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The *Journal of Transdisciplinary Peace Praxis (JTPP)* is a peer-reviewed, biannual, subscription-based, scholarly journal of contemplative cutting edge research and practice on subjects related to human social flourishing and peace.

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## Editor-in-Chief's Welcome and Introduction

I am enthusiastic to welcome you to our fourteenth (XIV) issue of the *Journal of Transdisciplinary Peace Praxis (JTPP)*, Volume 7, Number 2. My late father's favourite number was 14 and it often denoted the uncountable nature of a plethora of items that my young mind was desirous of him giving to me and my siblings (think M&Ms or other sweets). It became a family joke that when something was uncountable, there must be 14! It is with this same sense of youthful and unknowable wonder that I present one of the strongest issues of the *JTPP* yet. From Palestine to Baltimore to Africa and Asia, this issue spans the globe in both its description and analysis of what we call transdisciplinary peace praxis.

The excellent pieces in this issue are a testament to the human complexity of working towards peace, establishing dialogue, and dealing with the trauma and the agony of violent and politicised global conflict. While I am increasingly convinced that traditional disciplinary scientific scholarship can only have incomplete answers to the human condition, I am heartened by the fact that the scholarship we support and publish gets us one step closer towards truth. In developing connections across and beyond the existing disciplines, the pieces in this issue speak to unique experiences and the learning that these experiences spawn.

Contemporary global instability requires this reflection coupled with bold thought and action. Such transdisciplinary scholarship crosses disciplinary boundaries and integrates the 'truths' we can only know as partial grasping. This issue of the *JTPP* continues an almost 7-year tradition of expanding the boundaries of mere disciplinarity and creatively thinking about how we can put the unknown and known into greater understanding for nonviolent action.

The first article by Eleyan Sawafta, entitled 'The University as an Iron Wall: Epistemic Agony and Palestinian *Sumud* in Canadian Academia' presents an emotionally charged, heartfelt, and deeply theoretical articulation of the 'epistemic agony' of 'a Palestinian scholar navigating Canadian academia in the wake of the October 2023 genocide' (p.14). Sawafta, a Palestinian student pursuing a PhD in political science in a Canadian University, brings the agony and trauma of the violence in the Levant to North America's doorstep by critically interrogating the epistemic reality of the North American university system as a bastion of colonial knowledge production and interpretation. In doing so, the reflective language of Sawafta, and his experience of the destruction of the Canadian university encampment protesting Israel's genocide in Gaza, gives voice to a sense of epistemic agony as the loss of 'the ability to assert a perspective that is valued and heard in academic spaces' (p.24). This is a powerful piece that probes

the traumatic effects of not just the war in Gaza, but the counter-resistance to the wave of Palestinian protests of that war on North American campuses.

Providing further historical context to Sawafta's article, Abdullah Kiran's article 'The Palestine Question and the Three Phases of the Arab-Israeli Conflict', provides a detailed analysis of the history of this protracted conflict and its changing dynamics. Arguing that with 'the fall of the Assad regime in Syria... the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict changed for the third time' (p.62), Kiran highlights the role of both Syria and Iran, and their recent military defeats, in the changing dynamics of the proxy war in the region. Kiran's insights into the changing dynamics of the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict shed light on possible future directions of the conflict. He concludes by claiming 'the cumulative effects of internal division, regional disengagement, and asymmetric military realities have increasingly tilted the balance against Palestinian political aspirations' (p.65). What this portends for the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the region is yet unknown, but noting these dynamic shifts and phases is critically important for any future peace in the region.

The third article in this issue of the *JTPP* moves back to North America, this time reporting on the work of the Baltimore Cross-Community Reconciliation Project (BCCRP). Authors Shelly Clay-Robison and Robin Todd McDonough show that the BCCRP 'offers a framework for building peace in racially divided cities', like the divisions found in what they call the 'two Baltimores' (p.68). Launched in December 2022, this project of the Global Peace Foundation brought together 20 participants in 10 bi-weekly encounters of 'humanising dialogue' around racial difference in the city. Developing inter-racial relationships and narrative justice through storytelling, the work of the BCCRP, and the process of the participants' culminating community project, established newfound opportunities to humanise the 'other' in the racially divided city of Baltimore.

Following on the themes of contact and dialogue, Adeolu Ojedokun's article entitled 'National Dialogue as Peace Praxis: Lessons from Tunisia for Nigeria's Fragmented Federation' takes us to Africa to comparatively analyse the national dialogue processes in two African countries: Nigeria and Tunisia. As Ojedokun argues, 'the findings underscore that credible conveners, broad inclusion of stakeholders, clear mandates, and commitment to enact reforms were key to Tunisia's success and largely absent in Nigeria' (p.89). Concluding that 'the idea of a National Dialogue remains highly relevant' (p.105) for Nigeria, this article lays bare the complexities and pitfalls of designing and implementing national dialogues that will 'maximise the chances of success' (p.106).

