

Sacred values in high-level peace negotiations

Recommendations informed by neuro- and cognitive science

Berghof Policy Brief 18

Carla Schraml

Executive Summary

In an era where violent conflicts are increasingly complex and deeply rooted in sacred values and identities, traditional peacemaking strategies often fall short. Deeply held beliefs, as they are core to identity, are not only difficult to negotiate but also challenge conventional tactics for transforming conflicts and settling violence. Integrating insights from neuro- and cognitive sciences can enhance the practice of designing communication and processes for high-level peace negotiations. Drawing on neuroscience-informed research and insights from global (high-level) peace processes, the recommendations for peace practitioners in this policy brief emphasise the relevance of emotional and psychological underpinnings of conflict. Practices such as active listening, empathy, symbolic concessions, and working with narratives can be useful for high-level peace negotiations. The design of negotiation processes should prioritise inclusive, intragroup discussions and consider symbolic gestures that respect sacred values.

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Recommendations for high-level peace negotiations:

General considerations:

- ≡ Preventive diplomacy is key,
- ≡ Dealing with emotions needs to take centre stage,
- ≡ Authentic and long-term involvement is needed.

Work with sacred values in facilitating peace talks:

- ≡ Verbal acknowledgement throughout the process is key,
- ≡ Work with identity-constitutive narratives,
- ≡ Make holders of sacred values, including third parties and mediators, aware of them.

Work with sacred values when designing a process:

- ≡ Park the “non-negotiable” to open up opportunities to agree,
- ≡ Do not exclude conflict stakeholders, e.g. from the process,
- ≡ Focus on intragroup negotiations and intragroup consensus-building,
- ≡ Use the “sufficient consensus”-approach,
- ≡ Deal with dynamics around sacred values, beliefs, and identities at the “negotiation table” and beyond,
- ≡ Give space to nuanced and multiple identities throughout the process.

1 Revisiting practices – timelier than ever

Violent conflicts are increasing worldwide, while political solutions to settle these conflicts are becoming less likely. The number of active state-based armed conflicts, as well as the number of fatalities resulting from non-state conflicts, remained at historically high levels in 2023 (Shawn et al., 2024). In 2024, there are over 120 armed conflicts around the world, involving over 60 states and 120 non-state armed groups, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.¹

“Religious claims”, worldviews, sacred values, i.e. deeply held beliefs, identities and emotions are seen to make the settlement of conflict more difficult, and contribute to the persistence and reoccurrence of conflict (Palik et al., 2020; Seul, 2021; Shapiro, 2017).

Next to a multiplicity of (external) factors, the prevailing practices of (high-level) peace mediation have largely sidestepped addressing worldviews, emotions, and identities in conflict (Seul, 2021). The field of (high-level) peace mediation continues to be dominated by power mediation, and “carrot and stick” approaches (including positive and negative incentives) that are based on the assumption of rational actors and decision-making. More often than not, processes focus on “substantive issues” to solve conflict (Shapiro, 2017, p. 3).

Seasoned global mediators confirm this and deplore the (high-level) peace mediation practices of dismissing the human dimensions of conflict, and more specifically of dismissing needed trust-building and relationship transformation. Against the background of these insights and first-hand experiences, they believe that “psychology and the behavioural sciences” are “one of the big areas that... is missing in high-level practice” (Waldman, 2022, p. 11).

To improve our understanding of the sacred and how we design peace processes that deal more effectively and constructively with it, the Berghof Foundation, in collaboration with Beyond Conflict, conducted

The PeaceLab “Brain and Peace”

Crucial insights from neuro- and cognitive science on how sacred values are processed in our brains inspired a structured and facilitated¹ exchange among seasoned peacemakers at *The Berlin Moot* from 17-18 April 2024. The experts took a closer look at the results of brain scan studies that show how sacred values impact brain activity, as well as other aspects related to process design, including facilitating peace negotiations.

