

CARIM: MEDIATING CONFLICTS WITH RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a role in many of today's conflicts. Less clear is what exactly that role is, making it difficult to recommend how exactly efforts to end these conflicts should take religion into account. The Culture and Religion in Mediation Program (CARIM) at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) of the ETH Zurich aims to tackle this very challenge. CARIM explores the interplay between religion and politics in the context of conflict transformation and mediation. The program aims to help those working to address violent conflicts to better understand the role that religion plays and how to factor this into the work that they are doing.

ORIGINS OF THE PROGRAM

CARIM is a joint initiative between the CSS and the Religion, Politics, Conflict (RPC) desk of the Human Security Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). Switzerland is constitutionally committed to promoting the peaceful coexistence of peoples and has a long history of peace promotion work. With the creation of the RPC desk in 2004, the FDFA specifically expanded its peace promotion efforts to include a focus on transforming violent or potentially violent conflicts where there is an interplay between religion and politics. "Religious factors, worldviews and conflict transformation" was confirmed as a specific sub-theme in the last message of the Federal Council to Parliament concerning the continuation of measures relating to civilian peacebuilding and the promotion of human rights.¹ It was on this basis that the CARIM program was launched in 2011. The program draws on methodologies that are the product of RPC's eight years of practical experience and seeks to further develop, refine and apply them.

CSS and the FDFA's Human Security Division already have a history of close collaboration in the framework of the Mediation Support Project (MSP) which brings the Center for Security Studies and swisspeace together with the Human Security Division in support of Switzerland's mediation activities.² Like MSP, CARIM combines the wide international network and experience of the Swiss FDFA with the academic and policy expertise and networks of the CSS. At the same time, the joint implementation of two similar programs allows all involved institutions to benefit from synergies between the two programs.

ACTIVITIES

CARIM's activities are organized into three inter-related pillars. Under the first pillar, the program offers direct support to mediation and conflict transformation processes where there is an interplay between religion

¹ See *Botschaft über die Weiterführung von Massnahmen zur Förderung des Friedens und der menschlichen Sicherheit 2012–2016*. 29.06.2011. Section 3.2.1.4

² http://www.css.ethz.ch/research/research_projects/MSP. See also Mason, Simon J.A. /Siegfried, Matthias. Mediation Support Project (MSP): Massgeschneiderte Verstärkung der schweizerischen Mediationskapazitäten. In: *Bulletin zur schweizerischen Sicherheitspolitik* (2008). S. 137 – 145.

and politics. This support is offered both directly to conflict actors, and to third parties engaged in efforts to resolve the conflict. It can include, but is not limited to, mediation training, coaching, assistance with process design, research on particular aspects of the conflict, facilitation of contacts or identification of experts.

The second pillar is concerned with research and knowledge management. Research seeks to better understand and explain the interplay between culture, religion and politics and the practical implications it has for conflict. In addition, CARIM engages in capturing best practice and lessons learned of experienced practitioners from different contexts.

The third pillar is concerned with capacity-building. It aims to enhance the specific skills, knowledge and awareness of third parties and policy makers on how to engage in conflicts shaped by an interplay between religion and politics.

RELIGION AS WORLDVIEW

There are many ways to approach questions of religion and conflict. One is to disregard the role of religion entirely in the belief that it is irrelevant to conflict resolution efforts or too complex to master. This attitude, historically widespread amongst Western policymakers and practitioners, while still common, is losing credibility. There is increasing recognition that in a world where over 80% of the world's population identify with a religious group, the role of religion cannot be ignored.³ Increasing efforts to take religion into account have led to an increased focus on the role of religious leaders in conflict. There is growing support for their efforts as peacebrokers and for the organization of inter-religious dialogues.

The CARIM program takes a different approach. Rather than analyzing religion as a separate obstacle or resource in transforming the conflict, it seeks to integrate analysis of religion's role into wider analyses and responses to conflict. Working from the assumption that traditional mediation and conflict transformation tools are insufficient to adequately address conflicts where religion plays a role, it seeks to improve existing tools as well as develop and promote new ways of approaching such conflicts. As a starting point it conceptualizes religion as a worldview, i.e. a whole framework for understanding and being in the world that is adopted by a group and its members. This approach leads to a focus particularly on conflicts involving conflict actors adhering to differing worldviews.