Among other factors, the author points to gender inclusion as necessary for the success of national dialogues, which leads nicely to an interesting fifth article by Angelina Mendes entitled: Women re-storying their lived experiences

of violence and trauma using a strategic arts-based peacebuilding approach'. Based on fieldwork in Indonesia, Mendes argues that 'developing meaningful and creative spaces for women survivors to safely and creatively explore their lived experiences can offer individuals and groups opportunities to address traumatic violence and contest dominant discourses, stigmas, and stereotypes that function to constrain their personhood and agency' (p.133). Using 'participatory photography-based narrative methods' (p.115) the work highlights the ways in which sexually and gender-based violence (SGBV) 'impacts people of all identities' (p.133). This unique qualitative research presents a powerful, and underused, methodological approach in conflict-affected areas.

The last article by Elaine (Lan Yin) Hsiao, Andrew Shenal, and Lily Stenroos entitled: 'Recognising Territories of Life as Protected Zones: Safeguarding Indigenous Lands from Armed Conflict', takes a more global perspective to explore the environmental security, precarity, and peacebuilding realities of indigenous 'territories of life' (p.138), not to mention how to protect them. By both quantifying and enumerating the vast indigenous resources under threat due to armed conflict, the authors provide some case studies from Guatemala, Afghanistan, Micronesia, and Columbia to argue for recognition of the territories of life as globally recognised protected zones in which armed conflict should not be allowed to happen. These spaces are just too important for our interdependent shared humanity and as the authors argue an 'approach that includes Indigenous knowledge could be instrumental in this process' of developing policy and protocols for these protected zones. This last piece does a nice job of bringing the local discussions in the earlier articles towards a more global approach to realising nonviolent change.

I believe that readers will find that each of these articles nicely compliments each of the others and builds upon our knowledge base of peace praxis.

The final piece of writing in this volume, beside our regular *Kaleidoscope* section of current events, is a book review written by me, the Editor-in-Chief of the *JTPP*. In reviewing, *Whatever it is, I'm Against it: Resistance to Change in Higher Education* by Brian Rosenberg (2023), I wanted to draw readers' attention back to the current threats to knowledge and democracy in the United States. Rosenberg's book is an important read for those struggling to understand the complex machinations of major transformation in the higher education sector. As I say in my review 'Rosenberg's analysis of the case for change provides a sound grounding for [sic] needed discussion in the halls of higher education'. Having said this, I strongly believe that those both within and outside of higher education need to pay attention to the many challenges Rosenberg articulates. These challenges are not specific to just the higher education industry but have lasting implications for the future of free thought and innovative knowledge

production.

I hope readers will enjoy the innumerable pieces in this issue and use them in building compassion and further peacebuilding knowledge. As always, thanks to the Peace and Justice Studies Association's (PJSA), a bi-national social justice organisation that supports the work of the *JTPP*. As an affiliated journal of the PJSA, we continue to encourage the engagement of PJSA membership through both readership and manuscript submission to our always open call for papers, found at <https://jtpuk.org>.

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With much metta (loving kindness),



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9 August 2025

# The University as an Iron Wall: Epistemic Agony and Palestinian *Sumud* in Canadian Academia

Eleyan Sawafta

## ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the complicity of Canadian public universities in reproducing colonial logics through what I conceptualise as *epistemic agony*—a condition of embodied intellectual and political suffering that emerges from the silencing of Palestinian narratives. Drawing from decolonial theory, lived experience, and recent anti-genocide student encampments, this article argues that epistemic agony is not merely a symptom of *epistemic violence* but a generative force that catalyses *epistemic disobedience*. Grounded in case analysis of the University of Alberta’s violent suppression of a Gaza solidarity encampment, the article theorises Canadian academia as an ideological arm of settler-colonial power, where liberal commitments to neutrality veil the state’s racial and political repression. Through the praxis of *sumud*—Palestinian steadfastness—I highlight how students, academic staff, and communities are transforming agony into counter-knowledge, confronting institutional erasure with revolutionary pedagogy, and reclaiming the university as a political site of nonviolent resistance. This article contributes a decolonial epistemology of harm and charts a path towards pluriversal justice in higher education.

## KEYWORDS

Epistemic Violence, Epistemic Agony, Epistemic Disobedience, Palestine, Canadian Universities, Sumud

## INTRODUCTION

In 1923—twenty-five years before Israel’s establishment as a settler-colonial state—Ze’ev Jabotinsky, founder of the Revisionist Zionist movement, articulated his infamous ‘Iron Wall’ doctrine. According to him, Zionist colonialism had to crush the hope of decolonisation as a precondition to colonisation, thereby compelling the Indigenous Arab into submission. His doctrine resonates with what peace scholars term negative peace—the absence of direct violence without the presence of justice (see Galtung, 1996).

Jabotinsky's blueprint of domination has not faded. It reverberates in the rhetoric and policy of settler states today. In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the biblical figure of '*Amalek*' to cast Palestinians as the embodiment of evil and to justify calls to 'destroy Gaza' (Magid, 2025: 15; Yaghi, 2025: 9). In Canada, Selina Robinson—then Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills of British Columbia—dismissed Palestine as a 'crappy piece of land' (Schmunk, 2024). These statements scaffold for a 'second *Nakba*'<sup>1</sup> (Yaghi, 2025), demonstrating how theological and colonial logics interrelate and continue to remake Palestine as a space without Palestinians (see Desai, 2021; Masalha, 2012; Benvenisti, 2000).