The seasoned peacemakers, who contributed with their experiences from different conflict contexts were:

- **Monica McWilliams**, Professor Emeritus and Signatory to the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland,
- **Nickolay E. Mladenov**, Director General of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) and former UN Under-Secretary General and Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (2015-2020),
- **Basir Feda**, Head of Unit Afghanistan and Central/South Asia Unit at Berghof,
- **Nafees Hamid**, Research and Policy Director, KCL XCEPT, War Studies Dept., King's College London.

¹ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-opinion-paper-how-term-armed-conflict-defined-international-humanitarian-law>, access July 2024.

an extended workshop session, a so-called PeaceLab, at *The Berlin Moot*.² The PeaceLab combined the experiences of seasoned peacemakers with evidence and insights from neuro- and cognitive science-informed research.³

2 Thinking brain, social behaviour and conflict together

Social psychology research has been looking for some time into social behaviour, and more specifically into conflicts, its drivers and settlements. It has emphasised questions related to (group) identity and behaviour, as well as emotions. Research prominently explored questions such as what is needed for individuals to identify with a group (very little, as Tajfel in 1978 proved in his experiments), and how human behaviour changes (often for the worse) when being part of a group (see e.g. Zimbardo et al., 1973). Due to technological advancements such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalography (EEG), and electrodermal activity (EDA), and social and psychological bioscience emerging in the last decades, biological concepts and methods have informed and refined the thinking about social behaviour and conflict (Fitzduff, 2021, p. 14).

Generally, neuroscience is understood to research the brain's functioning and structure. To understand the brain and its influence on human behaviour, neuroscience looks at hormones, neurons, and the structure of our brains. Accordingly, neuroscience is often seen as a subdivision of biology (sometimes called “neurobiology”). However, some perceive this field to be much broader, being constituted by many different disciplines (Rausch, 2021, p. 5).⁴ In the following, we will use “brain science” referring to the wider realm of neuro- and cognitive science and related sciences.

Crucial initiatives and pioneers in the field have brought brain science and peacebuilding together: Beyond Conflict, the ThinkPeace Learning and Support Hub at the MaryHoch Institute for Reconciliation as well as highly recognised and honoured individuals, such as Emile Bruneau, Lead Scientist for the Beyond Conflict Innovation Lab. They draw on insights and evidence from brain science related to dehumanisation, individual aggression, and trauma to inform peacebuilding practices and approaches. In Mari Fitzduff's recently published book “Our Brains at War” (2021), she relates insights from neuroscience to her vast experiences of studying war and making peace. Fitzduff introduces the relationship and functioning of different parts of the brain, as well as the rivalry between rationality and emotions, in order to explain observed dynamics related to group emotions, belonging, and beliefs in conflict contexts. Amongst others, the often-neglected functions of beliefs, such as providing a “sense of solidarity and collectiveness and a meaning to one’s own existence” are explored against the background of insights from social-psychology and neuroscience-informed methods. As shown in functional MRI (fMRI) studies, logical contradictions to deeply held beliefs induce negative feelings by the holder, however, there is no increase in brain activity in the reasoning cortex (Fitzduff, 2021, p. 61).

² The Berlin Moot took place from April 17-18 at the Humboldt Forum, in Berlin, <https://www.berlinmoot.org/>. The Berghof Foundation together with the support of various partners, including the German Federal Foreign Office, the Robert Bosch Foundation, Stiftung Mercator and others, hosted the conference for the first time. It created space for interdisciplinary, creative and solution-oriented exchange between high-level peace and policy makers, visionaries and stakeholders from across a variety of fields, such as business, neuro- and cognitive science, military, and technology.

³ Crucial were the shared experiences and inputs by: Monica McWilliams, Professor Emeritus; Signatory to the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland; Nickolay E. Mladenov, Director General of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA); former UN Under-Secretary General and Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (2015-2020); Nafees Hamid, Research and Policy Director, KCL XCEPT, War Studies Dept., King's College London; Basir Feda, Head of Unit Afghanistan and Central/South Asia Unit, Berghof Foundation. The exchange was moderated by Carla Schraml, Advisor on Mediation and Negotiation Support, Berghof Foundation.

