affected populations shape the processes meant to serve them (Donais, 2012). However, scholarship examining how local ownership operates in practice has found that indigenous mechanisms such as customary courts, elder-led mediation, or communal reconciliation ceremonies are frequently incorporated only as supplementary or symbolic components within a process whose core architecture remains externally designed (Shaw & Waldorf, 2010). In Rwanda, for example, the gacaca courts drew on a pre-existing communal dispute-resolution tradition but were substantially reformed and formalized to align with the requirements of an internationally overseen transitional justice framework, raising questions about the extent to which the resulting institution remained recognizably local (Clark, 2010). This body of work demonstrates that the language of local ownership can coexist with a substantive hierarchy in which local mechanisms are valued for their symbolic or legitimizing function rather than treated as equally authoritative frameworks for justice. This theme connects directly to the question of representation addressed in the following section.

Representation, Voice, and the Politics of Knowledge

A third strand of literature draws on postcolonial theory to examine how knowledge about conflict-affected societies is produced, and by whom (Spivak, 1988). This literature argues that the design of peace processes is shaped not only by formal institutions but by prior representations of the conflict and the society in question — representations typically produced by external researchers, diplomats, and organizations whose frameworks of analysis are themselves embedded within particular academic and policy traditions (Sabaratnam, 2013). Two consequences follow from this. First, local actors are often positioned as sources of information to be analyzed rather than as analysts in their own right, a division of labour that shapes whose understanding of the conflict is treated as authoritative. Second, when local concepts of justice or reconciliation do not map neatly onto the categories used by external frameworks, they are at risk of being either reinterpreted to fit those categories or excluded from the process altogether (Mac Ginty, 2011). This representational dynamic forms the conceptual bridge to the integrated framework developed in the next section.

Towards an Integrated Framework

Taken together, the literatures on the liberal peace, local ownership, and the politics of knowledge point towards a common conclusion that has not yet been fully integrated into a single analytical framework. Specifically, cross-cultural conflict resolution processes appear to operate through a representational hierarchy in which externally derived frameworks are positioned as the default, universal standard, while local and indigenous frameworks are positioned as particular, supplementary, or in need of validation against that standard (Richmond, 2011). This hierarchy is rarely stated explicitly; rather, it is embedded in the institutional design of peace processes, in the categories used to describe local practices, and in the allocation of authority between external and local actors. At the same time, the framework must allow for variation: in some contexts, local frameworks have achieved a more substantive degree of authority, and these instances are analytically important because they indicate the conditions under which the hierarchy can be disrupted rather than merely reproduced. This chapter argues that the durability and legitimacy of cross-cultural peace outcomes can best be explained by the degree to which this hierarchy is reproduced or disrupted in a given process. This integrated framework structures the comparative analysis that follows, beginning with the case of Rwanda.

Comparative Analysis

Rwanda: The Gacaca Courts and the Limits of Hybridity

The Rwandan case illustrates the integrated framework with particular clarity. Following the 1994 genocide, the government revived the gacaca system, a pre-colonial community-based mechanism for resolving disputes, as the primary vehicle for processing the enormous backlog of genocide-related cases (Clark, 2010). Two aspects of this process illustrate the representational hierarchy at work. First, although gacaca was presented internationally as an authentically local alternative to formal courts, its procedures were substantially restructured to incorporate formal legal categories of crime, evidentiary standards, and sentencing guidelines drawn from the framework of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (Rettig, 2008). Second, international assessments of gacaca's success were framed predominantly in terms of its contribution to formal legal accountability and reconciliation targets, with less attention paid to how participants themselves understood the process in relation to pre-existing communal norms. The result was a hybrid institution in which the local label was retained but the underlying logic was substantially reshaped by external legal frameworks. This had measurable consequences for legitimacy: survey-based research on participant experiences found that while many Rwandans valued gacaca's contribution to truth-telling and community-level acknowledgement, a significant proportion also reported viewing the process as coercive or as serving the government's reconciliation narrative rather than their own sense of justice, particularly where formal sentencing outcomes diverged from what communities considered an appropriate resolution (Clark, 2010). This evidence suggests that the gap between gacaca's local framing and its reformed legal content was not merely an analytical observation but was registered by participants themselves as a tension affecting the process's perceived legitimacy. This dynamic of formal incorporation generating mixed legitimacy outcomes recurs, in a different form, in the case of Timor-Leste examined next.

