



Mediation Space: Addressing Obstacles Stemming from Worldview Differences to Regain Negotiation Flexibility

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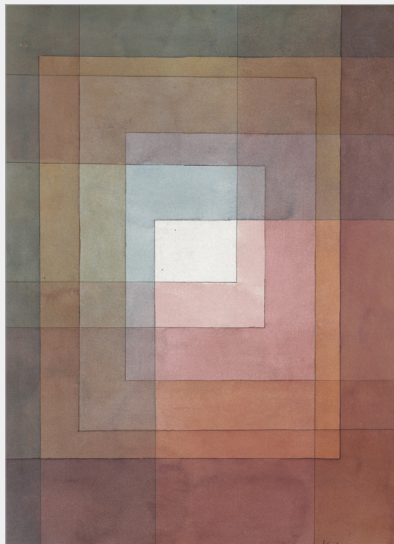
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Stemming from Worldview
Differences to Regain
Negotiation Flexibility

Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Simon J. A. Mason,
Emanuel Schaeublin, Angela Ullmann



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Foreword

According to its Foreign Policy Strategy 2020–23, Switzerland aspires to be one of the world’s leading countries in the field of peacebuilding. The facilitation and mediation of dialogue is a core component of Swiss peace policy. It is an important principle guiding our action to work inclusively. What does “work inclusively” mean? It means that we are open to talk and engage with all actors who are willing to do so, without proscribing any groups or individuals on the basis of their ideas or worldviews. This openness is obviously not a value statement, but a working principle.

In order to carry out this mission effectively, we need not only to reach out to actors who are parties to armed conflicts. We also need to understand and take into account those actors, whose different worldviews, narratives or ideologies shape the behavior and decisions of these armed conflict parties – even as we do not agree with them.

To engage such actors constructively we found that adapted dialogue facilitation and mediation methods are necessary, such as the “Mediation Space” approach outlined in this important publication. The term “mediating a space” was first coined by conflict transformation practitioner John-Paul Lederach. He used it to highlight the importance of the space created for different actors to meet and exchange, rather than focusing on the role of a mediator in structuring a negotiation process using a pre-structured agenda built around specific issues (e.g. ceasefires, political power sharing arrangements, economic wealth-sharing agreements, etc.).

We have further developed the “Mediation Space” approach over the last two decades at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA – in collaboration with partners at the Center for Security Studies at the ETH Zurich, at the Cordoba Peace Institute and, before 2011, also at the Graduate Institute in Geneva. This helped us to engage with political actors inspired by different worldviews. What is key in this approach is that it is oriented towards a joint vision, shared by those who participate in the space. The mediation space allows actors to meet without fearing their core value-systems and worldviews are being threatened. How the process is structured and what issues are discussed is developed in a participatory and iterative manner. Emphasis is placed on exploring and jointly implementing agreed activities that make sense in the context of the different worldviews. Further dimensions of this approach are discussed in this publication in a

comprehensive manner for the first time and illustrated by two case studies. I am happy that through this publication we can share our insights with a wider mediation and conflict transformation community. This publication will be particularly interesting for those who are curious about innovative ways to address conflicts in which value-systems and worldviews play a key role.

Simon Geissbühler,

Head of Peace and Human Rights Division,
Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Summary

In numerous intra-state conflicts, societies are polarized along worldview divides and conflicting parties disagree over what kind of society and state they want to build. These disagreements can concern many issues. What kind of religious or secularist framework should determine the nature of the state? Which laws should regulate family relations, gender relations, and the right to live in ways that deviate from what is considered the norm in a given context? What value systems should define education and the fabric of society? Such questions can deeply divide societies and entrench intra-state wars by blocking political processes and mediation efforts.

This paper suggests a method for addressing such blockages, one which is based on an understanding of the principal challenges that can arise from worldview differences in conflicts and conflict transformation. These challenges include: (1) how a community's sense of deep security is undermined by fears that another group is imposing a different worldview – and thus a set of laws – upon them; (2) how communication can become more challenging, as particular words may have different practical consequences for groups embedded in different worldviews; (3) how conflict actors and third parties with differing worldviews are confronted with diverging understandings and experiences of reality; (4) how escalated conflicts that take place between groups with different worldviews tend to lead to a hardening or “sacralization” of positions, rendering certain issues non-negotiable as long as there is polarization; and (5) how worldviews can shape time horizons and visions of peace in ways that can disrupt international mediation efforts focused on peace agreements and international law.

In order to deal with these challenges, we propose a model of engagement that we call the “mediation space” approach. Mediation space is defined as a process of exchange convened by a mediation team who bring together people across different worldviews in order to coordinate their actions and to agree on ways for practically addressing specific aspects of an ongoing conflict. The idea is to create a space where leaders of communities, specifically the guardians and interpreters of a community's worldviews and value systems, can come together across divides to address conflict issues. The aim is to acknowledge worldviews while avoiding their discussion head on. Exchanges instead explore practical actions that can be justified by political leaders whose communities are embedded in different worldviews. The ap-

proach does this through the creation of forums, which can be complementary to or independent from track one peace processes involving top-level political and military actors.

This paper distinguishes between conflict actors' worldviews, their interpretations of situations, and their political behavior. The relationship between these three levels is flexible. Political leaders need to interpret situations and explain their decisions in ways that resonate with the worldviews of the communities they represent. Depending on the circumstances, they can justify a decision to either commit to a peaceful solution of a conflict or perpetuate hostilities. Both decisions can be based on their respective worldviews. Therefore, the challenge for mediation teams, which are ideally composed of a mix of outsiders and insiders, does not lie in altering the worldviews of groups involved in conflicts. Instead, it involves encouraging leaders to take constructive steps towards a peaceful solution that can be explained within the worldview of their community.

Introduction

In recent decades, conflicts with religious or cultural dimensions taking place between groups adhering to different visions of the state and society have increased.¹ This is why it is important to pay closer attention to how worldview differences affect the dynamics of conflicts and their transformation. This paper discusses mediation space as a way of addressing conflicts where worldview differences polarize society and block political peace processes.

What are worldviews?

For the purpose of conflict transformation, we define worldviews as **shared understandings of reality which orientate social and political life.**² Worldviews affect how people experience “reality” and how they perceive and acknowledge issues such as religion in public life, gender roles, and structural inequalities. Consequently, worldviews shape laws, political systems, and ways of life. There are multiple challenges in trying to understand worldviews, not the least of which is that we are all embedded in a worldview and are often only partly conscious of the implications. Moreover, we can never be free of a worldview and we may be severely limited in understanding worldviews that are different to our own. Therefore, if we are to approach conflicts and their transformation with the necessary humility, it is important to be self-aware of how worldviews shape our interpretations of situations and choices of action. In light of this, the following paper looks at how worldviews can shape political behavior and how they come to bear on conflict dynamics and conflict transformation.

How worldview differences affect conflict and their transformation

Worldviews affect political behavior. However, the relationship between political actors’ worldviews, their interpretations of specific situations, and their actions is not deterministic or linear.³ Instead, it is flexible. Conceptually, the

1 On which, see Svensson (2012).

2 This definition was developed in the learning process project “[Mediating Conflicts between Groups with Different Worldviews: Approaches and Methods](#)” (ETH Zurich: 2022), convened by the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, Seton Hall University, and the University of British Columbia. The definition has been adopted by the European Union in its “[Peacemediation Guidelines](#)” (European External Action Service: 2020, 21). For a discussion of the increasing ambition also present in UN circles to “mediate across worldviews,” see Seul (2021).

3 Such a deterministic approach is often conceptualized as “essentialism.”

flexibility between worldviews, interpretations, and actions is important for exploring how to address conflicts between actors who are embedded in different worldviews. But before discussing this flexibility, it may be useful to explore examples of how different worldviews shape political behavior and how this can lead to a hardening of conflict, an escalation of violence, and obstacles to dialogue as a means for dealing with conflict.

Consider the example of armed groups in the Sahel region. They frame their conception of justice in explicitly Islamic terms when denouncing the central government or the UN as corrupt and immoral. Other examples include protracted conflicts around sites such as the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in the city of Jerusalem. This site is deemed to be a “sacred space” by groups with different Jewish and Islamic understandings of reality. In intra-state conflicts, actors with different worldviews often face severe problems when seeking to agree on a constitution or legal framework that defines the basic norms of the political community or the nature of a future state. Clashes between political movements over gender norms or over whether the state should be defined in explicitly religious or secularist terms can put entire peace processes at peril.

