

Conflict Resolution Dialogue Group

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In this introduction I shall look at some of our greatest challenges and opportunities, and see what might emerge by pointing to what might give us hope.

The challenges are immense. Major conflicts – measured in numbers of deaths by violence – are on-going in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, and the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and neighbouring states. Significant conflicts continue in Israel-Palestine, Somalia, Darfur and South Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Sinai and Ukraine. There are other ways of losing your life through violence, for example if you are involved in the drug trade in Mexico or Colombia. But the first ones mentioned are probably those that touch us most keenly. Partly this is because for every one of those violent deaths, there are numerous injured casualties, and even more numerous refugees or displaced persons; and partly because people fleeing those conflicts tend to aim, obviously, for places where there is peace and where they might find a job. These people are daily on our screens and in our newspapers, and now high on our political agenda.

Those are the physical, factual, challenges. What are the analytical challenges? Traditionally, wars were fought mainly for power and control. Sometimes there was an ideological element, such as in the 17th and 18th century Wars of Religion in Europe or the American Civil War; but the battleground, and the outcome, was territorial. Territorial conflicts continue: several of those mentioned above can be analysed in those terms, particularly where the struggle is over an area containing valuable natural resources. One of the ghastly paradoxes of conflict is that it is often fiercest where resources are scarce, so that people already poor are reduced to nothingness by the ravages of fighting.

But increasingly we face the challenge presented by conflicts driven by ideology, by people who wish to impose a religious or political world view, or to undermine or destroy a way of life inconsistent with their own, without any particular ambition to exert control over territory or those living in it. The prime example of this is, of course, al-Qa'ida, and now "Islamic State" or Da'ish – though Da'ish now aims at territorial control over large areas of the Levant. Conflict driven by this kind of motivation is more difficult to analyse; and we should ask how – or even if – resolution can be achieved.

Our Dialogue has the theme of "Universal Responsibility." But how far can this extend in Conflict Resolution? Of course we are all affected by these conflicts: our human sympathy is aroused, and in many cases our political or economic interests are involved. But should responsibility lead to intervention?

Active intervention in conflict, by outsiders, has a mixed and often negative history. Bearing in mind the damage done by too much - or too little - intervention, where are the limits of responsibility? Is it the case that other people's (or nations') conflicts are their own, and that the solutions must also be internal? Does mediation work? And, if so, with a strong arm and the use of force, or only through negotiation? Where is there hope?

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