Timor-Leste: Customary Reconciliation and the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation

In Timor-Leste, the integrated framework helps explain the mixed reception of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, which incorporated a Community Reconciliation Process drawing on customary adat practices alongside its formal truth-seeking mandate (Kent, 2012). The Community Reconciliation Process allowed lower-level offenders to reconcile with their communities through locally recognised rituals, while the Commission's central truth-seeking and

reporting functions followed a format closely modelled on international truth commissionprecedents. This division produced a layered structure in which customary practices were granted a defined operational space, but the overall narrative and findings of the Commission — the elements most visible to international audiences were framed primarily in the language and categories of international transitional justice (Kent, 2012). As a result, the Commission was often evaluated, both domestically and internationally, primarily against the benchmarks of the formal framework, with the customary component treated as a complementary addition rather than a co-equal framework of accountability. Evidence on local reception supports this assessment of asymmetric legitimacy: research on participant perspectives found that communities generally regarded the Community Reconciliation Process itself as legitimate and meaningful, since it operated through recognisable adat procedures and produced tangible outcomes such as community service and acceptance ceremonies, but also found that many participants viewed the Commission's broader truth-seeking mandate and final report as a separate, largely external exercise with limited connection to local reconciliation practice (Kent, 2012). This divergence indicates that legitimacy was not uniform across the two components of the same institution, but tracked closely with which framework customary or international each component was perceived to belong to. This pattern of customary mechanisms occupying a defined but subordinate space is mirrored, with important variations, in the case of Northern Ireland discussed next.

Northern Ireland: Competing Narratives and the Politics of Dealing with the Past

The Northern Ireland case adds a further dimension to the framework by highlighting how representational hierarchies can operate between two communities within a single society, rather than only between local and external frameworks. Mechanisms for 'dealing with the past' following the Good Friday Agreement have repeatedly struggled to establish a single framework for truth and acknowledgement that is perceived as legitimate by both unionist and nationalist communities, each of which holds different understandings of victimhood, culpability, and appropriate forms of acknowledgement (McEvoy & Bryson, 2016). One consequence is that successive proposals for truth recovery mechanisms have been criticised by one community or another for implicitly privileging the other's narrative framework, even when the proposed mechanism was presented in neutral, technical language. Documented community responses bear this out: research on attitudes towards dealing-with-the-past mechanisms has found that

perceptions of legitimacy diverge sharply along community lines, with proposals framed in the language of individual human rights violations sometimes perceived by unionist communities as implicitly validating a narrative of state culpability, while mechanisms emphasising state security operations have been perceived by nationalist communities as inadequately addressing state violence (McEvoy & Bryson, 2016). This evidence demonstrates that, in a context with two competing local frameworks rather than one dominant external framework, legitimacy outcomes depend on which community's categories a given mechanism is perceived to embed, regardless of whether the mechanism's designers intended any such alignment. This case demonstrates that representational hierarchies are not reducible to a simple external-versus-local binary but can also reflect unresolved competition between domestic cultural narratives. This complication, together with the patterns observed in Rwanda and Timor-Leste, sets up a useful contrast with the case of Colombia examined next, where local and indigenous frameworks achieved a more formalised degree of authority.

Columbia: Ethnic Jurisdiction and a Partial Disruption of the Hierarchy

The Colombian case offers a partial counter-example to the pattern observed in the previous three cases, and is therefore analytically significant. The 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP established the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, a transitional justice mechanism with an explicit 'ethnic chapter' that recognizes the jurisdictional authority of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities to apply their own justice systems to cases involving their members, subject to coordination with the national mechanism (Sandvik & Lemaitre, 2020). Two features distinguish this case from the others discussed. First, rather than incorporating indigenous justice as a supplementary or symbolic component, the ethnic chapter formally recognizes indigenous jurisdiction as constitutionally grounded and co-equal in status, reflecting Colombia's broader multicultural constitutional framework dating from 1991 (Rodríguez-Garavito & Baquero Díaz, 2015). Second, this recognition has not been without tension: coordination mechanisms between the national jurisdiction and indigenous authorities remain contested, and some scholars note that the practical application of the ethnic chapter has been slower and less resourced than the main jurisdiction (Sandvik & Lemaitre, 2020). Evidence on indigenous community perspectives reflects this gap between formal and practical authority: assessments of the ethnic chapter's early implementation have found that indigenous and Afro-Colombian representatives generally welcomed the formal recognition of their jurisdiction as

an improvement over previous transitional justice arrangements, while simultaneously reporting frustration at delays in establishing the coordination protocols needed for their jurisdiction to operate with the same practical effect as the national mechanism (Rodríguez-Garavito & Baquero Díaz, 2015). This pattern indicates that formal recognition can shift legitimacy perceptions in a positive direction even before practical authority is fully realised, but that a persistent gap between the two can itself become a source of renewed grievance. The Colombian case therefore suggests that the representational hierarchy identified in this chapter is not immutable, but that even formal recognition of co-equal status does not automatically translate into equal practical authority or into legitimacy that is fully secured. This qualified counter-example provides an important caveat for the cross-case conclusions presented next.