These examples highlight how worldview differences can entrench conflict dynamics and block dialogue or negotiations. Because of diverging worldviews, constructive conversations across such divides may become difficult.

Worldview differences between groups can give rise to the following challenges to conflict transformation: (1) a community’s sense of **deep security** can be negatively affected when its members **fear** that another group is imposing another worldview upon them; (2) **communication** can become more challenging, as particular words may have different practical consequences for groups embedded in different worldviews; (3) through engagement, conflict actors and third parties with different worldviews can be confronted with different understandings and experiences of **reality**; (4) escalated conflicts that take place between groups with different worldviews tend to lead to a **hardening** or “**sacralization**” of **positions**, leading such groups to see certain issues as non-negotiable as long as there is polarization; and (5) different worldviews can shape **time horizons and visions of peace**.

Being attentive to these challenges and how they affect conflict transformation does not mean neglecting more tangible issues related to the economy, political institutions, or the security of communities. The question is more how conflict actors and third parties perceive these issues through

their respective worldviews; how they interpret a specific situation of conflict based on their diverging worldviews; and how this leads the different parties to take specific kinds of political or military action. Interpretations of situations that resonate with a community's worldview can play a key role in mobilizing people to steer courses of action in conflict, either towards peace or further violence.⁴

What is the mediation space approach?

The mediation space approach is tailored for addressing the above-mentioned challenges to conflict transformation, to better address situations where political processes or peace negotiations are blocked because of worldview differences. We define mediation space as **a process of exchange convened by a mediation team who bring together people across different worldviews in order to coordinate their actions and to agree on ways for practically addressing specific aspects of an ongoing conflict.**⁵ The aim of the approach is to create spaces for discussion where conflict actors feel safe that their worldview and perception of conflict issues will not be denigrated or repressed. The idea is that in such spaces, conflict actors can constructively address practical problems arising from a specific aspect of the conflict or the polarization of society more broadly.

Since 2005, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) has explored and developed the mediation space approach to address situations of conflict where political and religious dimensions interact. Building on a book by Jean-Nicolas Bitter, the FDFA implemented a range of conflict transformation projects between actors with different worldviews in close collaboration with academic institutions and non-governmental organizations.⁶ The collaboration between the FDFA and academic partners has enhanced the approach by enabling the cultivation of wide networks of people and ensuring sustained learning from practical experiences.⁷

This paper first explores the role of worldviews in conflicts, the difficulties they present to conflict transformation, and ideas for dealing with these challenges. Second, it discusses the practicalities of using the media-

4 Aroua et al. (2021).

5 This definition has been developed in course of practical interventions in conflict spanning almost two decades. It builds on the work of Lederach (2002) and Bitter (2003).

6 See Bitter's (2003) foundational work on this topic.

7 See e.g. the learning process project "Mediating Conflicts between Groups with Different Worldviews: Approaches and Methods" (ETH Zurich: 2022).

tion space approach. Third, it illustrates the approach with two case studies. We conclude by discussing the potential risks involved in using the approach and end with an outlook on the relevance of worldview differences for the future of mediation and conflict transformation.

Worldview Differences in Conflict Transformation

Worldview differences are very often a matter of power relations between different groups. For example, colonial powers tend to shape the education systems and languages used in the territories they control. By doing so, they try to impose their worldview and exert power. Consider also contemporary conflicts over whether a constitution should be secular or Islamic and what this means in practice; whether structural racism exists; and whether new gender categories should transform language and social roles. The actors in these examples seek to determine the terms in which the conflict is defined. Thereby, they compete over who is able to give meaning to the situation.⁸ The next section discusses how to understand worldview differences and how they affect political behavior and conflict. We then address the challenges, listed above, that arise from worldview differences.

How Do Worldview Differences Play into Violent Conflicts?

In order to better understand and engage with such dynamics, the field of mediation and conflict transformation has developed a growing interest in narratives, discourse, worldviews, values, and power asymmetries.⁹ This also brings into view the question of voice. Who is in a position to explain to the world a situation of conflict? Who determines the dominant narratives? Who remains silent in the public sphere? These questions are particularly salient in conflicts between actors with different worldviews. In peace processes, international policymakers still struggle to situate the demands and positions of religiously motivated armed actors. Too often, conflict actors expressing themselves in secularist, liberal, or “moderate” terms get more international attention than those expressing themselves in explicitly religious

8 On which, see Lukes (2004) whose argument about power is also discussed in Cobb's (2013, 143) book on narrative mediation.

9 For a comprehensive overview of these debates, see Cobb, Federman, and Castel (2019).

languages. This is because international peacebuilding circles remain largely unfamiliar with systems of meaning making beyond secular liberalism.¹⁰

To situate the mediation space approach in relation to other approaches to dealing with conflict, it is useful to differentiate between four simplified scenarios that illustrate four different types of relations between two actors embedded in different worldviews (figure 1).

In scenario A, there is no conflict, as the two actors' behavior towards one another is coordinated or does not involve a clash. Furthermore, actors A and B are embedded in the same worldview, or the differences in worldviews are irrelevant to the issue at hand. Relations between two neighbors from the same community who live peacefully side by side could serve as an example for this scenario, as there are no clashes and both actors are embedded in similar worldviews.

In scenario B, there is also no conflict, as the two actors' behavior towards one another is coordinated or does not involve a clash, even if each actor is embedded in a different worldview. To provide an example, parents in a local community in the US may clash in their value systems. For instance, this may involve "pro-life" conservatives and "pro-choice" liberals regarding abortion. However, both groups may still agree to build a school in their neighborhood and run it in a cooperative manner irrespective of religious, ethnic, or other affiliations. Indeed, they may not even fully realize they have different value systems.¹¹

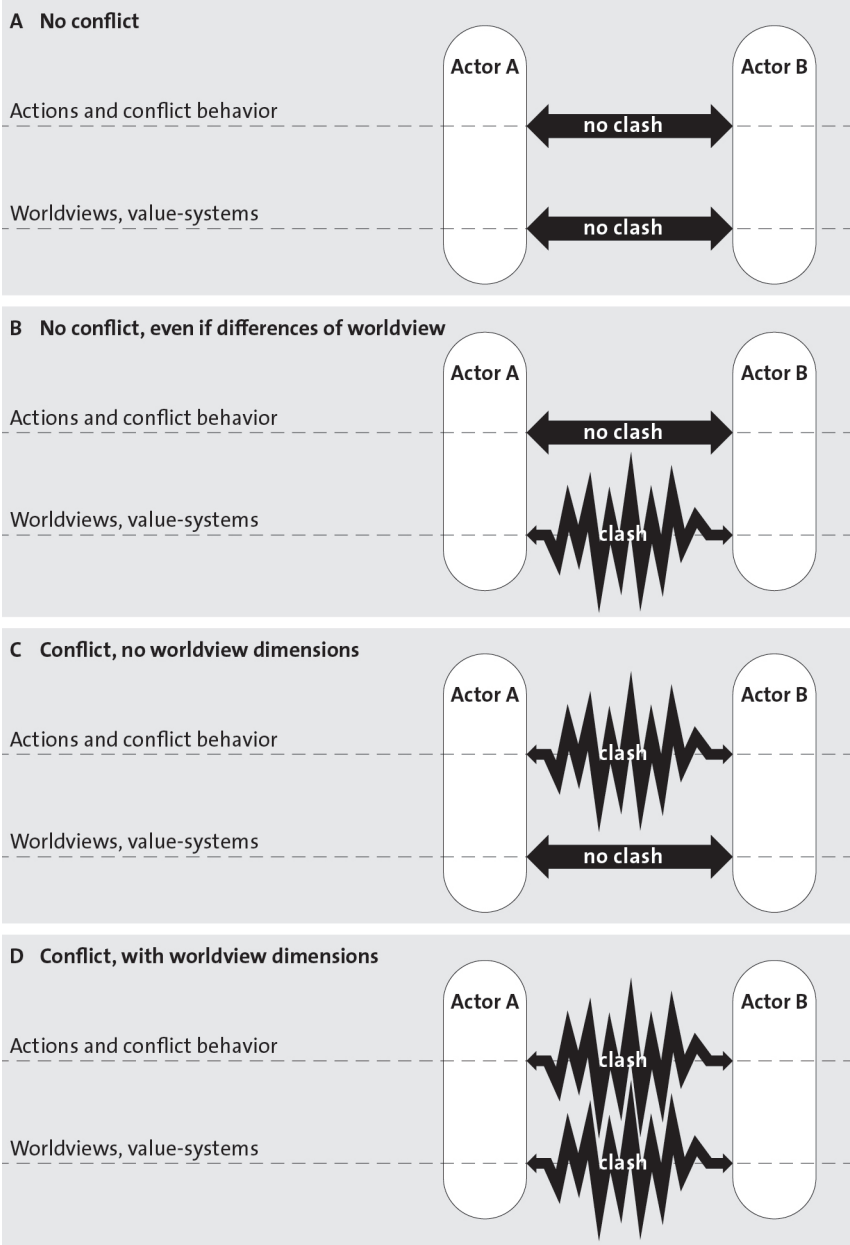
In scenario C, there is conflict behavior. For example, this could involve clashes between two neighbors (be these individuals, communities, or states) about border demarcation. However, in this scenario, both actors are embedded in the same or a similar worldview, or their worldviews differ but are not relevant to the issue at hand. Such conflicts do not need a worldview sensitive approach, as classical issue or relationship-oriented forms suffice.