Why invoke this history in a study of Canadian universities? Because settler-colonial logics travel—and settle. As a Palestinian doctoral student navigating Canadian academia in the wake of the 2023 genocide<sup>2</sup> in Gaza and the subsequent anti-genocide student encampments, I observe a haunting parallel: the same hope-killing logic that animates Zionist settler colonialism also informs the response of Canadian universities to Palestine solidarity. While Canada claims multiculturalism (Minister of Justice, [1985] 2025), its universities enforce an invisible iron wall—not of concrete and barbed wires, but of Israeli surveillance technologies (Kirchgaessner, 2025; Khalil, 2024), academic capitalism (Kuokkanen, 2007), and the suppression of anti-genocide speech (Karame, 2025).

This article is, therefore, not just academic. It is a refusal to sever Palestine from Canada or my tears from theory. Following Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2007: 14), it is a raid on the academic borders erected around what Michel Foucault (1980) might call 'the truths'. From Treaty 6 territory—from encampments where the air carries the scent of pepper spray and solidarity, and where *sumud* is my epistemology, steadfastness as praxis (Meari, 2014)—I ask: How does the epistemic violence committed by the university give rise to creative forms of epistemic disobedience?

To answer this question, the article argues that Canadian universities function as political institutions and ideological extensions of settler-colonial regimes by reproducing epistemic violence against Palestinian narratives. Yet this violence produces not only pain, but also what I call epistemic agony: a state of intellectual, emotional, and somatic suffering that arises when one's knowledge, identity, and grief are rendered illegible. Epistemic agony serves as a conceptual bridge between epistemic violence and epistemic disobedience, as it gives rise to a collective revolutionary identity grounded in refusal, resistance, and the reimagining of knowledge—as seen in the student encampments across North American campuses in 2023–2024. These encampments were not just protests, but acts of epistemic resistance—refusing the university's complicity in reproducing state-sanctioned narratives and enacting counter-knowledge rooted in solidarity and decolonial



praxis (see Elhalaby & Wind, 2025; Doughty, Anonymous [6], and Anonymous [7], 2024).

The article proceeds in three parts. First, it examines how Canadian universities reproduce epistemic violence—distortion, dehumanisation, and erasure—drawing on the work of José Medina (2023), Kristie Dotson (2011), and Miranda Fricker (2007). Second, it theorises epistemic agony. Third, it explores how that very agony becomes a source of nonviolent resistance. Drawing on Walter Mignolo's (2011) epistemic disobedience and the Palestinian concept of *sumud*<sup>3</sup> (Meari, 2014; Jayyusi, 2007: 134), Canadian academia's iron wall is not immutable. By centring epistemic agony as both a symptom of violence and a source of hope, this article pursues two goals: to expose the complicity of (neo)liberal Canadian universities in reproducing colonial silencing and hope-killing. Grounded in institutional case analysis and Canada's global alignments, this article contributes to Canadian political scholarship by theorising epistemic agony as a revolutionary collective identity that emerges in the absence of ideology.

Grounded in institutional case analysis and Canada's global alignments, this article contributes to Canadian political scholarship by theorising epistemic agony as a revolutionary collective identity that emerges in the absence of ideology.

This article is not only an intervention in Canadian academia—it is also a situated act of writing from within the very institutions it critiques. Before proceeding to the broader literature on epistemic violence, I turn briefly to the lived standpoint that informs this analysis. In doing so, I follow Diana Allan's (2018: 75) recognition of 'embodied knowledge', which centres lived human experience and political events simultaneously. I also underscore what feminist Donna Haraway (1988) calls 'situated knowledge'—theorising from the ground, not the ivory tower. This article rejects the myth of neutrality, embracing instead Sandra Harding's (1992: 458) strong objectivity. Where knowledge born of struggle, written in the ink of agony.

## SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND THE POLITICS OF WRITING PALESTINE IN CANADA

When I began this article, I did not hesitate to write about colonial violence in academia—the kind etched into Canadian university lawns by police boots, the sort of violence that generates agony by undermining the hope of decolonisation. My conviction hardened after a workshop I facilitated, where a University of

Here, epistemic agony is not abstract—it is visceral. It is the weight of a keffiyeh in a lecture hall, the silence that follows ‘Free Palestine’, the anxiety of speaking what the university deems unheardable.

Alberta student wept with the fury of dammed rivers. ‘The university is dead’, they said, after Edmonton police violently dismantled Gaza encampment on 11 May 2024 (Hennig, 2024). I had no words to offer. How could I, when my own breath came in shards—each one a fragment from Gaza lodged in my throat?

I ride the wind, I flee. From the Quad’s hollow silence. From the oppression of ‘neutral’ science. From my own writing, now a stranger’s hand. Even from my skin—a cage I claw at, desperate to escape. The library’s complicit shelves whisper: Sit. Read. Be still. So I obey. Before me, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms sprawls like a settler’s map: federalism, multiculturalism, since former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The debates about coexistence. My existence. The distance between my body and the resistance.