Cross-Case Comparision

The Table summarises the four cases according to the framework introduced, the local or indigenous mechanism involved, and the degree of authority and legitimacy outcome documented in each. Three patterns emerge from this comparison. First, in Rwanda and Timor-Leste, local mechanisms were retained in name but substantially reshaped by, or evaluated against, externally derived categories. Second, Northern Ireland illustrates that representational asymmetry can also arise between domestic communities rather than only between local and external actors. Third, Colombia shows that formal constitutional recognition of co-equal jurisdiction can disrupt the hierarchy at the level of design, even where implementation gaps persist. Together, these patterns indicate that the representational hierarchy identified in this chapter is a strong tendency rather than an inevitability, and that the conditions distinguishing Colombia from the other cases particularly prior constitutional recognition of legal pluralism merit closer attention in future research. This comparative summary provides the basis for the conclusions and suggestions presented in the final section.

Tab. 1: Comparative Summary of Cases

Case	External/Dominant Framework	Local/Indigenous Mechanism	Degree of Authority Granted	Legitimacy Outcome
Rwanda	ICTR-aligned transitional justice	Gacaca community courts	Local Label retained; procedures reshaped by formal legal categories	Mixed: high case throughput, contested local meaning
Timor-Leste	International	truth commission model	Community Reconciliation Process (adat)	Defined operational space for minor cases only
Northern Ireland	Technical/neutral truth-recovery proposals	Competing unionist and nationalist narratives	No	single framework accepted
Colombia	Special Jurisdiction for Peace	Indigenous	and Afro-Colombian ethnic jurisdiction	Constitutionally recognised
Timor-Leste	International	truth commission model	Community Reconciliation Process (adat)	Defined operational space for minor cases only
Northern Ireland	Technical/neutral truth-recovery proposals	Competing unionist and nationalist narratives	No	single framework accepted

Conclusion and Suggestions

Implication for Research

This chapter has argued that questions of legitimacy and durability in cross-cultural conflict resolution cannot be separated from questions of representation: which cultural framework is treated as the default standard, and which is treated as particular or supplementary, shapes how a peace process is perceived by the populations it affects. The two research questions guiding this chapter — how dominant frameworks represent non-Western understandings of peace and justice, and what consequences follow from this representational imbalance — are answered through the integrated framework developed here and summarised in Table 1 (Comparative Summary of Cases). On the first question, externally derived frameworks tend to occupy the position of universal standard, while local and indigenous frameworks are incorporated in ways that preserve their symbolic presence while limiting their substantive authority, with Colombia illustrating that this hierarchy can be disrupted at the level of formal design even where practical authority remains uneven. On the second question, the participant-level evidence reviewed across the four cases indicates that this representational imbalance translates into measurable and patterned legitimacy effects: legitimacy tends to track the framework to which a given component of a process is perceived to belong, such that hybrid institutions can be simultaneously regarded as legitimate in their locally-framed components and as externally imposed in their internationally-framed components, as seen in both Rwanda and Timor-Leste, while in Northern Ireland legitimacy diverges along the lines of which community's narrative a mechanism is perceived to embed. Two suggestions follow for future research. First, researchers should develop systematic methods for documenting how local populations themselves evaluate the legitimacy of peace processes, using categories drawn from their own frameworks of justice and reconciliation rather than only the categories used by external evaluators. Second, comparative research should examine the conditions — such as prior constitutional recognition of legal pluralism, as in the Colombian case — under which representational hierarchies are more likely to be disrupted, extending this framework to cases beyond the four examined here.