In scenario D, there is conflict behavior and parties are embedded in different value systems or worldviews. For instance, in a situation where communities are divided over the legality of reproductive health regarding abortion, the actions of two sides involved in a conflict over whether to build an abortion clinic can clash. Further, their pro-life and pro-choice values systems can also clash. As we will see below, a worldview sensitive approach to such a conflict seeks to shift the situation to that of scenario B by

10 See Zalberg's (2019) discussion of such dynamics in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

11 Although there are of course cases where school boards are affected by value differences.

Figure 1: Simplified scenarios to show how worldview differences may or may not shape conflict at the level of behavior and action.



coordinating the actions between the two groups. Regarding the example given here, this could involve forming agreement on providing social and health services to all women irrespective of the abortion question. This shift is carried out without changing values or worldviews. How this can be done is explored below.

The mediation space approach is one way to deal with conflicts where behavior is clashing and actors are embedded in different worldviews affecting issues in dispute (situation D, above). This approach thus aligns with an ongoing shift in the field of conflict resolution practice and scholarship towards seeking to address conflicts with strong value differences. The central concern of the approach is mitigating fears among the conflict parties that their own worldview is at risk of being subverted or suppressed. Dealing with these fears is crucial for working across polarized camps and for finding negotiation flexibility when peace processes are blocked. Such fears reduce the ability of conflict actors to change how they interpret a situation, as they can make them feel that they need to defend their way of being in the world. When seeking to regain negotiation flexibility, it is useful to acknowledge both the flexibility and historical continuity of worldviews. Rather than seeing worldviews as stable, peace practitioners are best advised to approach them in terms of “worldviewing”. This involves the constant cultivation (and negotiation) of a shared understanding of reality with others.¹² To illustrate how worldviewing functions in practice, we distinguish between three different levels (figure 2). We can also use these levels to identify areas of flexibility in conflict negotiations.

On the first level, **worldmaking stories** provide historical continuity and should not be challenged or transformed in a mediation process. This is the level of foundational stories (such as those conveyed in the Bible, the Torah, the Quran, accounts of the Enlightenment, or descriptions of the rise of feminism); historical narratives (e.g., the histories and foundational myths of nationalist movements or marginalized groups); or the collective memories of groups in conflict (e.g., experiences of humiliation, massacres, genocides). These stories are not merely conscious but also include unconscious, traumatic, and healing dimensions.

On the second level, there are the **interpretations** conflict actors make of current situations, which are based on their worldmaking stories and memories, to give meaning to particular situations. The processes that

12 For a discussion of worldviewing in conflict negotiation, see Docherty (2001).

lead to the formation of these interpretations take time and require sufficient internal exchange between the diverse actors within a given group. This highlights a problem concerning the use of external pressure on a party to move towards agreement in a peace process. Such pressure often reduces space and time for internal discussions related to different possible interpretations of an evolving situation. The consequence can be that a group hardens its position, flexibility is lost, and a peace process gets blocked.

The third level is the **conflict behavior and the course of action** that groups in conflict choose. Both the continuation of armed struggle and the development of new political strategies can be aligned with worldmaking stories or collective memories in ways that endow them with legitimacy.

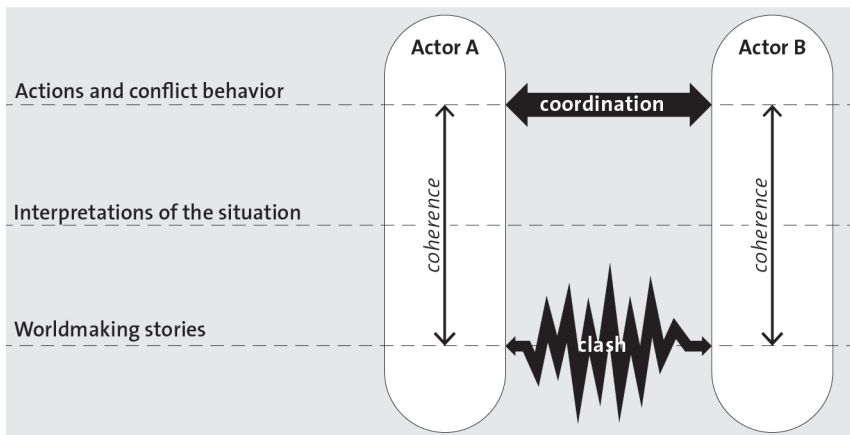
As shown above, when two groups in conflict are embedded in the same or similar worldviews, no specific worldview sensitive methods are needed to transform the conflict (scenario C, figure 1). When two groups are embedded in different worldviews, however, the situation looks different (scenario D, figure 1). In this situation, mediating interventions often need to acknowledge the level of worldmaking stories for a process to move forward. An agreement at the level of worldmaking stories, however, is not required. Parties can continue to differ in their worldmaking stories. The important point is that they arrive at a situation where they stop clashing on the level of actions and conflict behavior. In other words, moving to a peaceful solution in a conflict between actors with different worldviews primarily requires two things. First, increasing the coherence between actions and interpretations of the current situation within each actor group (the vertical axis in the figure below). Second, it also necessitates the coordination of actions and behavior towards each other (the horizontal axis in figure 2 below). Any agreement reached which involves actions that are not coherent with an actor's worldview will be seen as illegitimate. This is why the actor's internal work of interpretation/reinterpretation of a situation is so important, as it creates the necessary internal coherence between actions and worldviews.¹³

When actors in conflict are divided by different worldviews, third parties are best advised not to put into question conflict parties' respective worldmaking stories as this can trigger existential reactions and defensive behavior – entrenching polarization. The situation appears more promising when conflict parties explore negotiation flexibility on the levels of interpre-

13 Aroua et al. (2021) and Zalzburg (2019).

tations and actions/conflict behavior. This is also the case when a mediation team sees how far they can facilitate the conditions for this to happen. Worldview sensitive mediation acknowledges that actors in conflict need to feel safe that the foundations of their worldviews are not up for debate. One such approach is the creation of a mediation space. This approach allows conflict parties to explore practical and interpretative flexibility in a clear framework that will not make them feel that the foundations of their worldviews are at risk of being unsettled.¹⁴

Figure 2: Mediation space to deal with conflicts with worldview dimensions: The formation of internal coherence between each actor's actions and worldmaking stories through an interpretation/reinterpretation process (vertical) enables coordination between actors on mutually acceptable actions and behavior (horizontal).



Key Challenges to Addressing Conflicts with Worldview Differences

Given the dynamic relationship between worldmaking stories, interpretations of situations, and practical action, it is useful to further reflect on the **challenges** to conflict transformation in contexts where the conflicting groups are involved in very different versions of worldviewing. For instance, this could involve groups in conflict that would like to live in societies with

¹⁴ For other approaches in this field, see, for example, the work of Podziba (2013), Docherty (2001), and Zalzburg (2019).

different norms regarding gender and the family. This could also concern different forms of secular or religious statehood.

First, worldview differences can give rise to **existential fears or profound insecurity**.¹⁵ The sentiment within a community that other actors may be transforming or undermining its worldview can give rise to deep running fears and violent reactions. According to Oscar Nudler, other worldviews (or what he calls “worlds” or “frames”) “imply alternative, competing ways of meeting the need for meaning and, therefore, they may be perceived as putting in danger our own way, a way on which all the rest of what we are depends.”¹⁶

Second, worldviews can entail difficulties on the level of **communication** and the respective ability of each actor to understand the other side.¹⁷ Actors with different worldviews ascribe very different meanings to events that occur in a conflict. Moreover, they perceive and interpret issues related to the economy, the military, and political institutions through their respective worldview lens. For example, when armed groups controlling territory in an intra-state war establish taxation systems based on Islamic concepts, other actors will see this behavior as illegal extortion. In such situations, conflict actors may sometimes need to “negotiate reality” before they can embark on “issue-specific negotiations” as argued by Jayne Docherty.¹⁸ This often requires developing and agreeing on a common language to speak about certain issues, such as how a just system of taxation should be established and held accountable.