Here, epistemic agony is not abstract—it is visceral. It is the weight of a keffiyeh<sup>4</sup> in a lecture hall, the silence that follows ‘Free Palestine’, the anxiety of speaking what the university deems unheardable. It is the pain of being known only through accusation, and the grief of becoming unintelligible in the very place that claims to protect rights and freedoms. To endure that agony, I turned to theory. But Western knowledge surrounds me—its shelves groaning with every truth but mine. It demands that I trade mourning for methodology, agony for the security of my Canadian study permit. But how? When those who deserved these chairs are ash?

Canadian universities occupy a paradoxical position within the country’s political discourse. They are often romanticised and portrayed as neutral institutions—spaces that ought to remain above or outside political tensions (Husain, 2024). This liberal ideal aligns with Jürgen Habermas’s (1991) vision of the *public sphere* as a realm of rational discourse, detached from the coercive pressures of state and market. Institutional rhetoric reinforces this image through commitments to ‘neutrality’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘freedom’ from political interference, all in the name of fostering ‘unbiased’ intellectual inquiry.

Yet this notion of neutrality begins to unravel under scrutiny. As Irfan Ahmad (2025: 2) argues, Habermas himself—who famously championed the critical role of theory and the emancipatory potential of the public sphere—has demonstrated ‘unconditional support to Israel as almost constitutive of modernity’ since October 2023. Asef Bayat (2023) similarly critiques Habermas for failing ‘to apply his own ideas to the case of Israel–Palestine’. These contradictions compel us to re-examine the university’s role as a supposedly apolitical institution.

Applying Mouffe's (2013: vii) distinction between *politics* ('the ensemble of practices and institutions whose aim is to organi[s]e human coexistence') and *the political* ('the ontological dimension of antagonism'), this ideal of neutrality becomes problematic, particularly regarding Palestine. Mouffe argues that attempts to eliminate or deny the dimension of 'the political' merely mask underlying antagonisms and threaten the democratic ethos. Despite claims of neutrality, universities in the West, and particularly in North America consistently function within what Elhalaby and Wind (2025: 403) describe as 'the Zionist project [...] as entangled imperial formations'.

Furthermore, other critical theoretical lenses such as those of Antonio Gramsci and Foucault help in illuminating how Canadian universities inherently embody political functions. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (as discussed in Said, 1978: 6-7) positions institutions like universities as pivotal sites where dominant societal ideologies and counter-hegemonic discourses compete, shaping collective values and social consensus. Meanwhile, Foucault's (1980) framework of power/knowledge underscores universities as key nodes in disseminating and legitimising knowledge, influencing public norms, policies, and understandings of truth itself. The seemingly neutral choices universities make actively reinforce (or challenge) existing power structures. Consequently, Canadian universities are far from being apolitical or neutral institutions; rather, they represent profoundly *the political* arena, deeply intertwined with societal power dynamics, continually engaged in shaping and reshaping Canada's political and cultural landscapes.

Thus, Canadian campuses are not exceptions to Canadian political life when it comes to decolonisation topics such as Palestine. When a university's mission calls for a 'vibrant and supportive learning environment', remember: some of us are busy digging graves with our teeth. In the next section, this article turns to a broader theorisation of epistemic violence as both a structural and embodied phenomenon.

## VIOLENCE, BUT NO 'SERIOUS INJURY'?

Canada's self-image as a 'multinational', 'multiethnic', and 'multicultural' democracy (Kymlicka, 2020: 329-30) crumbles under the weight of its settler-colonial foundations—Indigenous dispossession, resource extraction, residential schools, and ongoing cultural genocide (Simpson, 2017; TRC, 2015; Coulthard, 2014; Snelgrove, Dhamoon & Corntassel, 2014). These are not historical footnotes or events but active structures (Coulthard, 2014), reproducing the hegemony of what Benita Bunjun (2021) refers to the white settler state. Hence, postcolonial theory, as J Kēhaulani Kauanui (2020) notes, often fails to address settler colonialism where colonisers remain.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous<sup>6</sup> and decolonial theories are better suited to interrogate Canada's violence, particularly the epistemic form

I will primarily focus on epistemic violence in academic settings. But this is not a call to methodologically separate what is material violence from what is immaterial. These forms of violence are deeply interrelated and inseparable. The roots of epistemic violence may lie in physical violence—and vice versa.

of violence, where domination, as Yellowknives Dene Glen Coulthard (2014: 6-7) eloquently puts, ‘interrelate[s] discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power’.