Implication for Research

For practitioners, this analysis points towards two suggestions. First, peacebuilding practice should consider design processes in which local and indigenous frameworks are involved not only in implementation but in setting the criteria by which the overall process will be judged successful, so that local frameworks shape the standard rather than being measured against it. Second, where formal recognition of local or indigenous jurisdiction is granted, as in Colombia, this recognition should be accompanied by resourcing and coordination mechanisms sufficient to allow practical authority to match formal status, since the Colombian case suggests that a gap between the two can itself become a new source of contested legitimacy. Taken together, these research and practice implications point towards the same underlying question: whose culture, and whose understanding of peace, is allowed to define what counts as a successful outcome. The chapter closes with a brief reflection on the author's own position in relation to this question.

A Note on Positionality

Given that this chapter critiques the privileging of externally derived frameworks of knowledge, it is appropriate to acknowledge the position from which the analysis itself is conducted. This chapter is written using the conventions, citation practices, and academic vocabulary of the English-language conflict resolution literature, and it draws primarily on sources produced by, or filtered through, international academic and policy institutions. In this sense, the chapter is itself situated within the representational hierarchy it describes, and its critique should be read as an internal critique — an attempt to use the tools of mainstream scholarship to question that scholarship's own assumptions, rather than as a vantage point external to those assumptions. Readers are encouraged to treat the analytical framework offered here as a provisional contribution to an ongoing conversation, one that would benefit from being read alongside scholarship produced from within the communities and traditions discussed.

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Between Convenant and Conquest Land

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Zusammenfassung

Dieses Kapitel untersucht den Zusammenhang zwischen abrahamitischen Landbündnissen und der Ethik bewaffneter Konflikte in Judentum, Christentum und Islam sowie deren Instrumentalisierung in zeitgenössischer geopolitischer Gewalt. Durch vergleichende Schriftinterpretation, kritische Diskursanalyse und angewandte Politikethik wird argumentiert, dass die Landbündnisse in Tora, Neuem Testament und Koran primär spirituell und gemeinschaftsbildend sind und keine uneingeschränkten territorialen Ansprüche begründen. Ihre selektive Berufung zur Rechtfertigung von Eroberung und Gewalt – etwa im israelisch-palästinensischen Konflikt, im „Krieg gegen den Terror“ und in konfessionellen Konflikten im Irak und Syrien – stellt eine Instrumentalisierung dar. Zugleich zeigt das Kapitel eine gemeinsame Ethik der Zurückhaltung als Ressource für Konfliktlösung und Friedensförderung. Die Auslegung heiliger Texte ist damit auch ein politischer Akt mit konkreten menschlichen Folgen.

Schlagwörter: Religion, Peacebuilding, Abrahamitische Landbündnisse, Konfliktethik

Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between Abrahamic land covenants and the ethics of armed conflict in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as their instrumentalization in contemporary geopolitical violence. Drawing on comparative scriptural interpretation, critical discourse analysis, and applied political ethics, it argues that the land covenants in the Torah, New Testament, and Qur’an are primarily spiritual and constitutive of communal identity, rather than providing unrestricted territorial claims. Their selective invocation to justify conquest and violence—as seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the “War on Terror,” and sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria—constitutes an instrumentalization of scripture. At the same time, the chapter identifies a shared ethic of restraint across the three traditions as an underused resource for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The interpretation of sacred texts is therefore also a political act with concrete human consequences.

Keywords: Religion, Peacebuilding, Abrahamic Land Convenants, Conflict Ethics

Introduction

Few modern geopolitical tensions are as consistently misread as the relationship between religious scripture and territorial conflict. Political actors have repeatedly pointed to Abrahamic scripture (Torah, Gospel, and Quran) as divine warrants for conquest, exclusion, and violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the sectarian wars of Iraq and Syria, and the ideological framing of the post-9/11 global war on terror. This chapter argues that such invocations represent a fundamental misreading of the textual and theological record. All three of the land covenants are spiritually constitutive rather than politically prescriptive, defining identity before God rather than sovereign entitlement to territory. The use of scripture to support modern conflict is not faithful interpretation but selective instrumentalization. This is important because conflict resolution efforts that do not address the theological aspect of territorial disputes are structurally incomplete. Understanding how scripture has been distorted and what it actually says provides negotiators, analysts, and peace architects with a more honest interpretive basis (Appleby, 2000; Johnston & Sampson, 1994). The sections that follow establish the textual evidence for this claim, trace its modern misuse, and draw out the implications for policy practitioners.

Research Context

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the post-9/11 War on Terror, and the sectarian violence of Iraq and Syria, political and non-state actors have systematically invoked the land covenants of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran as divine warrants for territorial conquest, exclusion, and armed violence. This invocation is not incidental; it is structural and recurrent. But the textual and theological evidence in all three Abrahamic faiths is clear that these covenants are conditional and relational, not unconditional grants of territorial possession.