Third, groups can have **incommensurable perceptions and experiences of “reality,”** meaning that the perceptions and experiences of a group will not make sense to groups embedded in other worldviews as they cannot be judged by the same standards.¹⁹ So even when the best efforts are made to improve communication between different worldviews, actors risk not understanding each other. The problems arising from this are not just about the need for better “understanding” in the cognitive sense, nor are they simply a matter of translation. Worldviews presuppose a certain set of assumptions and concepts with which to comprehend the world. Exploring options for

15 On which, see Bitter (2003, 9–10).

16 See Nudler (1990, 187).

17 On which, see Baumann, Finnbogason, and Svensson (2018, 2–3).

18 Docherty (2001, 55).

19 By incommensurable, we mean that things cannot be judged by the same standards, i.e., one thing does not translate into the other.

practical action is thus often a promising starting point for enabling communication and, hence, for building trust even if the worldviews remain incommensurable.

Fourth, worldview differences in conflict can give rise to **hardened doctrinal positions and “non-negotiable” sacred issues** that render negotiations very difficult. Consider the tensions over abortion concerning the legal status of the fetus or conflicts over holy sites where different groups claim sacred rights to the same site. On a more general level, the nature of the state, as reflected in political and legal systems, can become a sacred issue in intra-state conflicts involving actors who are strongly committed to specific types of secular or religious statehood.²⁰ For instance, such conflicts surfaced in Egypt and Tunisia after the popular uprisings of 2011. In Tunisia, the conflict between the proponents of a secular state and the advocates of an Islamic polity led to a political compromise. This compromise kept the transition process from dictatorship to a democracy alive for several years. The transition has only been challenged again more recently as the country’s population has grown discouraged by economic stagnation. In Egypt, however, the increasing polarization between the two camps led to renewed curtailment of political rights only a few years after the 2011 revolution.

Fifth, worldview differences may involve very different understandings of **time horizons and visions of peace**. This can concern the kind of “peace” that different conflict actors aspire to and the gaps between these visions. It may also involve the path to peace suggested by third parties and how this may differ from the visions that belong to the conflict actors. Actors with different worldviews often have different time horizons. For instance, for certain religious actors, this may involve the future appearing to be open and determined by God. For such actors, committing to a “final settlement” – as pursued by secular third parties – is often difficult, especially if it negates a religious actor’s ultimate vision of and for peace. Consider Jewish national religious perspectives on the possibility of peace between the Israeli and the Palestinians. If peace is to come with the return of a Messiah or the building of a Temple, rather than through a peace agreement, then striving for a peace agreement may be seen as a diversion from peace. One way to handle such a situation may be to have a rather simple and “thin” jointly agreed preamble in a peace agreement. This may allow different communities to have different

20 For a list of specific contexts, see e.g. Svensson (2012, 85).

justifications for the agreement.²¹ Zalzburg argues there may be a need for different “victory speeches” that can be given by leaders of different secular and religious groups to explain the same peace agreement in the terms of the respective worldviews of their community.²² The key quality of such peace agreements is that they specify coordinated behavior and actions between different actors (horizontal axis in figure 2) and the action is also compatible with the different actors’ worldviews (vertical axis in figure 2). Communities do not need to understand the deep justifications given by other communities for buying into an agreement. However, they need to witness actions that enable them to trust that the others are serious about the agreement. Such trust arises when communities hear relevant actors from other communities communicating the content of the agreement to their constituencies and when they gain a sense that the others are not merely engaging in the agreement for tactical reasons.

21 See Zalzburg (2019).

22 Ibid.

Mediation Space as a Method of Conflict Transformation

The following section explores the mediation space approach as one way to try to address worldview differences in conflicts by responding to the challenges outlined above. Here, we provide practical guidance on how to create and convene a mediation space by clarifying the aim of the approach, the role of the third party, requirements for participation, and what happens in the different phases.

The Aim

This mediation approach is tailored for contexts where political processes are blocked because society is polarized along worldview divisions and the main conflict actors have very different understandings of reality. As such, the creation of a mediation space may be useful when there is no ongoing peace process. One may also be created to complement an ongoing peace process by addressing areas that are stuck.

The overall vision behind this approach is that segments of society that are polarized along worldview differences can live together peacefully as equal members of the same political community. However, to do so, they need to be able to coordinate their actions in a non-violent way while remaining faithful to their value systems. The aim here is not cognitive harmony. Communities embedded in different worldviews may continue to adhere to what appears to be clashing values and worldviews. Instead, the goal lies in preventing communities from ending up or remaining stuck in violent conflict. Thus, room needs to be created for different ways of living in the same public space.

As communities with different worldviews may have divergent ultimate visions of “the good life,” the aim of a mediation space often needs to be very modest and involve simple steps. At times, this requires the avoidance of reference to “final” settlements and peace agreements. This is because the use of this term can suspend the search for a joint justification for an agreement. However, this may need to remain open if the justification is to

be framed in the terms of the respective worldviews.²³ The aim of the mediation space approach is to work towards joint actions or “diapraxis” while accepting that the respective justification in different worldviews for these may be very different.²⁴ Diapraxis, in this context, means “dialogue through praxis,” which fosters communication through joint action rather than merely focusing on understanding through verbal dialogue.²⁵ The implementation of a joint activity that addresses a concrete aspect of the conflict can enhance coordination between actors (horizontal axis in figure 2) and the coherence within a group between their worldviews, their interpretations of a situation, and their choice of political actions (vertical axis in figure 2).

The Third Party

In this approach, the mediation team consists of insiders or outsiders who support conflict actors and local communities in the co-creation of a mediation space. The mediation team focuses on setting up and convening the meeting space. A mediation team composed of people from different backgrounds can be more effective. This is because a mixed team will have learnt how to work together across their own worldview differences. Further, they will have done so while being accessible to and building legitimacy and trust with actors from different worldviews.²⁶

The co-creation of a mediation space is only possible if the third parties are aware that the worldviews that shape their interpretations of the situation are different to others. This requires a lot of self-reflection. No one is neutral when it comes to value systems. Without such awareness, third parties are ill-prepared for building positive relations with unfamiliar actors, such as religious representatives or activists with a view of the world that is hard to comprehend for outsiders. Active and non-judgmental listening is key. This is the case in all mediation approaches. However, the mediation space approach does not simply involve avoiding judgement of positions and interests, as in general practice. Instead, the idea here is to go a step further

23 On which, see Zalzburg (2019).

24 For an approach in philosophy for thinking about such scenarios, see Rawls (1993, 139–149), including his notion of “overlapping consensus.” For detailed discussions of diapraxis, see Rasmussen (2011) and Benthall (2012).

25 See Rasmussen (2011).

26 Mason and Kassam (2011).

and to avoid judging the worldviews that shape positions and interests. Sometimes, this will require a mediator to suspend their own interpretations and to go along with another actor's religious or other truth claims in a playful way, even if they find such claims irritating or absurd.²⁷ Peace practitioners should always try to listen actively to the conflict parties and to show an openness towards interpretations of the world that are different to theirs. Thereby, they can learn to understand the practical implications of interpretations and claims that are framed in the terms of different worldviews.²⁸

It is often helpful for the mediation team to distinguish between the foundations of people's worldviews and their interpretation of the current situation. Embeddedness within a worldview can never serve as the sole explanation of a group's behavior. The relationship between any given communities' worldview and its political actions is mediated by a process of interpretation (or worldviewing). This interpretation is a matter of internal debate within a community drawing on concrete challenges faced in the present and elements of the group's worldviews which provide meaning to the situation. Indeed, there can be internal debates in any worldview and people can adopt changing positions concerning these debates, narratives, value systems, and discourses.²⁹

External mediators have a limited or no role in these internal interpretation processes.³⁰ Many mediation approaches suggest a role division between mediators and conflict parties, with mediators being in charge of the process (the how) and conflict parties being in charge of the content (the what). This is potentially problematic when conflict actors are embedded in

27 On which, see Knibbe and Droogers (2011).

28 See also Winslade and Monk's (2000, 222–23) suggestions for bringing God into conversations with conflict parties that are stuck in religious positions.