Moving between Palestine and Canada, I agree with the view that violence, though ‘vague’ and ‘complex’ (Vorobej, 2016: 1-2), is socially constructed and context-dependent (Livingston, 2021; Kuokkanen, 2007). Violence may also be understood as war when it is employed ‘to compel our opponent to fulfil our will’ (Clausewitz 1827, as cited in Nicoll, 2013: 277). Engaging with scholars such as Hannah Arendt (1970), Charles Tilly (1985), John Galtung<sup>7</sup> (1969, 1990), Mahmood Mamdani (2003), Judith Butler<sup>8</sup> (2020), Pierre Bourdieu (2003), Edward Said (1978), Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2016), and Michael Burawoy (2019), I embrace understanding violence as a cluster of direct, structural, systematic, legal, symbolic, cultural, and epistemic dimensions. In the Canadian context, violence is multifaceted—

it begins with ‘genocidal practices’ (Coulthard, 2014: 4) and extends into the ‘discursive’ realm to sustain the colonial structure (Coulthard, 2014: 103).

For the purpose of this article, I will primarily focus on epistemic violence in academic settings. But this is not a call to methodologically separate what is material violence from what is immaterial. These forms of violence are deeply interrelated and inseparable. The roots of epistemic violence may lie in physical violence—and vice versa.

In academia, there is no study without struggle, this is what Leigh Patel<sup>9</sup> (2021) asserted, since Western higher education functions to uphold settler colonial structures. This is no less true in Canada, where epistemic violence is not incidental but constitutive of higher education, maintaining racial domination and preserving ‘distinct spaces in Canadian society’ that ‘[keep] the ivory tower white’ (Schick, 2002: 117). Thus, universities in settler colonial contexts are not neutral spaces—they are ideological and discursive battlegrounds that ‘serve to ensure that the configurations of people, resources and space that allow for new decolonial knowledge to emerge never come to exist’ (Richardson, 2018: 231). This discursive and epistemic violence is codified in university structures. This means that, as Robert and Shohat (2012: 61) and Said (1978) indicate, academia

is a site where imperialism and colonialism launder domination as knowledge and culture. In such sites, epistemic violence is ‘the violence one suffers when one is harmed as a subject of knowledge and understanding’ (Medina, 2023: 62). As Dalit feminist Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2022: 84) puts it, this kind of epistemic injustice, ‘lock[s] [someone] out of history and knowledge of the pervasive violence, also lock[s] [someone] out of [his] ability to hold grief, to heal, and to find pathways to a future beyond this violence’. As such, Fricker (as cited in Rinker 2024: 104) epistemic injustice ‘wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and this in a capacity essential to human value...’.

In Canadian universities, the entanglement of domination and knowledge production manifests in what Carol Schick (2002: 102) terms ‘continuous surveillance’. This surveillance operates most aggressively when whiteness and institutional privilege are perceived as threatened—functioning, in effect, as what Foucault ([1975] 1995) means a disciplinary apparatus that feels monstrous in its totalising control over people to maintain order. This is exactly what happened to the student solidarity encampments when they reclaimed the indigeneity of the land—by calling Gaza encampments Liberated Zones—for a few hours or days at various universities across Turtle Island.

To bring the aforementioned discussion to life, this article invokes the case of the University of Alberta’s violent dismantling of the Gaza encampment in May 2024 (Hennig, 2024). This case of dismantling was deemed ‘lawful’ by an institutional review (Board of Governors University of Alberta, 2024), which lays bare the underlying logic of this regime that blends together domination and knowledge. Following Walter Benjamin (1921: 248), this article interrogates the ‘mythic’ violence of law that preserves colonial order. How can we claim the lawfulness of something when the very law itself was born of settler colonial practices? Is the Hobbesian social contract (see Gauthier 1988)—the law governing the modern nation-state—truly nonviolent, apolitical, and just? Tilly (1985: 170) indirectly answers no, arguing that ‘war makes states’. State formation—and by extension, its laws and institutions—is rooted in such violence. Similarly, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (as discussed in Said, 1978) reinforces this view, emphasising that the political society of the state is fundamentally based on domination. This domination, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848) emphasise, is inevitably violent and hegemonic and needs a permanent revolution

The university dismantled this sense of nonviolent revolution—or, more precisely, what Asef Bayat (2021) reconceptualises as ‘refolution’—in order to prevent the emergence of Gramscian organic intellectuals.

to be countered. While their vision often implied the possibility of violent upheaval (see Marx & Engels, 1848: 20), this article calls for a reimagining of revolution as a nonviolent, epistemic and structural undoing of domination. Hence, the university dismantled this sense of nonviolent revolution—or, more precisely, what Asef Bayat (2021) reconceptualises as ‘refolution’<sup>10</sup>—in order to prevent the emergence of Gramscian organic intellectuals.

Returning to Alberta, after dismantling the encampment, the police watchdog’s claim that no ‘serious harm’ occurred (Wakefield, 2024) exposes the settler state’s narrow way of measuring violence. In contrast, as University of Alberta professor Natalie Loveless mentioned after the violent encampment clearance (Bartko, 2024), the ‘deep harm’ inflicted transcends physical violence to encompass moral and psychological injury that becomes indelibly etched in institutional memory. How is harm defined, and by whom? Is it constructed by institutional authorities, or by the populations who are most affected? Even if one were to contend that physical violence was absent, are emotional, epistemic, and collective injuries dismissed because they are not visible? Harm, as Dax D’Orazio (2020), Vittorio Bufacchi<sup>11</sup> (2005: 194), and Bourdieu (2003) argue, is not reducible to bodily injury; it includes the ‘dirty pain’ and ‘clean pain’<sup>12</sup> (Menakem, 2017: 20–21) of epistemic erasure. This form of harm is precisely what Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1985: 141) captures when he names Palestinians the ‘easy enemy’, he names this condition: a people rendered disposable in discourse long before they disappear in practice.

