

Conflict Resolution Dialogue Group

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A Westphalia for the Middle East is a project and seminar series convened by Michael Axworthy (Exeter), Brendan Simms (Cambridge), and Patrick Milton (Berlin), with financial assistance from the DAAD-Cambridge Research Hub for German Studies, and Institution Quraysh for Law and Policy. It constitutes one of several “Laboratories for World Construction”—policy-oriented and collaborative research projects which are run by the University of Cambridge’s new Forum on Geopolitics, established by Prof. Simms in 2015 at the Department of Politics and International Studies. The Laboratories assemble informed multi-disciplinary teams of academics and practitioners with the aim of tackling the most pressing, and seemingly intractable, current international geopolitical challenges through rigorous analysis, deep historical knowledge, and research.

As one such Laboratory, “A Westphalia for the Middle East” investigates how lessons from the experience of confessional and power-political strife in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Central Europe can be used to inform steps toward the resolution of contemporary conflict in the Middle East, given the analogous nature of the conflicts and constellations in both epochs. Specifically, the aim is to determine how seventeenth-century central European conflict-resolution models relating to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation – chiefly the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and its mechanisms of politico-confessional co-existence – could serve as an inspiration for attempts to solve the geopolitical and sectarian challenges of the contemporary Middle East. The Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War. A particular concern of the analysis has been to avoid (and refute) the widespread and tenacious myth that Westphalia inaugurated a system of state sovereignty and non-intervention in domestic affairs.

We have found that far from enshrining a system of independent state sovereignty and non-intervention, the treaties of Westphalia actually increased the scope for appeal from within states to supra-statal legal institutions, and for external intervention in domestic matters, while also securing minority religious rights on a more secure footing. This occurred through the opening up of domestic confessional matters and rights to international scrutiny, and by empowering external guarantors to intervene in defence of stipulations, which often dealt with local inhabitants’ liberties. Just as the legal norms established by Westphalia served to dampen conflict, provide means for the settlement of disputes, and outlaw violence even, to some extent, when they were breached, so the establishment or re-establishment of similar norms through a treaty, with similar mid-to-long-term effects, must be the aim of a settlement in the contemporary Middle East. The conflicts leading up to the conclusion of the peace of Westphalia and those affecting the Middle East were

found to be broadly analogous; in many cases the closer we examined the detail, more parallels emerged. Therefore the project concept, using Westphalia not as a blueprint for a new treaty for the Middle East, but rather as a toolbox of potential elements toward a future solution, appeared justified. Objections and challenges from regional experts were met and welcomed: rather than presenting findings, the purpose of the series was to create a space for the exchange of knowledge, and for debate, and to arrive at new insights together.

My hope is that the discussion at Inspire Dialogue on 17th September will provide an opportunity to test some of these ideas with people from the region and those with an interest in achieving peace there.

Further information:

1. <http://www.coggs.polis.cam.ac.uk/laboratories-for-world-construction/westphalia-middle-east>
2. Reports on the first four seminars of the events series can be found on this page: <http://www.coggs.polis.cam.ac.uk/news>
3. Foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier held a speech on the themes of the project in Osnabrueck on 12 July (the German foreign ministry is a collaborating partner), the text of which can be found here:
http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_FF7E428720BDF9C0479207EEDEDC0879/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2016/160712-Westfaelischer_Frieden.html
4. Earlier this year we published an article on the ideas behind the project in the New Statesman, as a curtain-raiser for the new seminar series (I also attach a pdf of the print version):
<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/01/ending-new-thirty-years-war>
5. We have been invited by the German foreign ministry to help conduct a workshop entitled 'Der Westfaelische Frieden - Lessons Learned fuer den Nahen und Mittleren Osten' at the ministry's annual ambassadors' conference (Botschafterkonferenz) at the end of August. The event is aimed at inspiring new policy ideas for the region among the participating German ambassadors.
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