29 See Winslade (2006).

30 However, if external mediators are involved in any process where worldviews play a role, it is important to acknowledge that they too may have an internal interpretation process going on between their worldview and any actions. It can sometimes be helpful for external mediators to give parties the possibility to problematize and discuss the mediators' worldviews and the possible biases or blind spots that arise from them (Kraus 2011). Worldview differences between conflict parties and mediators pose challenges to conflict transformation (Lederach 1996, 55–62; Goldberg 2009; Salem 1993). International mediation efforts have been criticized for imposing norms as part of a "civilizing mission" (Nader 1995) or an effort to spread liberal values (e.g., Zalzburg 2019). Neutrality and impartiality have been described as "folklore" which obscures how mediators are inevitably marked by their own cultural histories (Rifkin, Millen, and Cobb 1991). Against this background, Kraus (2011) has called for "culture sensitive process design" that is both "inductive" and "consensual." According to her, mediators should acknowledge that their own worldview shapes the procedures they suggest to conflict parties. Consequently, it is important that mediators act in a "multi-partial" way that allows for the integration of feedback from conflict parties and remains open to continuous correction concerning courses of action.

different worldviews. After all, worldviews can also shape ideas about what can constitute an adequate process for addressing a conflict. The mediation space approach addresses this challenge by relying on a very facilitative style and through heavy investment in the preparation phase.

Selecting Participants

Two steps are needed when exploring who needs to participate in a mediation space. The first step is to look for those who are recognized by the relevant community as the legitimate guardians and shapers of a group's shared understanding of reality. Who these guardians are depends on the context. They can be journalists, researchers, religious scholars, public personalities, and so on.³¹ The key is to find those who legitimately express shared concerns in a way that resonates with the worldview of their respective community. Sometimes, these are individuals with an institutional or organizational mandate to represent their community. In many fragile communities affected by conflict, however, the people with the most legitimacy are sometimes not holding an official position. The mediation space approach is particularly suited for talking to and including such people with a lot of weight but no formal mandate into a dialogue process.

The second step is to look for potential participants from different walks of society. The legitimate guardians and interpreters of the communities' worldviews and value systems may not only belong to one social category. Thus, it is necessary to reach out to a variety of people from different layers and sectors of society and to carefully acknowledge the different voices that are interpreting issues and narrating events.

It is important for third parties not to ignore power relations at play within a group, even when it is seemingly composed of actors embedded in the same worldview. At the same time, any acknowledgment of power relations and differences within a community needs to be separated from the question of *who* can engage (e.g. internal third parties rather than external third parties), and *how* to work (e.g. in intra-group work rather than inter-group work) on these matters.

31 Legitimate guardians of a community's value- systems and worldviews may also be found in academic or scholarly circles. To the extent that mediation space involves researchers, it contributes to science diplomacy. On science diplomacy, see Switzerland's [Foreign Policy Strategy 2020–23](#) (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2020).

When considering who needs to participate in inter-group work in a mediation space, the types of actors to look out for include the following:

The legitimate guardians of a communities' worldviews: In order to get a sense of the debates internal to groups with different worldviews, it is important to include actors who are considered by their communities as the legitimate guardians of their communities' worldviews (sometimes referred to as "orthodox"). Such guardians of worldviews are people whose communities trust them to perform the role of protecting their way of seeing the world and living life. Words such as "hardliner" and "moderate" should be avoided within the mediation space approach. These terms can create confusion concerning questions about behavior (e.g., violence or peace) and different worldviews and values (which may be the same or different to the mediator's own). To join a mediation space, participants need to have a basic openness to the use of dialogue and diapraxis to address the conflict. The legitimate guardians of a communities' worldviews are also able to interpret and reinterpret worldmaking stories, such as founding texts or historical narratives, and they are seen as trustworthy and legitimate by their communities. Ideally, these people have the influence and necessary weight to promote new interpretations, framings, and actions among their group.

Others affected: It is also important to consult or keep other voices informed about the mediation space. This does not necessarily only mean parties to the conflict but also people who will have to live with the diapraxis arrangements agreed upon by the conflict actors.

The Phases of Convening a Mediation Space

Each case that involves a mediation space is different. However, as a simplified phased way of looking at a mediation space may help describe the approach, one is presented here. This account also includes potential questions that can be used by mediators and participants during the different phases.

Phase 1 – Preparation: The preparation for convening a mediation space involves the putting together of a mediation team, networking, and reaching out to different actors. Here are some guidelines for establishing a mediation space:

- **Formulate a joint vision in consultation with different people on all sides:** This vision should be acceptable to all parties and serve as motivation for

entering the process. It often consists of something broad like the will for all parties concerned to live together peacefully. Different communities may have significantly varying visions of peace that relate to their traditions, their imagination of the past, and their expectations for the future. This makes crafting a minimal joint vision challenging. *Questions to consider for the participants: What is your community's vision for peace? How far is there an overlap between this vision and that of other communities?*

- **Parties establish safety lines:** Parties need to agree on actions and statements that are not tolerated in the mediation space. The process can be facilitated by a third party. This practice is about ensuring all parties feel safe to participate. Thus, it is not focused on the issues themselves or particular positions. These agreed safety lines apply to all parties, including the third party. Be careful to ensure that the safety lines are not too narrow. This can hinder discussion of sensitive issues, and the space can become sterile and meaningless. Ideally, the principle can be established that no one can veto what issues are discussed within the parameters of the safety lines. Discussing an issue is not the same as agreeing on an issue.³² Mediation teams should not forget that they will have safety lines as well when convening a mediation space. Consequently, they may also need to check with their mandating organizations, governments, and international legal frameworks as to what kind of activities are allowed or prohibited. This can also be an argument for why a team of insider mediators may be more suitable. *Questions to consider for the participants: What kind of behavior or statements would make you feel unsafe in the space and should be avoided? What are the most sensitive aspects of this process for you?*
- **Third parties need to avoid imposing a worldview on the process:** Worldviews not only shape conflict but also our understanding of what a fair process is. This means that the classical role division in mediation, where mediators structure the process (the how) and parties focus on content (the what), may not work in conflicts with worldview differences. Rather, the process has to be co-designed by the third parties and the conflict parties.³³ The worldviews of parties also strongly inform their

32 The distinction between discussing and negotiating and the principle about “no veto of agenda” stems from a presentation by Julian Th. Hottinger, MAS ETH MPP November 2018.

33 Kraus (2011).

conceptions of procedural justice and effectiveness. Thus, as far as it is possible, parties' procedural preferences need to be incorporated into the proceedings in a balanced way, and third parties should be aware of how far their own worldviews are also shaping procedural questions. This can help processes move forward. *There are two types of questions for this guideline: (1) Questions a third party should ask themselves: Am I aware that I may not know or understand what the actors are saying? If so, can I ask them: "What are the practical consequences of what you are saying?" Can this help me better understand the situation?"*³⁴ (2) Questions to consider for co-designing a process with conflict actors: *What makes for a good process in your view? What makes for a bad process in your view? How should we communicate the purpose of this mediation space to the wider public? Are you comfortable with the process and the convening of this mediation space? What would you like to adapt?*

- **Focus on the practical:** Rather than examining worldviews and worldview differences, the mediation team needs to focus on the practical aspects of the conflict and the immediate concerns of the parties. The mediation team can provide room for the exploration of how a concrete issue is perceived through different worldview lenses. However, the team's emphasis should always be on developing and implementing joint activities that address a concrete issue that parties struggle with (i.e., diapraxis). In contrast to some of the general mediation approaches that seek to understand interests before developing options, in a mediation space it may often be better to explore options for practical action first. In fact, discussing such options can be a useful way for gaining a better idea of the parties' interests, concerns, and underlying values. *Questions to consider for the participants: Which practical issues from the conflict would you like to address? What are the practical options for dealing with each issue? If a specific option were implemented, would it be acceptable for you?*

The aim of the preparation phase is to create an environment where actors can sit at a table and talk without their communities being concerned that this will lead to their worldviews being compromised. The common vision formulated in this phase should provide an overall sense of direction for the whole process and should aim at improving the coordination of actions.

34 This idea has also been referred to as "action mediation", where the mediation happens through the level of actions (I can see, imagine and can accept what would practically happen, even if I cannot understand why), rather than through words and value-systems.

Phase 2 – In the Space: In this phase, mediators convene parties in the mediation space. The following outlines some of the possible activities that can be carried out in the space.