Canadian academia operationalises this harm through what Abu-Laban and Bakan (2008: 638) describe as an ‘international racial contract that assigns a common interest between the state of Israel and international political allies, including Canada, while absenting Palestinians as simultaneously non-white, the subjects of extreme repression, and stateless’. And as Canada continues to arm Israeli colonialism (*Al-Jazeera*, 2024; Wildeman & Swan, 2021), the boundary between material and immaterial violence against Palestinian narratives collapses. This collapse reveals that Canada, and its universities, is not merely symbolically complicit in the genocide in Palestine—it is an active participant: by supplying arms abroad and extinguishing the hope of anti-genocide protesters at home.

This (im)material violence also reflects what sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2013) calls the four foundational epistemicides/genocides that forged modernity and enlightenment:

- (1) the erasure of Muslims and Jews in Al-Andalus;
- (2) the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas;
- (3) the transatlantic enslaved Africans trade; and
- (4) the mass killing of women accused of witchcraft in Europe.

In Canadian universities, this epistemicide continues under liberal narratives of civility and inclusion (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Universities often celebrate diversity without practising genuine inclusion, while simultaneously reducing noble and transformative political struggles to superficial acts of racial representation. It is akin to bringing Palestinian students to campus, claiming racial representation, yet refusing to listen to their journey, testimony, or lived experiences. Even if they speak, they are unheard.

The Gaza encampment was not a protest but an epistemic confrontation for truth (Finkelstein, 2025)—a refusal of what Tuck and Yang (2012: 9) call ‘settler moves to innocence’. When former Prime Minister Trudeau memorialises Holocaust victims while silencing Gaza’s dead (Levitt, 2024), or when BC Minister Robinson dismisses Palestine as a ‘crappy piece of land’ (Schmunk, 2024), they rehearse Patrick Wolfe’s (2006) ‘logic of elimination’ through discourse effectively silencing dissenting voices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ meets its limit in the encampment in Canadian universities, where speech is contingent on self-dismemberment. In other words, the universities allow the speech of the subaltern if, and only if, they distance (or detach) themselves from their political identity. Thus, the limit of Spivak’s question is not merely whether the subaltern can speak, but rather: Are all subalterns the same? And on what terms are they permitted to speak? As a Palestinian, I highlight the hidden hierarchy that enables some subalterns to speak while silencing others—reminding us that the subaltern is not a monolithic category. While Spivak’s framework has been influential in critiques of epistemic violence, it is essential to read it alongside scholars who interrogate both colonial and deeper layers of domination and epistemic exclusion.

As Soundararajan (2022: 93-94) notes, while beloved postcolonial scholars such as Spivak have illuminated the violence of the Orientalist and white-imperial gaze, they often fail to locate that colonial dynamic within—or built upon—the foundational dominator-culture of caste. Spivak for example has been caste privileged. In this sense, the epistemic agony of the subaltern is not only about conditional speech within Western institutions, but also about the unacknowledged structures of caste, race, citizenship, and empire that underpin the very terms of legibility, recognition, and detachment.

As Rafeef Ziadah (2025: 242) puts, complicity wears the cloak of ‘detachment’. But the university is no detached mind-factory—it is a body-shop and it is built on Charles Mills’ (1997) racial contract,<sup>13</sup> where racialized scholars are pressed into the somatic labour of dissociation. Therapist and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem (2017: 27) notes that trauma that comes from such supremacy ‘lives primarily in the body, not the thinking brain’. This is precisely why I refer to it as agony.



Menakem's pain was very vivid in the encampment's destruction, which crystallised the university's iron wall—not of stone, but what Dotson (2011) terms 'testimonial silencing' or, in Fricker's (2007) words, 'testimonial injustice'—where the speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer's part. Thus, to study Canadian politics is to navigate, first, what Jamaican critic Sylvia Wynter (2003), Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2007), and Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) term the colonality of power: a regime where, as Patel (2021) argues, violence is the unspoken curriculum. Yet in this agony lies defiance. The encampment refused the university's demand: Mourn quietly, if you must mourn at all. And second, to realise the social power, 'a practically socially situated capacity to control others' actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally' (Fricker 2007: 14). Such forms of power, as experienced by Palestinians and their allies, cause the speaker to endure agony.

**I define epistemic agony as the visceral tension between the scholarly imperative to know and the institutional machinery that renders certain knowledge illegitimate. It is psycho-political: it emerges at the intersection of the psychological (the internal, intra-personal world filled with ambition, hope, and the will to live) and the political (the external, inter-personal world that silences, dehumanises, and produces despair). The intellectual stands at the seam of these two worlds, connecting them.**

## EPISTEMIC AGONY AS A CONCEPTUAL BRIDGE: BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND DISOBEDIENCE

In this section, I define epistemic agony as the visceral tension between the scholarly imperative to know and the institutional machinery that renders certain knowledge illegitimate. It is psycho-political: it emerges at the intersection of the psychological (the internal, intra-personal world filled with ambition, hope, and the will to live) and the political (the external, inter-personal world that silences, dehumanises, and produces despair). The intellectual stands at the seam of these two worlds, connecting them.