The problem, therefore, is not what the scriptures say it is how they are read: the deliberate suppression of ethical obligation in favour of territorial promise constitutes selective instrumentalization that has directly enabled and legitimized violence with measurable humanitarian consequences. This chapter tackles that problem head-on, arguing that a vigorous comparative hermeneutic that recovers the full ethical framework of each tradition is intellectually necessary and practically urgent for conflict resolution in the twenty-first century.

Research Questions and Research Objectives

This chapter is framed by two key research questions. RQ1: In what ways have political and non-state actors selectively reinterpreted Abrahamic land covenants to justify territorial conquest and armed conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the post-9/11 War on Terror, and sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria? RQ2: How much do the foundational scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common ethical framework of restraint in conflict, and how might that shared framework be operationalized by policy and ethics practitioners involved in conflict resolution? Two corresponding objectives are proposed to answer these questions.

The first objective is to conduct a comparative textual analysis of land covenant narratives from the Torah, New Testament, and Quran, demonstrating that these covenants are spiritually and relationally constituted rather than politically prescriptive, and that invoking them as conquest mandates is a demonstrable misreading of the source material. The second objective is to identify the convergent ethics of restraint embedded in all three traditions, and to propose a practical framework through which conflict resolution practitioners, mediators, and policy analysts can engage religious communities based on their own authoritative texts. These objectives jointly ground the chapter's progression from textual analysis to ideological critique to action-oriented recommendation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

Studies on religion, land, and conflict in the Abrahamic traditions are substantial, but the field remains largely siloed by tradition rather than genuinely comparative. Walter Brueggemann's foundational study The Land (1977; 2002) establishes the relational and conditional character of land theology in the Hebrew Bible, arguing that the land is always a gift entailing obligation rather than a possession conferring right. This chapter builds directly on Brueggemann's framework while extending its logic comparatively into Christian and Islamic contexts that his work does not address. Regina Schwartz's The Curse of Cain (1997) offers a more polemical account, arguing that monotheism's logic of scarcity — one God, one people, one land — structurally generates violence. This chapter engages Schwartz's provocation critically: while her diagnosis of the problem is sharp, her refusal to distinguish between responsible and irresponsible readings of the same texts forecloses the recovery of restraint traditions that this chapter identifies as a peacebuilding resource. The scholarly conversation thus requires both Brueggemann's textual precision and a response to Schwartz's structural critique, and it is in that space that this chapter operates.

In the domain of Islamic jurisprudence and ethics of conflict, John Kelsay's Arguing the Just War in Islam (2007) provides the most rigorous comparative framework available, demonstrating that the Islamic tradition contains a rich internal debate on the ethics of warfare that is largely invisible in Western policy discourse. This chapter draws on Kelsay's framework while noting that his work, like much just war scholarship, tends to treat each tradition's ethical resources in relative isolation. Farid Esack's Quran, Liberation and Pluralism (1997) offers a corrective by demonstrating that Quranic hermeneutics has been used to authorize both oppression and resistance — a point that supports this chapter's central claim that interpretation, not text, is the primary site of conflict. Michael Walzer's In God's Shadow (2012) and his earlier Just and Unjust Wars (1977) provide the political philosophy scaffolding for the chapter's normative analysis. Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes a field in which textual analysis, hermeneutical theory, and policy ethics have developed in parallel but rarely in sustained dialogue the gap this chapter is designed to address.

Methodological Approach

This chapter employs a fully qualitative, multi-method approach grounded exclusively in secondary scholarly literature and primary scriptural sources, drawing on three complementary forms of inquiry. No empirical data collection, surveys, interviews, or quantitative methods are employed; the chapter works entirely from published academic scholarship, canonical religious texts, and jurisprudential traditions, situating it firmly within the qualitative tradition of comparative theological and hermeneutical research.

The first strand applies comparative scriptural hermeneutics a close reading of primary religious texts (the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran) within their own literary, historical, and theological contexts, interpreted and analyzed through secondary scholarly sources — to examine how land, covenant, and conflict are framed in each tradition. This involves analysis of canonical texts including Genesis, Deuteronomy, and the Hebrew prophetic corpus; the Pauline epistles, the Gospels, and patristic interpretation; and Quranic verses alongside classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and hadith literature, all read through the lens of established secondary scholarship including Brueggemann (2002) and Esposito (2002). The guiding principle is that no text can be responsibly interpreted in isolation from the conditions, obligations, and narrative framework that surround it, and that secondary scholarly engagement is essential to prevent the same selective reading the chapter critiques. This approach enables a historically

grounded reading that resists the selective abstraction characteristic of politically motivated scriptural use, and provides the evidentiary foundation from which the chapter's critique proceeds.