- **Develop a joint language focusing on practical issues:** This can be done through the convening of workshops or discussions that contribute to the development of language acceptable to both sides. It can also be useful to offer training in conflict transformation language. This can enable participants to speak about conflictual issues in a more “objective” and less judgmental way. It can also be helpful to highlight that words can mean different things and have different associations for different actors. The agreed-upon language should avoid words that irritate or trigger the sides of the conflict. The idea is to work towards a clarification of the use of basic terms, thereby developing a language that is compatible with the different worldviews, and to use this language to discuss a concrete issue of the conflict. *Questions for third parties: Which words could be cause for irritation in discussions? Which words for sensitive issues are acceptable to the parties? Question to consider for the participants: Which practical aspect of the conflict is most pressing to you and how would you describe it?*
- **Defining a practical issue to work on:** A useful approach is to ask participants to try and identify practical issues that need solutions. For example, in a conflict between a religiously motivated political actor and a secular government, it may be better to avoid discussing whether the future of the country’s constitution should be more aligned with human rights or with Islamic Sharia. Instead, the focus could be on what kind of institutions and procedures should determine whether a new law respects human rights and Sharia. On the basis of concrete questions and options, parties should explore which joint activities and practical solutions are acceptable for everyone involved and which are justifiable to constituencies with different worldviews.³⁵ These activities and solutions should address issues at the core of the conflict, i.e., they should not simply involve playing football together. Here, the mediation space approach is similar to Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). However, the diapraxis in a mediation space focuses more on creating conditions for communication rather than

³⁵ It is important that action is “com-possible” (Bitter 2003, 6), i.e., intelligible and acceptable in two worldviews at the same time.

merely on trust building. CBMs also tend to focus less on directly addressing pressing conflict issues. This is precisely what diapraxis seeks to do. Nevertheless, some of the principles of CBMs can also be useful here: (1) that activities should not be too ambitious; (2) that actions should be reciprocal and not asymmetrically harm or help one side; (3) that they are tangible and measurable; (4) that they are agreed on between the parties and are not done to impress the outside world; and (5) that they do not trigger fears of “normalization”, where a conflict is left unaddressed.³⁶ What is specific to the mediation space approach here is that an action that is agreed upon can be justified in a very different way in the different worldviews. *Questions to consider for the participants: What kind of practical aspect of the conflict would you like to address? What kind of practical next step would be acceptable for you? Do you need time or support in order to explain this step to your constituency? What options would help to address this practical challenge?*

Phase 3 – Implementation of Joint Action: In this phase, the participants implement a joint activity that tackles a practical problem that is relevant to the overall conflict. For example, this could involve joint research on a sensitive topic or work on a new law or mechanism. Any joint action should be acceptable to the conflict parties. Key aspects in this phase can include the following.

- **Supporting the participants in explaining the joint action to their constituencies:** Joint action introduces new elements to address on the level of interpretations and opens the possibility for new ways of giving meaning to the situation. Both sides need enough time and room to create coherence between their actions with their worldmaking stories and collective memories. They also need time and space to explain actions to their constituencies. Political or religious authorities need to be able to communicate a new course of action in a way that is seen as legitimate in the eyes of their constituencies. This can require the clarification of new roles that people can play in a conflict context. *Questions to consider for the participants: How has your community reacted to the joint action and the content discussed in the mediation space? What do they need to stay on board?*

36 Mason and Siegfried (2013).

- **Consolidating the process, different justifications for the agreement or action:** It may be useful for the participants to develop different justifications and “victory speeches” for any agreement and diapraxis, ones which link the agreement and action to the worldviews in their communities. This maintains cohesion between the representatives of the communities involved in the process and their communities. If this justification act is witnessed by actors from a different worldview, it tends to enhance trust. This is the case even if the justification is not understood by the other actor. For example, if an actor is not religious, they may not understand a religious justification for an agreement of joint action. However, if they hear religious justifications, this will show them that their religious counterparts are serious about the action. Through such acts of justification, the constituencies of parties also gain confidence that the agreement is coherent with their own worldview.³⁷ The constituencies will feel that they can coordinate their actions with the other side without having to abandon what they deem sacred or principles that are constitutive to how they see themselves. *Questions to consider for the participants: How is the agreement and joint action coherent with your community’s worldview? What have the other actors involved in the mediation space done to communicate the agreement to their constituencies, even if we may not understand their justification?*

The logic of the approach

The realization of a joint project allows people on different sides of conflict to explore and practically test the possibility of civic life, meaning being able to live together according to a set of laws that have been agreed to, without either side having to surrender anything on the level of their religion or worldview. For civic coexistence to occur, one group does not need to replace the worldview of another with their own. Instead, coexistence can happen when groups are able to arrive at new interpretations and justifications of the situation and are capable of defining new roles for themselves.

A proof that practical solutions across different worldviews can work is the existence of the sort of mechanisms for non-violent co-existence found in many local contexts. Customary law councils in many Arab countries, for instance, constantly coordinate actions rooted in different worldviews by bringing together modern state law, sharia discourse, and tribal law.³⁸ Cath-

³⁷ See Zalzburg (2019).

³⁸ See Khalil (2009).

olics and Protestants in Switzerland have historically given one another freedom to practice different forms of Christianity in different regions of the country.³⁹ Many political coalitions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region also cut across ideological or religious divides.⁴⁰

Such solutions are not always ideal for one side or, indeed, both sides. Contentious debates often carry on. However, these solutions have the potential of rebuilding a public sphere conducive to peace where more voices can speak and articulate diverse experiences and demands. Such a diversification of perspectives is crucial for overcoming a situation where two blocs oppose one another. The dynamics of polarization tend to erode the public sphere, as they silence nuanced accounts that cannot be subsumed by one side or the other.⁴¹

The theory of change for using the mediation space approach can be summarized as this:

Conflict actors with different worldviews can explore and practically test the possibility of civic coexistence through joint projects. As a consequence, these actors can develop the ability to coordinate their practical interactions without being obliged to surrender something on the level of their worldview (thus avowing any kind of “religious capitulation”). By doing this, these actors can also contribute to the development of political communities where groups with different worldviews live in what Leigh Payne calls “contentious co-existence” but without the fear that one worldview is imposing itself upon others.⁴² The collision of multiple perspectives and worldviews continues in such communities, but without leading to violence.

Against this background, a successfully implemented mediation space can address areas of political processes blocked because of diverging worldviews and polarization.

39 On Swiss subsidiarity, see Bitter and Ullmann (2018).

40 See Berriane and Duboc (2019).

41 See Cobb (2013).

42 See Payne (2008).

Case Studies

The Swiss FDFA has supported interventions using the mediation space approach in a number of conflicts.⁴³ Here, we briefly present two cases to illustrate the practical work the approach has given rise to in different contexts.

Case Study: Islamic Charities and the “Countering of Terrorist Financing” after 9/11

After 9/11, measures taken in the course of the US-led “war on terror” created substantial obstacles for the delivery of humanitarian aid by Islamic charitable institutions. This caused polarization between several governments including the United States and a large part of Muslim civil society in countries around the globe who were active in delivering aid to the needy in different conflict areas. At the same time, there was a common understanding that the problem was a joint one, as several key actors in the US and Europe realized that the resulting reduction in humanitarian aid could increase poverty, marginalization, and willingness to support or enter into violence. Against this background, the Swiss FDFA convened a dialogue process using the mediation space approach. Participants engaged in joint actions to contribute to the safe delivery of humanitarian aid to complex and contested conflict areas.

Following 9/11, the US government had launched a policy that was called “countering the financing of terrorism.”⁴⁴ As a result, they created blacklists which designated many Islamic charities as alleged funders of terrorism. These listing policies created significant legal obstacles for Islamic charities concerning bank transfers and the delivery of aid to conflict zones. There was virtually no legal mechanism for these charities to contest being listed or to demand information on the reasons justifying these sanctions.

Islamic charities perceived these measures as illegitimate. They felt that they were targeted because they framed their work in Islamic ethical

43 See, e.g., Jambers (2020) for a discussion on a mediation space intervention in Morocco. The approach was also used in Tajikistan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Iraq.

44 Biersteker and Eckert (2008).

terms. Giving alms to people in need is one of the five pillars of Islam and constitutive of Muslim faith. The obligation to give alms (zakat) is explicitly mentioned in the Quran. Giving zakat is said to keep society in balance, and the giver is compensated for this in the Hereafter. As such, zakat can be understood as an integral part of Islamic worldmaking stories.

The US government, however, saw these harsh sanctions as a necessary step to deter any possible donors from supporting terrorist violence carried out by Islamic actors.