I want to clarify how this idea emerged. A few days after the student approached me in tears, grieving a non-death relational loss, I had a phone conversation with my mother, who resides in the West Bank. As I recounted the events unfolding in the encampments. My parents often ask, 'How is your study?' before they ask, 'How are you?' I find myself



suspended between two worlds: the ambition to pursue my research like any other doctoral student, and the emotional burden of witnessing how universities respond to Palestine solidarity—with suppression, silence, and erasure. My mother responded with a single, resonant phrase: ‘This is agony, *Yamma*—أمي باذع اذه’. Indeed, the dismantling of the student encampment did not merely represent a moment of temporary pain; it marked the onset of continuous mental and physical suffering—an embodied and epistemic struggle over the production of knowledge and the right to express it. It was, in every sense, agony *per se*.

In Arabic, the word ‘*adhāb* (agony) refers to a state of unbearable pain. The conceptual shift from epistemic violence to epistemic agony finds its theoretical roots in Homi Bhabha’s reading of Frantz Fanon (1963: xxxvi), where colonial violence produces not just physical subjugation but an existential state of ‘continued agony’. This Fanonian agony represents more than psychological distress, it is a ‘state of political consciousness and psychic being with a harrowing accuracy’—it constitutes the fundamental condition of colonial subjectivity, where the colonised exist in a liminal space between being and erasure.

In addition to what Fanon (1963) calls ‘the desire to live’, epistemic agony unfolds within a political terrain shaped by Mouffe’s (2013: 89) notion of hegemonic ‘common sense’, itself grounded in Gramsci’s counter hegemony. This terrain is marked by struggles to disarticulate sedimented norms and dominant truth regimes. Epistemic agony, as I have lived it, shares more than etymological roots with Chantal Mouffe’s (2013) *agonism*. It is about *the political*, not *politics*.

While Andrew Schaap (2007) productively explores agonism—the ‘agony of politics’—through the lenses of Mouffe, Walzer, and Arendt, and emphasises agnostic struggle as an ontological dimension of political life essential to vibrant democracy, these frameworks remain limited in addressing the epistemic institutions. Schaap contends that agonism, as theorised by these thinkers, offers a necessary alternative to liberal political theory, which often privileges consensus and dialogue. The ideals of consensus and dialogue are central to the ethos of nonviolent movements. However, what remains underdeveloped, beyond the distinction between the political and politics, is how epistemic agony complicates the possibility of even entering the agnostic space on equal terms.

Thus, how does epistemic agony differ from ‘epistemic violence’, ‘grief’, ‘epistemology of resistance’, ‘epistemic injustice’, ‘epistemic activism’, ‘epistemic disobedience’? Unlike other frameworks, epistemic agony represents a form of identity formation that emerges or mobilises in the absence of a formal or coherent ideological framework. An identity that brings together activists from different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, religions, sexual orientations, classes, and ages to advocate. During the 2023–2024 campus protests, I have experienced how epistemic violence transforms intellectual pursuit into what Fanon (1963: 237) describes

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as thought-turned-agony. In many contexts, violence functions as a technique of domination aimed at securing compliance; in doing so, it often produces or imposes ‘never-ending cycles of victimhood’ within unequal regimes of recognition (Simpson, 2017: 80). At the same time, as Rinker (2024: 31) observes, the category of victimhood is increasingly malleable—‘victimization can more easily be claimed by all sides in a conflict’—raising critical questions about its discursive deployment in contested spaces of conflict.

Yet, violence does not invariably yield submission, and those positioned as targeted sometimes enact nonviolent resistance, reinterpret injury, and reconstitute political agency. Hence, epistemic agony is an advanced form of epistemic violence that compels individuals or groups to act or to express their desire to live.

Agony runs deeper than grief. While grief mourns, agony writhes. Where grief might accept loss, epistemic agony actively resists it through activism and agonism—it is the scream against the silencing and surveillance apparatus of the academic iron wall that structures what Jabotinsky (1923) envisioned precisely to extinguish the hope of decolonisation. Agony is the experience that mirrors what Makhoul (2013: 50) re-conceptualises as being ‘present-absentified’ (*al-ḥādir al-mughayyab*)—when activists’ bodies exist but their subjectivity is erased—and what Darwish (1985: 138) articulated as the Palestinian condition of superfluity, where one’s very existence becomes contingent on colonial recognition.

Epistemic agony is a condition within which responses to what Said (1978: 50) calls the ‘set of constraints upon and limitations of thought’; become possible. It is the crisis Darwish (1985: 141) captures when the ‘back is to the wall, but [the] eyes remain fixed on [the] homeland’. In many ways, epistemic agony parallels the emotional stages of personal agony that follow a significant loss, even if not related to death *per se*. This is often a death of knowledge—a loss not of a loved one, but of recognition, of the ability to assert a perspective that is valued and heard in academic spaces. Conceptualising epistemic agony is rigorous because it is foundational to the very philosophy of nonviolent confrontation at universities; it animates activism as both a response and a method.