The understanding of religion adopted by the program is particularly suitable for mediation, as it permits a mediator to take a neutral, non-judgmental approach to religion and, therefore, to the stated worldviews of the parties to the conflict. It also serves to emphasize the particular challenges related to communication and understanding that may exist between conflict parties with differing worldviews as each will have their own framework for understanding and making sense of the statements and actions of the other, increasing the risks of misinterpretation.

From this starting point, the core challenge the program seeks to explore is how to engage with actors in conflict who hold different worldviews in such a way as to help them arrive at mutually agreed ways of peacefully coexisting. In this regard, one of the key principles developed so far is that traditional dialogue-centered approaches may not be the most effective form of engagement. In addition to the above-mentioned communication challenges, when conflict parties adhere to wildly differing value systems, dialogue which seeks to discuss these value differences may just end up accentuating the differences and widening the divide

³ *The Global Religious Landscape, A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010*, Pew Research Center, December 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-exec.aspx> (Consulted: 01.10.2013).

between the parties. What can be more effective is to try and engage the parties in joint practical action to address aspects of the conflict. Through joint problem-solving of practical problems, rather than through discussing theoretical differences, trust can be built and practical ways of living together can be found.⁴

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

CARIM's current process support activities are focused primarily on the regions of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and on South-East Asia. In MENA, CARIM has been giving training and facilitation support to the Cordoba Now Forum which brings together activists, researchers and practitioners.⁵ Together with the Cordoba Foundation Geneva, CARIM has also been supporting partners in Egypt working on intercommunal violence. In South-East Asia the program is currently analyzing the role of Buddhism in politics in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka in order to identify new entry points for addressing conflicts in these countries. At the global level the program co-ordinated the Islamic Charities Project. The project sought to create a more nuanced understanding of the work of Islamic charitable institutions, with a particular focus on the situation in the occupied Palestinian Territories.⁶

Ongoing research and knowledge management work is focused on developing guidance for practitioners, for example on how to assess the role of religion in conflict or on how to mediate in conflicts involving religiously-inspired political actors. These products will be made available to a wide audience of practitioners. In addition, training modules on working on conflict with religious dimensions are being developed and tested. A priority target audience for such trainings will be Swiss FDFA human security advisors and diplomats working in contexts shaped by conflicts with religious dimensions.

CONCLUSION

As a program designed to make a practical contribution to peace promotion, it is the combination of research, training and practice that strengthens the applicability of CARIM's work. Through these efforts to improve mediation and conflict transformation approaches to conflicts where religion plays a role, the CSS and the Swiss FDFA seek to make a modest, but important, contribution to addressing violent conflict while at the same time furthering the reputation of Switzerland as an innovative actor in the field of peace promotion.

For further information concerning CARIM and a list of related publications please visit http://www.css.ethz.ch/research/research_projects/CARIM.

⁴ This approach has been termed diapraxis. For an explanation of diapraxis methodology see Bitter, Jean-Nicolas. *Diapraxis in Different Contexts: a Brief Discussion with Rasmussen*. In: *Politorbis No. 52: Religion in Conflict Transformation* (2011).

⁵ The "Cordoba Now Forum" is supported by the Cordoba Foundation Geneva and the Swiss FDFA. For more information: www.cordoue.ch (Consulted: 01.10.2013).

⁶ See Frazer, Owen. *Friend Not Foe*. In: *CSS Policy Perspectives* 1, No. 2 (2013). http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/PP_02_10_2013.pdf (Consulted: 01.10.2013). Schaeublin, Emanuel / Frazer, Owen. *Charity Under Threat? Zakat Institutions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (June 2012). <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Zakat-Institutions-in-Occupied-Palestinian-Territory.pdf> (Consulted: 01.10.2013)