⁴ Amongst others it is seen to be related to linguistics, psychology, computer science, mathematics, engineering, linguistics, philosophy, chemistry, physics, and medicine (Rausch, 2021, p. 5).

Our brain is important to understand social behaviour. However, brain science alone cannot exhaustively explain complex relations defining how humans behave in group contexts, and more specifically amidst violence and war. Culture, individual biography, history, and social interactions play important roles in influencing the brain, its structure and our genes (Sapolsky, 2017, p. 16). But brain science can help to check assumptions within peacebuilding and peacemaking, which are strongly influenced and shaped by social sciences.

3 The non-negotiable, worldview conflicts, and the sacred

In many violent conflicts as well as in peace negotiations and processes, values, beliefs and ideas are involved and are often non-negotiable. They are non-negotiable in the sense that they are difficult or impossible to bargain with as they are core to identities and their narratives. Non-negotiable values, beliefs and ideas give meaning to the lives of the conflict parties and are core to how they see themselves in the world (Shapiro, 2017, p. 98). Sacred values also are crucially related to identity and define “who we are” in groups (Atran et al., 2007, p. 1039). Accordingly, conflicts associated with these values, beliefs and ideas are strongly charged and driven by emotions. Worldview conflicts threaten the moral and social order of the conflict parties (Seul, 2021, p.208).

Sacred values are defined as such because they do not only resist external pressure, but they can also “backfire” and become even more important and rigid for the holder when they are challenged, threatened and pressured (Baron et al., 1997; Tanner et al., 2004). What is true for values and beliefs is true for identities themselves. They are fluid and fixed at the same time. When they come under threat and pressure, they are likely to harden: “When your identity is threatened, you hunker down in self-defence and conceive of it as a single immutable whole [...] you demand the other party to acquiesce to your perspective, your sense of right and wrong and your values”. Daniel Shapiro (2017, p. 13-14), one of the globally leading negotiation experts, describes this automatism against his vast experiences. Also, when worldviews collide with other worldviews, the rightness of the perspective is reflexively defended (Seul, 2021, p.207). Escalated worldview conflicts lead to the hardening and “sacralisation” of positions (Bitter et al., 2002, p. 8).

The sacred values can be strongly related to religion by being physically represented by holy sites and territories, but they can also be related to secular nationalism, ways of living and ideology. Many identities and narratives relevant to conflicts are only developed during protracted and continued violence and conflict. Different worldviews might be related to religiously or secularly inspired frameworks determining the nature of the state. They might be expressed in different laws regulating family and gender relations or in (religiously or secularly inspired) value systems defining education and the fabric of society (Bitter et al., 2002, p. 8).

Accordingly, in violent conflicts, identities, worldviews and sacred values are often strengthened. New identities and sacred values do emerge. Typically, emerging identities and sacred values are related to being victims, sacrifices and losses. This is particularly the case for actors being strongly exposed to threat and violence, e.g. such as armed actors.⁵ Relevant research examines sacred values of extremist groups and their supporters by scanning their brains. Neuroscience-informed experiments of supporters who hold values associated with ISIS, for example, show that experienced exclusion transformed previously non-sacred values into sacred ones, and increased the willingness to “fight and die” for them (Pretus et al., 2018). In order to better understand what a productive way of dealing with sacred values could be, the brain reaction of supporters of Lashkar-e Taiba, an extremist group in Pakistan associated with Al Qaida, were examined in a similar experimental set-up. It was shown that a simple social norm intervention, namely other Pakistanis disagreeing with the use of violence, reduced the willingness to “fight and die” for these

⁵ See the expert exchange during The Berlin Moot, April 17-18, 2024.

values. Through the social norm intervention, the cognitive control areas for these sacred values were reactivated again (Hamid et al., 2019). The research was crucial for inspiring the reflections, discussions and formulated recommendations at *The Berlin Moot*.

4 The sacred in high-level peace negotiations

Despite the human dimensions being often neglected in (high-level) peace mediation practices, relevant expertise exists. This expertise shows ways of dealing with sacred values or deeply held beliefs, worldviews (Seul, 2021) and “the non-negotiable” (Shapiro, 2017) in high-level negotiations and peace processes (Bitter et al., 2002, p. 8) in order to be effective. This state-of-the-art knowledge also inspired the expert discussion at *The Berlin Moot*.

