

Rethinking Mediation: Resolving Religious Conflicts

Religion is a conflictual issue in most armed conflicts today. We need to better understand how to resolve these conflicts.

By Jonas Baumann, Daniel Finnbogason, and Isak Svensson

Over recent years, armed conflicts with a religious dimension have dominated world news, and indeed they have become more frequent. The role and significance of religion in armed conflict is complex. The increased proportion of conflicts with a religious dimension is not only due to an increase of such conflicts, but also due to a decrease in non-religious conflicts overall. Further, not all conflicts where religion plays a role are becoming more frequent, calling for a more disaggregated analysis. The paper begins with such a brief analysis, followed by the empirical data and a discussion on how religion challenges conflict resolution.

The role of religion in conflict

In order to better understand the role of religion in conflict, there are two basic aspects to consider: religion as the identity-marker of the conflict parties, and religion and its influence on the issue the parties disagree about.

First, religion can play a role in conflict as a marker of group identity. This means that the fault lines of conflicts follow religious identity lines, either between world religions or between different strands of the same world religion. Religion can be both a way of identifying with a given group, as well as a way of differentiating from another group. In this brief, we will call such conflicts religious identity conflicts.

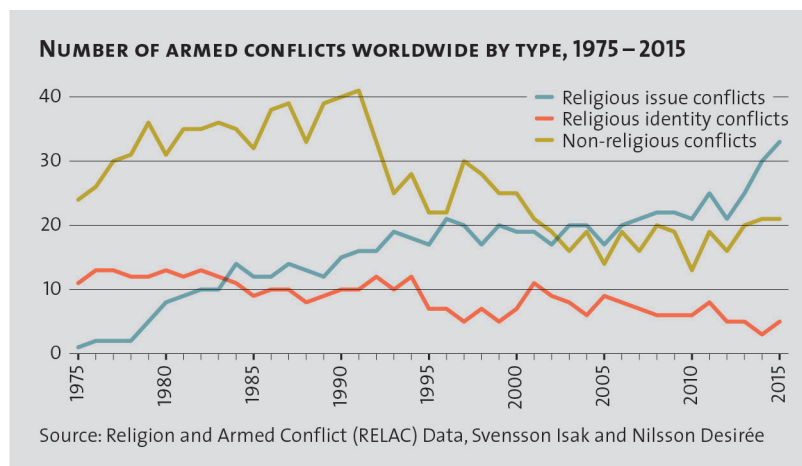
Second, religion can shape what the conflict parties fight about. Religious issues can, in turn, have higher or lower

importance relative to other issues in the conflict. This can take various forms such as contesting (a religiously important) territory, the power in a country based on religious grounds, or the role religion should play in determining how a country is governed. We will refer to conflicts where one or more of the conflictual issues has a religious dimension as religious issue conflicts.

It is important to stress that religion per se is not the problem. The encounter of parties with different beliefs

KEY POINTS

- Empirical data implies a need to recognize religion as a factor in armed conflict and call for better understanding of the interlinkages between religion and conflict and how to resolve such conflicts.
- Two types of conflicts are not increasing over time: conflicts without religious aspects and conflicts fought between different religious identity groups but not over religious issues. This indicates that classical conflict resolution approaches often work for these types of conflicts.
- Conflicts in which one or more of the conflict issues has a religious dimension are increasing and now account for a majority of all armed conflicts. This indicates that existing conflict resolution mechanisms may be insufficient for these conflict types.
- Successful resolution of religious issue conflicts point to the importance of disentangling the religious from the political components, and/or to adapt classical conflict resolution tools to better deal with differences in religious beliefs.



does not necessarily lead to violent conflict. However, such parties *can* enter into a conflict over a religious issue or mobilize along religious identity lines.

Empirical trends¹

The general trend in conflict numbers shows a relatively optimistic picture, with a steady decline and consolidation since the 1990s, a trend only broken since a renewed increase from 2010. Conflicts over non-religious issues between parties from the same religious group broadly peaked in the early 1990s, declined throughout the rest of the 1990s and flattened out in the 2000s and 2010s (fluctuating between 15 and 20 per year).

To analyze the trends in conflicts with a religious dimension, the distinction of identity and issue conflicts introduced above is used. In 1975 – the earliest data available in the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) dataset – religious conflicts represented only a minority of all conflicts, and almost all of these were *religious identity conflicts*. The number of identity conflicts has decreased slightly but constantly since, resulting in only five or less per year since 2012. This steady decrease may indicate that conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms have been effective for managing these types of conflicts.

Religious issue conflicts were a marginal phenomenon in 1975. The first increase of such conflicts occurred in 1979, driven partly by the dynamics following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and as a reaction to the Islamic Revolution in

Iran. Since then, the frequency of such conflicts has increased steadily, and with accelerated speed since 2010. In 2015, religious issue conflicts were the majority (56%) of all armed conflicts. Research suggests that such conflicts are more intractable than other types of conflicts and are less likely to be solved through peace settlements. This indicates that existing conflict resolution and prevention mechanisms may not be adapted to this particular type of armed conflict.