In 2005, the Swiss FDFA convened a mediation space under the title of the Montreux Initiative, which was later called the Islamic Charities Project.⁴⁵ In partnership with the Graduate Institute in Geneva, the FDFA convened charity regulators, charity lawyers, and representatives of different Islamic charities to address the financial regulation of Islamic charities and the challenges they were facing in the context of the “war on terror.” Participants agreed to pursue the overall vision of *removing unjustified obstacles for bona fide Islamic charities*. This allowed them to address the practical issue of the financial regulation of Islamic charities and the obstacles they faced in the context of the US-led “war on terror.”

The safety lines were the following:

- No use of derogatory language (e.g., “terrorist”) (This was requested by the Islamic charities);
- Not to work with organizations or actors designated on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) list (which only listed al-Qaida at the time);
- That participants will be vetted in accordance with actors proscribed by Swiss law – and Swiss law, at the time, did not list organizations but rather individuals (except al-Qaida, following the UNSC list);
- Agreement to separate discussions and possible activities related to humanitarian actions from those related to religious activities.

The joint action developed in this mediation space was based on the understanding that any restrictions on the actions of Islamic charities should be evidence based, laid out along internationally agreed humanitarian lines, and not be politically motivated. Participants jointly drafted the Montreux Document laying out a compliance mechanism for Islamic charities that find

45 For a summary, see Benthall (2018, 81–98).

themselves facing obstacles in delivering aid or facing the risk of being listed as terrorist entities. The Montreux Document (art. 6) articulated a basic agreement regarding non-discrimination in the delivery of charitable funds. If an Islamic charity agreed to go through a training process that allowed it to prove their compliance with the guidelines of the US Treasury's Financial Action Task Force, they would not be hindered from doing their charity work. The idea was that a board would oversee this compliance mechanism. This board would also be comprised of relevant individuals from the US and other governments and respected individuals from the Islamic charity world. This diapraxis was appealing to both sides. It would improve financial transparency and accountability in the Islamic charity sector. It would also foster a climate of trust, as bona fide Islamic charities would be protected from unnecessary legal obstacles.

The FDFA sought partner governments to implement this mechanism. The UK government co-sponsored the project with Switzerland during the first three years, before withdrawing after a political backlash in the country's parliament against its policy of engaging with the Islamic World. As they did not receive a green light from the US administration, other governments were hesitant to grant their support. While the mechanism had been developed in detail and agreed upon by the participants, it was not implemented.

Nevertheless, the mediation space created by this project led to a number of research spin-offs. After the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007, the Fatah-led government of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank resorted to shutting down many Islamic charities (so-called zakat committees). This had negative consequences for the Islamic aid sector on a local level. Researchers from the project's mediation space documented the history of these institutions and published research that situated their evolution and governance in the local and historical context.⁴⁶ The research showed that these institutions enjoyed a considerable amount of confidence among the local population. The publications were written in a conflict sensitive way that showcased different locally rooted worldview perspectives on the issue, including those from journalists, researchers, Islamic charity activists, and politicians from Hamas and Fatah. The research was then translated into Arabic and disseminated to policymakers and academics in the occupied Palestinian territories. While certain challenges remain unresolved, this pro-

46 On which, see Benthall (2016, 57–80) and Schaeublin (2009, 2012).

vision of a contextualized perspective on the issue was helpful in restoring a functioning Islamic charity sector in the Palestinian territories across the Hamas-Fatah divide.⁴⁷

The mediation space did not lead to the implementation of the compliance mechanism. This would have been an example of an experience of civic coexistence between Islamic charities and North American and European governments which would not have required concessions from either side on their worldviews. Nevertheless, the process did create room for discussions and exchange on the politics of aid whereby the worldviews of governments and those of Islamic charities were no longer cast as mutually exclusive and threatening to one another. Throughout the process, new interpretations across worldviews emerged. Some of these are demonstrated by the following list.

- The mediation space developed and helped disseminate a nuanced understanding of the connection and differences between humanitarianism and Islamic traditions of giving.
- It also opened up avenues of knowledge production on Islamic charities in their local context in a field of study that would otherwise have been exclusively dominated by research relying on (non-disclosed) intelligence sources rather than on transparent research methods allowing for triangulation of evidence.⁴⁸
- In the mediation space, the removal of obstacles to the delivery of aid was described as both an Islamic and a humanitarian ethical duty.
- Within the mediation space, the challenges arising from the politics and the politicization of aid were also discussed in a constructive and nuanced way, highlighting the importance of the rule of law and local accountability.

Such readings of the challenges of aid deliveries in conflict areas across different worldviews mitigated the polarization between Muslim communities and different governments by addressing concrete questions of governance, accountability, and justice in the delivery of aid to people in need.

47 For a discussion of how the Palestinian Islamic charity sector has been evolving in recent years, see Schaeublin (2020) or the full ethnographic monograph on zakat in Palestine (Schaeublin: Forthcoming).

48 For an example of such research drawing on non-disclosed intelligence sources, see Levitt (2006).

Case Study: Secular and Islamist Politics after the Arab Revolutions of 2011

In the MENA region over the last three decades, polarization between secularist and religiously inspired political activists, particularly those who refer to the Islamic tradition, has been a profound source of tension. Indeed, it has fed political divisions, and, at times, violent conflicts. More recently, this divide has developed in the Sahel as well. One well known example when these tensions played out was in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring.” The uprisings of the Arab Spring brought together many actors, particularly from among the young, in almost every country of the MENA region. More specifically, these actors, who were rooted in a diverse array of ideological and religious backgrounds, came together with the common goal of dismantling authoritarian regimes and replacing them with new forms of political community. Most of these actors understood that social polarization between secularists and Islamists (among other lines of polarization) in post-Arab Spring countries constituted one of the most significant risks for transition to more democratic political systems. In Egypt, renewed polarization between secularist and Islamist camps occurred after the victory of Mohammed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood in the presidential elections of 2012. A year later, Egypt’s democratic transition was interrupted by popular protest and the military removing Morsi from power.

Between February 2016 and March 2017, the Swiss FDFA and the Cordoba Peace Institute convened a mediation space to address these divisions in societies across North Africa, West Asia (Middle East) and the Sahel region. They brought together politicians and activists representing both secularist currents and different movements which refer to Islam as a normative framework – including the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists from the *haraki* trend. Salafists are Sunni Muslims who orientate their lives according to the transmitted practices of the first three generations of Muslims, referred to as *al-Salaf al-Sālih* or the “virtuous predecessors.” Unlike quietist Salafists who accept life under authoritarian rule for the sake of stability and jihadi Salafists who embrace armed opposition, *haraki* Salafists seek to participate in parliamentary politics and to maintain their ethical and doctrinal purity.⁴⁹

49 On which, see Bitter and Frazer (2016).

The aim of this mediation space was to highlight the possibility that both secularist political actors and faith-based groups can be part of the same political community under certain conditions.

A series of meetings took place in Istanbul and Doha. The agreed vision of the mediation space was reaching a *consensus on the possibility of a common civic space which could be acceptable to both secularists and Islamists*. A civic space includes political deliberation in parliament, public debates, and social interactions in public. However, a common understanding of civic space formed in the mediation space could only be sustainable if it could be coherent with the main worldviews in both secularist and Islamist political currents. The basic joint vision was agreeing on what to avoid, in other words avoiding a return to dictatorship, and hence it came with the need to depolarize relations and form peaceful coexistence.

The safety lines were the following:

- That the discussions and participation would be kept confidential, at least until decided otherwise by all participants: From an outside perspective at least, it seemed implausible that the parties would even sit together.
- No insults, no denigration: The actors who participated denigrated their counterparts on social media before the meetings.
- No accusation of not being Islamic and no threats of “takfir” (excommunication): In the understanding of the secularists, this could have been perceived as a license for extremists to kill the designated persons.

Addressing the common vision and the issue of civic space required that the participants develop a common language. For example, terms such as “secularity” and “secularism” triggered defensive and negative reactions among the Islamist participants. They perceived these as a threat to their worldviews and ways of life. The development of a common language to address these things required discussion of the sorts of words that could be used to address secularity and experiences regarding religion in the public sphere. An important aspect of this process was that the word “secularism” was not to be used in this exchange. However, the term “common civic space of action” was acceptable to all the actors involved. Thus, the actors favoring the term “secularism” accepted that the term “common civic space of action” was sufficiently equivalent in meaning to the idea of “secularity,” a term which they originally preferred to use in discussions.

To clear the ground for discussions, the first meetings sought to sensitize religiously inspired political actors to the different meanings of “secularity,” which vary depending on historical and geographical contexts.⁵⁰ Further, it was important to distinguish between two terms. The first was “secularity,” as understood in its application to a common space in which different value systems can cohabit in public debates that allow for arguments and contentions. The second was “secularism,” understood as an ideology or “quasi-religion” that seeks to shape people’s lives or to restrain the role of religion in a context.