Generally, interest-based bargaining, i.e. enlarging the pie by going beyond positions through exploring an underlying interest, is often falling short in these cases (Seul, 2021, Shapiro 2017, Bitter et al., 2002).

In respect to micro-mediation tools, including facilitating peace talks and structuring interaction, active listening and showing empathy in conflicts where core elements of identity are involved and possibly under threat are seen to be crucial (Seul, 2021). Furthermore, the relevance of symbolic concessions is emphasised (Atran et al., 2007). Symbolic concessions include expressing understanding for the situation of the other side, expressing apologies for loss and suffering and acknowledging the sacred values of the other side (Atran et al., 2007).

Regarding the actual design of a peace negotiation process, different aspects are discussed in respect to worldview conflicts, the sacred and the non-negotiable. These aspects relate to the relevance of intragroup talks (as opposed to intergroup talks) (Seul, 2021), different decision-making mechanisms, which allow for a veto until the end (“nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”), and where mundane and sacred aspects can be negotiated and discussed jointly (Seul, 2021, p. 218-220). How to sequence the sacred and the mundane, and the experience-based recommendation to “create spaces for discussion where conflict actors feel safe that their worldview and perception of conflict issues will not be denigrated or repressed” (Bitter et al., 2002, p. 12) are also related.

5 Recommendations for high-level peace negotiations and peacemaking

5.1 General considerations

- ≡ **Preventive diplomacy is key.** Values, identities and beliefs will harden when under threat. As insights from neuroscience show, non-sacred values transition into sacred ones when under threat and pressure (this makes them less accessible and more rigid). The hardening of identities and deeply held beliefs can be observed in many violent conflicts worldwide. Ethnopolitical identities, which developed and became salient and relevant during the wars in the 1990s in the Western Balkans, are a very prominent example. As is the case in almost any violent conflict when large-scale violence comes into play, prevention is key.

- ≡ **Dealing with emotions needs to take centre stage in peace negotiations.** The substance in high-level peace negotiations is often overestimated, and emotions are underestimated. One seasoned peacemaker emphasised during the PeaceLab at *The Berlin Moot*: “You do not fight over land; you fight over stories.”
- ≡ **Authentic and long-term involvement is needed.** Insights into neuroscience show that social norms intervention, when peers disagree with the use of violence, leads to the reactivation of cognitively controlled brain areas of values and beliefs. The reactivation of these brain areas makes values and beliefs more flexible and accessible again. This points also to the relevance of gatekeepers and insider mediators (IM)⁶ who convincingly and authentically share the value system and are considered to be peers.

5.2 Work with sacred values in facilitating peace talks

- ≡ **Verbal acknowledgement throughout the process is key:** Neuro- and cognitive science show that verbally acknowledging the sacred and ideological character of motivations and actions leads to the reactivation of cognitively controlled brain areas and makes the non-negotiable negotiable again. The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, in the multiparty negotiations, had this function of mitigating hostile language, acknowledging emotions and creating empathy across the parties through back channelling.
- ≡ **Work with identity constitutive narratives,** as they capture and transport relevant meaning. Many violent conflicts crucially involve a struggle over narratives, e.g. who is entitled to live on the ground and who is a stranger and, therefore, alien to the land (see e.g. the conflicts in Northern Ireland and in Israel/Palestinian territories). The process must develop a narrative that is inclusive to conflicting sacred values and crucial to the conflict dynamic.
- ≡ **Make the holders of sacred values, including third parties and mediators, aware of them.** Not every holder of sacred values might be aware of them and their specific relevance for the self. The facilitation of peace talks has the crucial role of helping the conflict parties and stakeholders to become aware of the sacred values, beliefs and ideas they hold. The reflection of the third parties on their own sacred values ensures that values, beliefs and ideas of the conflict parties, stakeholders and their constituencies shape the process and its outcome.