Challenges to conflict resolution in religious conflicts

Research on religion and conflict has raised several explanations to why religious issue conflicts seem to be particularly difficult to resolve peacefully. One centers on differences in worldviews and

the resulting challenges to *communication*. For actors with diverging worldviews, it is harder to communicate and understand each other. Words not only do not mean the same, but the way sense and meaning are created in the world differs. This results in miscommunication and misunderstanding, and creates challenges to classical conflict resolution approaches which rely heavily on voicing one's values and interests by putting them into words. An example of this problematic is the term "land" in the Israel-Palestine conflict, to which religious and non-religious groups

FURTHER READING

Religion in Conflict Transformation Mason Simon J. A. and Sguaitamatti Damiano A. (eds), 2011, *Politorbis* No. 52, Bern, Switzerland

This issue aims to help policy-makers and practitioners to deal with religious dimensions of conflict by conceptualizing the role of religion in conflict, by presenting methods of conflict transformation and resolution and by presenting concrete cases.

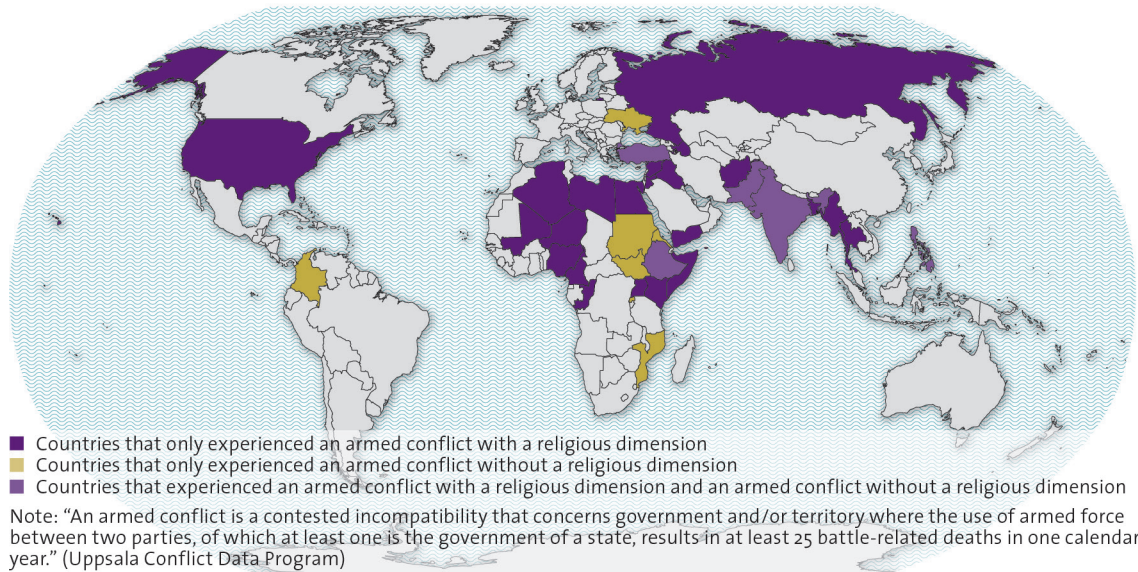
Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975 to 2015 Svensson, Isak and Nilsson, Desirée, 2017, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1–22

This article presents the new Religion and Armed Conflict data set – which is suitable for analysing the causes, dynamics and resolution of religious conflicts – and describes patterns and key trends.

Ending Holy Wars: religion and conflict resolution in civil wars Svensson Isak, 2012, *University of Queensland Press, Queensland, Australia*

This book explores how religious dimensions affect conflict resolution in civil war by mapping out the religious dimensions of internal armed conflict and how it impacts their resolution.

COUNTRIES THAT EXPERIENCED ARMED CONFLICTS WITH RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS IN 2016



Source: Based on updated data from Svensson Isak and Nilsson Desirée, 2017.

on both sides attribute different meanings. As a consequence, negotiating while using the term "land" leads to misunderstanding because the different groups do not understand this term in the same way. Moreover, in religious issue conflicts, the relationship between the parties is further complicated because religious beliefs are highly emotional. Generally, people are able to compromise, yet this may not necessarily be true when strong beliefs are present. As a consequence, actors with strong beliefs can be unwilling to accept other actors as counterparts, i.e. there is often a high level of intolerance towards actors motivated by other beliefs. This problem is re-enforced in the context of religious nationalism where including others per definition undermines the aim of exclusivity. A focus on exclusivity thus counters the generally accepted need to include all relevant actors in a conflict resolution process for it to be sustainable.