The second strand employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (1995) and applied to religious-political speech by Chilton (2004). This approach examines how political and ideological actors including state governments, armed movements, and religious institutions have publicly invoked scriptural language to legitimize territorial claims and military action. The analysis attends not only to what is said, but to what is systematically omitted: the suppression of conditional and ethical dimensions of scriptural texts in favour of their promissory elements. By foregrounding omission as an ideological act, CDA reveals the mechanism by which complex texts are reduced to slogans a finding whose implications for practitioner engagement with religiously justified violence are developed fully in Section VII.

The third strand draws on normative ethics and applied policy analysis to assess the implications of the chapter's findings for practitioners. This includes engagement with the just war tradition across all three faiths, international humanitarian law, and existing scholarship on religion's role in both sustaining and resolving conflict (Kelsay, 2007; Walzer, 1977). Together, these three methodological strands allow the chapter to progress from textual evidence to ideological critique to actionable recommendation, following an arc appropriate for an audience of ethics and policy professionals. The subsequent sections are organized along this arc.

Three methodological limitations of this approach are acknowledged. First, close reading is never a neutral enterprise: the decision to foreground certain texts and to privilege certain traditions within each religion involves interpretive choices that other scholars could reasonably make differently. Second, as an approach, CDA has its own ideological assumptions, having developed largely out of a critical-left tradition concerned with the power of dominant actors; the analysis here seeks to apply it as evenly as possible between state and non-state actors, Western and non-Western contexts. Third, the normative conclusions of the chapter — that the traditions contain resources for restraint and that these should be operationalized by practitioners — depend on a commitment to the value of reducing violence, which itself is a philosophical position and not a finding that is textually derived. These limitations do not undermine the chapter's argument, but they do define its scope and invite the kinds of empirical and comparative extensions that future research should pursue.

The Covenant Tradition: Promise, Not Deed

The foundational argument of this section is that the Abrahamic land covenants are conditional and relational rather than unconditional ethnic entitlements a claim the textual record of all three traditions supports unambiguously. The covenant between God and Abraham over the land of Canaan is embedded in a framework of divine-human fidelity in the Hebrew Bible: the land is a sacred trust rather than a permanent ethnic inheritance. Deuteronomy makes this explicit: continued possession of the land is contingent on justice, care for the stranger, and obedience to divine law. Exile is a recurring theme in the Hebrew prophetic tradition and is framed not as a military defeat but as a theological consequence — the land withdraws when its covenant obligations are abandoned (Brueggemann, 2002). Any interpretation that separates the territorial promise from its ethical obligations has already made a first-order interpretive error. This conditionality is not a minor qualification to the promise; rather, it is structurally inseparable from it. Section VII considers the implications of this for contemporary uses of the biblical covenant as a political mandate.

Christian theology reinforces this reading through a process of universalization rather than territorial specification. The covenant is reinterpreted in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's epistles and John's Gospel, as a universal inheritance based on faith rather than ethnicity or geography. This interpretation was cemented by Augustine and subsequently Calvin: the Promised Land is a type, a shadow pointing to a heavenly city not built by human hands. Christian theological consensus understands a divine real-estate reading of the Abrahamic land promise as an interpretive regression (O'Donovan, 1996). This spiritualization of the territorial promise is not a diminishment of the covenant's significance but a transformation of its register — one that places any claim to divine title over physical land squarely outside the mainstream of Christian theological tradition, a point directly relevant to religiously framed territorial justifications examined in the following section.

Islam offers a third position that further reinforces the chapter's central claim about the non-prescriptive nature of Abrahamic land theology. The Quran does not associate divine favour with any particular ethnic group's claim to specific territory. Stewardship (khilafah) of the earth is granted to humanity collectively, under conditions of justice and accountability. The concept of waqf land held in sacred trust for community benefit reflects an Islamic jurisprudence in which territory is a communal moral responsibility, not a nationalist possession. Early Islamic legal scholars consistently distinguished between the spiritual status of sacred sites and

the political questions of governance and sovereignty (Esposito, 2002; Kelsay, 2007). Taken together, all three traditions converge on a shared structural logic: divine relationship to land is mediated through ethical obligation, not ethnic or political entitlement a convergence whose full significance for conflict resolution practice becomes clear in Section VIII.