5.3 Work with sacred values when designing a process

- ≡ **Park the “non-negotiable” to open up opportunities to agree** (in the short-term). The multiparty negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland (1998) were able to decisively reduce violence. Disagreements on, for example, the anthem, flag and name were postponed to a later stage. This corresponds with findings backed by neuroimaging that altering and challenging sacred values might strengthen the relevance for the holder of these values and beliefs. In the case of the multiparty negotiations in Northern Ireland, a commission was set up in 2016 to help resolve these still emotionally charged issues related to the anthem and the flag. They also established a parade commission, which was meant to steer inflammatory and deeply symbolic parades. The sacred highly relevant symbols but also the political and ideological motivations for using violence (which distinguish a freedom fighter from a mere criminal), need to be addressed

⁶ Insiders – in contrast to outsiders – are actors intrinsic to the conflict context in question, i.e. they are part of the social fabric of the conflict; their lives are directly affected by the conflict; and they may have a stake in the conflict (Mubashir et al, 2016, p. 27).

and acknowledged. Social norms, such as rejecting physical violence, within the course of a more general societal transformation are crucial.

- ≡ **Do not exclude conflict stakeholders from the process.** It will enhance the emotional relevance of values and beliefs and will make them less accessible for intellectual arguments and reasoning. As research backed by neuroimaging shows, the experience of exclusion will make values, beliefs and ideas processed in emotionally controlled brain areas instead of cognitively controlled brain areas. The international isolation of the Taliban regime after 2021 and the strong international emphasis on “girls’ education” might be an example in this respect: the international political pressure and emphasis on the topic make the negotiations of the topic more rigid. For the Taliban, its constituency and beyond, the topic becomes a very strong symbol and synonym for power struggles related to external intervention, ownership and self-determination.
- ≡ **Focus on intragroup negotiations and intragroup consensus-building,** especially when sacred values are involved, as peers do play a significant role in shaping norms (e.g. regarding the use of violence). In intergroup and -party negotiations, negotiators who reach out to and acknowledge the loss and victims of other conflict parties will be easily delegitimised and seen as a traitor and treated as an outcast. “We were treated as pariah,” shares Monica McWilliams, who was a negotiator in the multiparty negotiations and a signatory of the Good Friday Agreement.
- ≡ **Use the “sufficient consensus”-approach.** This decision-making procedure has been very helpful in the case of multiparty negotiations on Northern Ireland as well as in South Africa. The mechanism allows for inclusion of different views related to sacred values while also keeping the process manageable by avoiding strong blockages through veto.
- ≡ **Create effect messaging to the constituencies for securing support.** Deal with dynamics around sacred values, beliefs, and identities at the “negotiation table” and beyond. As communication around the core elements of the Good Friday Agreement show, leaders can “sell” the agreement and its core elements (including and concerning sacred values) by framing it in ways that resonates with their constituencies, ensuring buy-in.
- ≡ **Give space to nuanced and multiple identities throughout the process,** alongside acknowledging strong collective identities related to sacred values. This is why informal spaces beyond “the negotiation table” are crucial where conflict parties can experience each other in different roles as well as in other parts of their identities.

6 Further research and exploration

- ≡ Insights into high-level peace negotiations confirm that (collectively-shared) sacred values can be intentionally instrumentalised, e.g. for leveraging stakes at play and for securing influence and political power. This implies that individuals are acting and thinking rationally to different degrees in respect to specific values and beliefs. It would be crucial to better understand the interplay between instrumentalisation and sacred values – inspired and backed by neuro- and cognitive science-informed evidence.
- ≡ Sacred values influencing conflict dynamics have individual as well as collective dimensions. Neuroscience-informed evidence very strongly focuses on the individual level, and is less apt to explain the dynamics between group and self-identity on a socio-political level. Against this background, it is relevant to explore more specifically the relationship between collectively and individually held sacred values and their interplay under specific circumstances (e.g. inclusion and exclusion).
- ≡ Furthermore, it would be relevant to explore further the communication between “negotiation table” and constituencies and how concessions on sacred values are to be framed in order to increase acceptance amongst constituencies.

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