A second explanation emphasizes the challenge of *indivisibility*, which generally applies when parties aspire to the same set of sacred resources. One aspect of indivisibility refers to the impossibility of exchanging an issue for something else of equal value. For instance, building a copy of Jerusalem elsewhere or offering economic compensation for ceding Jerusalem is not an acceptable solution for either the Israelis or the Palestinians, because the value ascribed to Jerusalem cannot be replaced. The second aspect of indivisibility is the parties' perception that an issue would lose its value if it were to be split. For instance, in Sri Lanka, the Buddhist nationalists consider the entirety of Sri Lanka as holy, hence putting even a part of this territory under either a secular or other religious ruling would,

in their view, devalue the entire island. Indivisibility hence poses a challenge to classical conflict resolution which generally relies on compromising or sharing.²

A third explanation focuses on differences in *time horizons*. The argument here is that religious militants and their secular opponents perceive time differently, in that the former have longer (sometimes even eternal) time horizons and may therefore be more willing to bear higher costs in the short term in order to achieve their goals.³

Mitigating religious disputes

The increase of religious issue conflicts and the particular challenge they pose to conflict resolution point to the relevance of conflict prevention, a field deserving more attention. The focus of this paper, however, is on conflict resolution, aiming to present policy makers with a better understanding of the options for dealing with these kind of conflicts. There are two basic approaches: removing the sacred from the conflict; and adapting traditional conflict resolution tools for dealing with religion.

The first approach attempts to desacralize the religious dimension of the issues parties fight over. The goal of this process can be to change an actor's priority ranking of the various conflict issues, ultimately aiming to remove the religious issues from the conflict or otherwise lower their importance relative to others. In Indonesia, the government granted permission to the Aceh region to implement sharia law. This accommodated some demands of the Free Aceh Movement rebels, thus taking the religious issue out of the conflict and laying the ground for continued negotiations and the peace agreement in 2005.⁴ Alternatively,

the aim can be for actors to re-frame the religious message by focusing on the more moderate and cooperative aspects of religion.

Conflicts can also become desacralized due to changes in the structural dynamics of the conflict, which are outside the scope of action of a mediator. An actor can lose backing of its core supporters due to moral outrage about particularly violent conflict behavior. Similarly, a new group can emerge which forces all actors to reposition themselves, typically leading to a more moderate and a more extreme group. Alternatively there can be a shift in the society which leads to a narrowing of the religious divide between the various sections of the society, ultimately making the religious dimension of the issue at stake less relevant.

Adapting conflict resolution tools

Given the deeply emotional nature of worldviews, people and societies tend to react strongly to perceived pressure to forgo their beliefs. As a consequence, attempting to mitigate religion or to negotiate religious views can lead to polarization and hardened positions. Out of this consideration, another line of thinking concentrates on adapting conflict resolution mechanisms so that they are better equipped to deal with religious issue conflicts. This approach accepts that religion can be a key component in a conflict – not just as an instrument of recruitment or identification – but as a conflictual issue in its own right. Consequently, the religious component is taken into account when analyzing and when dealing with such conflicts. As an early adopter of this thinking, Switzerland used this in the early 2000s in Tajikistan. Other actors such as US pastor Bob Roberts have also worked in this manner in Afghanistan and Palestine.⁵

Most of these approaches stress that the focus of the conflict resolution process should not be on negotiating the differences in the religious beliefs. Instead, the idea is to create a “safe space” in which convictions and beliefs are not questioned or challenged. The process is instead structured so as to allow actors to reinterpret the practical implications of their beliefs themselves. If the process focuses on discussing the actors’ views, both sides are likely to defend them, leading to a hardening of those views. Instead, the idea is to

find and implement joint practical solutions to the parties’ conflict. This allows them to manage differences in a non-conflictual way, increases the trust between actors and allows each group to re-evaluate their positions on practical questions while remaining true to their beliefs and faith. The strong focus on joint practical solutions is seen as a form of communication between the parties, which is particularly important given the difficulties of mutual understanding outlined above. While it might appear strange not to aim to resolve the value differences, the strength of this approach is that it allows the parties to remain true to themselves. In that, this approach recalls that religion per se is not the problem, but that the conflict results from how we deal with differences on a practical level.

SELECTED SOURCES

1. Unless specified otherwise, all data is taken from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) of Uppsala University, Sweden (www.ucdp.uu.se) and Svensson, Isak and Nilsson, Desirée (2017), Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975 to 2015, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1–22.
2. See Hassner, Ron E. (2003), To Halve and to Hold: Conflict over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility, *Security Studies* 12(4): 1–33.
3. See Toft, Monica D. (2006), *Religion, Civil War, and International Order*, Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; and Svensson, Isak (2012), Conflict Resolution and Religious Dimensions of Armed Conflict, in Lee Marsden (ed.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 119–135.
4. See Svensson, Isak (2012), Conflict Resolution and Religious Dimensions of Armed Conflict, in Lee Marsden (ed.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 119–135.
5. Mason Simon J. A. and Sguaitamatti Damiano A. (eds), “Religion in Conflict Transformation”, *Politorbis No. 52*, Bern, Switzerland (2011).

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