It is essential, however, to acknowledge that each tradition also contains internal voices that have used precisely these same texts to justify conquest, and that a responsible comparative analysis cannot dismiss those voices as simply aberrant. Within the Hebrew Bible itself, the Deuteronomic traditions of herem the divinely commanded destruction of Canaanite peoples — resist easy spiritualization; they are present in the canon and have been read literally by communities ancient and modern alike. Within Christianity, the Crusading tradition drew on genuine theological arguments, not merely cynical misappropriation, and strands of American Manifest Destiny theology constructed a providential narrative of territorial expansion from the same scriptural sources that others read as universal and peace-oriented. Within Islam, early jurisprudents who authorized offensive campaigns of expansion were working within a recognizable interpretive tradition, not simply inventing one. The point of acknowledging these internal tensions is not to neutralize the chapter's argument but to strengthen it: if the texts genuinely contain both conquest-authorizing and restraint-affirming trajectories, then the choice between them is an interpretive and ethical act which is precisely what makes hermeneutics, not theology, the real battlefield, as Section VII argues.

Modern Misuse: Scripture as Strategic Asset

The central claim of this section is that the modern weaponization of Abrahamic scripture follows a recognizable and demonstrable pattern of selective instrumentalization rather than faithful interpretation. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, certain strands of religious Zionism have treated the biblical covenant as an unconditional deed of ownership, ignoring the prophetic tradition's insistence that the land responds to the moral conduct of its inhabitants. On the opposing side, jihadist ideologues have misappropriated Quranic concepts of defensive warfare (jihad) and sacred territory (haram) to authorize offensive campaigns that classical Islamic jurisprudence would not recognize as legitimate (Juergensmeyer, 2000; Roy, 2004). The mechanism in both cases is identical: strip the conditional framework, elevate the territorial promise, and suppress the ethical obligations that surround it. The result is a scriptural fragment that bears surface resemblance to its source text while inverting its normative logic a point that practitioners must

be equipped to identify and articulate when engaging religious justifications in conflict settings.

The post-9/11 War on Terror extended and deepened this pattern into a broader civilizational frame. Both Western military campaigns and their jihadist opponents framed their confrontations in apocalyptic scriptural terms a clash of civilizations projected backward onto ancient texts (Huntington, 1996). In Iraq and Syria, the collapse of state structures unleashed sectarian violence in which Sunni and Shia groups deployed competing religious narratives to justify massacres, displacement, and the erasure of communities that had coexisted for centuries. In each case, the theological complexity of the original texts was flattened into slogans that served political mobilization (Filiu, 2011). The consistency of this pattern across such varied contexts is itself analytically significant: it suggests that the problem is not theological but hermeneutical — not what the texts say, but the political infrastructure through which they are read and deployed. Practitioners operating in these environments must therefore recognize that such scriptural claims are not simply beliefs to be accommodated they are arguments to be engaged, contextualized, and, where necessary, challenged on their own textual terms (Appleby, 2000), which requires the kind of shared ethical vocabulary that Section VIII identifies.

It would, however, be analytically incomplete to confine the pattern of scriptural misuse to the Israeli-Palestinian context and jihadist movements alone. The phenomenon is demonstrably cross-traditional. In nineteenth-century America, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was constructed from biblical typology the settlers as a new Israel, the continent as a promised land to authorize the dispossession and destruction of indigenous peoples on an enormous scale (Tuveson, 1968). In apartheid South Africa, Dutch Reformed theology drew on the narrative of the Israelite conquest of Canaan to provide theological legitimacy for the racial segregation of an entire society, a reading that the tradition's own internal critics eventually mobilized the same texts to dismantle (Villa-Vicencio, 1988). These examples are not peripheral to the chapter's argument they confirm it. The weaponization of Abrahamic covenant theology is not the property of any single tradition, region, or political orientation. It is a structural possibility latent in any reading that severs the promise from its obligations, and a challenge that the cross-traditional ethic of restraint identified in Section VIII is uniquely positioned to address.