The participants agreed to speak of “secular space” as a “common space for interaction or joint action.” Moreover, participants agreed that religious rules in matters of life constitute a “framework” which orients but also allows for creativity and flexibility. This highlighted how matters of everyday life – distinct from religion in the prescriptive and ritualistic sense – can fall “within the realm of religion” and not necessarily be separated from a given framework of rules. Such careful use of words is especially important to Salafists. Nevertheless, frameworks that address matters of life also need to adapt to different contexts and therefore require a certain flexibility.

This insight highlighting the importance of rules and flexibility in people’s everyday lives opened up a vision of a society for the participants. More specifically, this vision was one where religious actors with strong commitments to rules and secular actors with strong commitments to a variety of different ways of life (that do not fall into the realm of religion) could live. Further, both groups would be able to do so while remaining faithful to their own convictions without seeking to impose their worldviews on others.

Therefore, this mediation space prepared the ground and a common language for addressing some of the more sensitive aspects regarding how different rules define civic space. In doing so, the idea was to open up the possibility to develop joint actions regarding the interaction of religion and politics in the public sphere. For example, this could be by discussing different rules as they apply to parliamentary politics or to social interactions in public spaces in different countries across the region. This could involve questions such as the following: What does religious flexibility mean on these levels? How can religious flexibility be conducive to inclusive political communities where secularists and Islamists from different strands of Islam can have animated public debates without feeling threatened by one another?

50 See Bitter (2015).

Seventy high-level participants – including a future prime minister, a Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate, and various Salafist actors with important constituencies – signed a document that explained the possibility of a common civic space of action. This document also included a commitment to implement the idea of this space through pilot projects. These participants additionally sat together in working groups to develop such pilot projects at the national level.

In Tunisia, participants worked on two projects. One was on preventing political violence, as secularist opposition leader Chokri Belaid and Member of Parliament Mohamed Brahmi had been assassinated in the country.⁵¹ The other project was on religious education. All the actors involved saw the absence of a solid religious education in Tunisia as dangerous for the country, as it created space for any type of religious dissemination, including those containing exclusionary and divisive ideas.

In Morocco, the participants addressed the phenomenon of political violence in universities. Several students had been killed in the country due to clashes, including ones between communities of students organized along nationalist (secular) and religious lines.⁵²

51 On which, see France 24 (2013).

52 On which, see Tarif (2018).

Conclusion

The mediation space approach is useful in situations where societies are polarized, where negotiations are blocked, or where communication is difficult because of worldview differences. It is a type of mediation that is less focused on official “political-executive” negotiations between political leaders. Rather, it is concerned with addressing divisions and conflicts of society related to different juridical discourses and legitimizing processes and frameworks. The mediation space and track one mediation processes are two different approaches that address different types of challenges and focus on different ways of finding durable solutions. They can either complement each other or take place independently of each other. A mediation space can be especially useful when there is worldview polarization between communities. In this case, a mediation space can be set up as separate forums convening networks of experts across different constituencies in order to address practical issues of a blocked peace process.

By way of conclusion, we would like to point out a few risks and things to consider in order to avoid causing harm when convening a mediation space. To the extent that worldviews shape ways of life, they are a matter of power relations. These power relations are at play *between* worldviews, when actors of one worldview impose their value systems over actors of another value systems, e.g., through the imposition of laws and political systems.⁵³ Such a conflict is often violent, and narratives may become consolidated and hardened. An increase in external pressure on parties tends to further harden such narratives. The aim of a mediation space from a conflict transformation perspective is thus to take away pressure and to retrieve negotiation flexibility by opening up possibilities within each group. This should not, however, lead peace practitioners to overlook power relations *within* a community composed of actors embedded in the same worldview. To counter this risk, “do no harm” considerations are absolutely key and require in-depth conflict and context analysis. For example, this could involve

53 On which, see Nudler (1990, 188).

careful research projects, series of exploration workshops, working with insiders, and the consideration of different perspectives within a community.⁵⁴

Moreover, conveners of a mediation space run the risk of entrenching worldview divides by making division explicit. This is one reason why it is best to avoid discussing worldviews in a mediation space: We assume they are there, and thus we focus on developing actions that are compatible in terms of different worldviews (what one could also call com-possible action). The risk of entrenching divides, therefore, can be mitigated by focusing on practical issues of the conflict and not getting lost in discussions of worldviews on an abstract or purely normative level. Moreover, peace practitioners should distinguish between groups of people and their respective worldviews. This means that they should not make inferences on how a given group is going to act in a conflict solely by analyzing their worldviews as such. Further, peace practitioners should view the worldviews of respective others as containing infinite possibilities. They should not seek to understand such worldviews in their totality.⁵⁵

Another potential risk is to focus too much on the worldview dimensions alone at the expense of paying attention to tangible conflict issues. However, rather than ignoring tangible issues, the idea suggested here is supposed to involve an exploration of the interplay of worldviews, interpretations, and tangible issues or actions.⁵⁶

There are other approaches to mediating across worldview differences that address this issue more head on.⁵⁷ Such methods, however, need to be used very carefully as they risk making divisions more visible and getting lost in more theoretical discussions that are not conducive to concrete problem-solving.

54 The anthropologists Bräuchler and Naucke (2017) diagnose the risk of romanticizing different worldviews or the local in peacebuilding activities. This can lead peace practitioners to overlook local power relations and to have a false understanding of the local. Ethnographic research reveals that what peacekeepers generally assume to be local is never merely local. Local power structures often maintain complex transnational ties that need to be unpacked. What is needed to address this is locally grounded knowledge production conducted by researchers with good relations and long-term experience in a certain local context. This knowledge can then enhance and improve peacebuilding efforts, as well as the quality of public debates in contexts of conflict.

55 On which, see Levinas (1969).

56 Aroua et al. (2021).

57 Seul (2021, 214–221) makes a number of practical suggestions for addressing worldviews in conflict transformation, including “worldview mapping work” (see also Seul 2018). This can involve asking parties to draw their respective worldviews as maps on the floor and then introducing them to the other side by giving them a tour in the physical space.

Outlook on the future of mediation and conflict transformation

In the past decades, social polarization along different worldviews has become a widespread phenomenon. Perhaps this trend has been amplified by the use of digital information technologies that make worldview differences more apparent while also creating separate spheres of public conversation.⁵⁸

As it is an approach that is designed for such tensions, mediation space could be useful for addressing the social divisions in number of conflicts. These include (1) social polarization in the US between the religious right and progressive liberals; (2) blockages in peace processes (e.g., Israel-Palestine⁵⁹), (3) blockages in constitutional dialogues where the nature of the state is contested (e.g., Tunisia and Afghanistan); (4) sectarian tensions (e.g., Lebanon and Iraq); and (5) contested understandings of multilateralism.

The mediation space approach as outlined here should be seen as work in progress, as the conceptualization of the approach evolves with the practice in an iterative manner. We would therefore also greatly appreciate any feedback you may have, especially regarding the usefulness of the ideas presented here in your conflict transformation practice.

58 On the link between worldviews, disinformation, and digital communication technologies, see Humprecht et al. (2020).

59 See Mason (2021) and Zalzburg (2019).

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This mediation space paper is a vitally important innovation in our field; it opens ways forward for engaging some of the most intractable conflicts of our times. Useful for mediators, policy-makers and scholars, it significantly adds to existing thinking and broadens ways of engaging those who can make change in the midst of deep differences.

Prof. Michelle LeBaron, University of British Columbia

Conflicts due to worldview differences among conflicting parties require an approach that capitalizes on building understanding, engaging new actors who would act as “the guardians and interpreters of the community’s worldviews and value-systems”, and focuses on practical actions rather than dialogue around values. The mediation space approach has not only opened new possibilities for ending violence, it has also provided legitimacy for the dialogue process and provided assurances for the stakeholders. In this well thought through publication, the authors describe how such a unique approach has made a leap difference in transforming some of the most complicated 21st century conflicts.

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The authors offer deep insights which resonate with our practical mediation experiences in Middle Eastern arenas of violent conflict that are characterized by sharp worldview differences.

*Ofer Zalzburg, Middle East Program Director at the Kelman Institute
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This publication will be particularly interesting for those who are curious about innovative ways to address conflicts in which value-systems and worldviews play a key role.

*Simon Geissbühler, Head of the Peace and Human Rights Division,
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