Toward a Comparative Ethics of Restraint

A rigorous comparative reading of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scripture reveals not a clash of irreconcilable mandates but a shared moral architecture of restraint, and this convergence constitutes an underutilized resource for conflict resolution practice. Jewish tradition's prohibition on destroying fruit trees in warfare (Deuteronomy 20:19), the Christian just war tradition's strict conditions on proportionality and civilian protection, and the detailed Islamic laws of war prohibiting the killing of non-combatants, women, and children, and the destruction of crops, all converge on a moral architecture that contemporary armed actors consistently violate while claiming scriptural sanction (Kelsay, 2007; Walzer, 1977). This convergence is not incidental: it reflects the same structural logic identified in Section VI, namely that all three traditions frame the use of force as subject to divine accountability and ethical condition rather than as an unconditional prerogative. That armed actors violate this framework while invoking it demonstrates precisely the selective instrumentalization identified in Section VII and makes the recovery of the full ethical framework all the more urgent.

The practical significance of this convergence lies in the cross-traditional platform it offers for conflict resolution practitioners. The three traditions do not agree on theology, but they share a vocabulary of restraint embedded in their foundational texts. For ethics practitioners and mediators, this shared vocabulary offers a platform from which religious leaders, community elders, and even combatants can be engaged on the basis of their own authoritative sources rather than through the imposition of external secular frameworks. Conflict resolution approaches that surface this shared vocabulary rather than treating religion as an obstacle or conceding its terms uncritically stand a greater chance of gaining moral traction within communities for whom international humanitarian law carries limited authority (Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Lederach, 1997). This has direct implications for how practitioners are trained and how peacebuilding frameworks are designed, a set of implications that the Conclusion draws out in full.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the Abrahamic land covenants far from serving as divine mandates for territorial conquest are fundamentally conditional, relational, and spiritually oriented texts whose ethical obligations have been systematically suppressed in the service of political violence. The same pattern appears in all three case contexts: actors extract the promise, discard the obligation, and weaponized the resulting fragment as sacred authority. This is not interpretation; this is ideological construction in the language of scripture. The comparative textual analysis presented here shows that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have significant internal resources to resist such abuse: the conditional covenant in the Hebrew Bible, the spiritualized universalism of Christian theology, and the jurisprudential restraint of classical Islamic law all point to a basic ethical principle land, territory, and sovereignty are not unconditional divine gifts but responsibilities held in trust, subject to the demands of justice, the protection of the vulnerable, and accountability before God and community. These findings establish the evidentiary basis for the operational recommendations that follow.

For policy and ethics practitioners, the implications are both analytical and operational. A scripturally informed lens that grasps the full textual record rather than weaponized fragments yields a more accurate analytical diagnosis of conflict drivers when engaging armed conflicts. Operationally, the common ethic of restraint in all three traditions offers a legitimate cross-communal platform for dialogue, mediation, and norm-building in situations where secular frameworks lack moral authority. Two findings are worth underscoring. First, religious literacy is not a supplemental skill for conflict resolution professionals; it is a core competency. Mediators, policy analysts, and humanitarian actors working on religiously inflected conflicts must be able to engage scriptural arguments with precision, rather than deferring to them uncritically or dismissing them as irrational.

Second, the diversity within each tradition the prophetic critics of conquest within Judaism, the pacifist strands within Christianity, the restraint traditions within Islamic jurisprudence — is an underutilized resource. Amplifying these voices, rather than treating each tradition as monolithic, is among the most effective tools available for delegitimizing violence conducted in the name of God. The covenant was never a mandate for conquest, and this recognition — rooted in the textual traditions themselves is a contribution comparative religious ethics must make more forcefully and more urgently to the practice of peacebuilding in the twenty-first century.

Several avenues for future research follow from this chapter's findings. First, the framework developed here needs to be empirically tested through community-level fieldwork: how do religious leaders, mediators, and community elders in active conflict zones actually engage scriptural arguments in practice, and what hermeneutical strategies prove most effective at delegitimizing religiously justified violence? Second, the structural possibility introduced here — that authoritative texts will simultaneously authorize opposing positions, a condition of contested canonicity deserves further theoretical development as a framework applicable beyond Abrahamic religion, to Hindu nationalism, Buddhist ethno-nationalism, and other contexts in which sacred texts play a role in political conflict. Third, the policy dimension of this work requires working with practitioners to design and evaluate training programmes in religious literacy for conflict resolution professionals, an intervention whose effectiveness is largely unevaluated in the existing literature. These directions mark a research programme that is empirically grounded and theoretically generative, taking the comparative hermeneutical approach worked out here into the field where its consequences are most keenly felt.

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