This agony manifests most acutely in the contradictions of Canadian academic liberalism. While in part one of the constitution act (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982), the Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees fundamental

freedoms such as freedoms of assembly and expression, Palestinian solidarity activism on Canadian university campuses is increasingly subject to suppression through accusations of ‘antisemitism’, particularly when such activism involves ‘criticism of Israeli state policies’ (Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2012: 323)—a disparity made stark when contrasted with institutional supportive responses to Ukrainian solidarity (Hagigi, 2024; Theobald, 2024). The university’s performative commitment to diversity functions as a liberal veil obscuring racialized exclusions. Students studying human rights principles while being disciplined for applying them to Palestine experience the epistemic agony of institutional hypocrisy—the violent dissonance between theoretical ideals and material practices.

The political potency of this agony becomes clear through Sara Ahmed’s (2014) and Judith Butler’s (2009) work on grievability. Borrowing the notion of ‘war frames’ from Butler, I believe that university’s ‘war frames’ determine which lives merit recognition, which pains deserve acknowledgment. When Darcy Harris’ (2021) ‘assumptive world’ of academic freedom and justice collapses for racialized scholars and students, the resulting political grief transforms into epistemic agony—not as passive suffering but as what Palestinian scholar Ashjān Ajūr (2021) identifies as revolutionary subjectivity that encompasses mind, body, and spirit. This transformation echoes Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s (2017: 239) analysis of Indigenous resistance to state cooptation of grief, where she warns against therapeutic solutions that individualise collective trauma while maintaining settler structures. I echo Simpson’s insight that, agony in this article, is not a space where individual healing unfolds, but rather a site of struggle and nonviolent change. Agony functions most powerfully in a collective environment; it requires a shared memory to transform pain into nonviolent resistance—much like the ‘shock resistant’ communities Naomi Klein (2007: 459) envisions in the aftermath of systemic trauma.

Hannah Proctor (2024) demonstrates that suffering and organising are not opposites; rather, they coexist. In this meaning, political resistance must accommodate not just urgency, but also patience and recovery from trauma—not through (neo)liberal models of wellness, but through collective care. This collective care could manifest as activism.

Epistemic agony thus represents both the wound of colonial knowledge regimes and the potential for their disruption. It names the violence of having to argue for one’s humanity in the oppressor’s language while also constituting what Mignolo (2011) would call epistemic disobedience—the refusal of those very terms of recognition.

More than a psychological state alone, epistemic agony is a political resource that helps us, as Proctor (2024: 10) urges, channel emotions into action. Activist Malkia Devich-Cyril (2021) echoes this call, urging us to ‘increase the elasticity

of our responses to loss'. Given the context of Canada and its history in using the politics of grief to undermine Indigenous painful experiences, Simpson (2017: 238) notes that people who are suffering should refuse mere victimhood, and instead enact themselves 'as revolutionaries fighting a transformative campaign against colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism through everyday acts of resistance and resurgence'. These voices challenge us to ask: What responses are available to those who agonise? What forms of resistance, care, and hope building can emerge from such agony?

## EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE AND NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

This article approaches its subject through the intertwined angles of arrival—as a doctoral student shaped by displacement, diaspora, and transnational activism—and departure—as one who resists remaining within the limits of Canadian politics frameworks in the time of genocide. This dual orientation enables a critical reading of university not merely as a conventional site of policy and governance, but as a contested space of belonging, refusal, counter-knowledge, and epistemic struggle—where Indigenous thinkers and critical materialists actively dismantle dominant paradigms (see Todd, 2017).

Counter-knowledge—a notion that is close to the idea of counter-hegemony for Gramsci (Bates, 1975)—emerges from a tent, from the streets, everyday nonviolent resistance, and not necessarily in the classroom. Activist Aziz Choudry (2011: 175) refers to this as knowledge 'from the ground up'. His work highlights a critical question: How do social struggles influence academic theory? Or, put differently, how does on-campus activism shape our ways of knowing and being? Addressing such a question necessitates foregrounding the importance of reflective practice as integral to the praxis of *sumud*. Jeremy Rinker and Chelsey Jonason (2014: 163-64) note that 'traditional social science pedagogies too often keep theory and practice separate' and argue that students on university campuses require '[a] pedagogy focused on reflective practice [that] is both critical and discerning of effective local change management and necessary for applied learning'.

Drawing on John Holst's 'the pedagogy of mobilization', Choudry insists that social movements are important and often overlooked sites of knowledge production, existing outside formal academic institutions. Importantly, Choudry's intervention is not a call to prioritise practice at the expense of classical theory; instead, it affirms the view held by many practitioners that theory and practice are inextricably linked.

Choudry (2011), Rinker and Jonason (2014) critique the academic tendency to abstract theory from practice, noting that intellectual work is not the sole domain

of scholars and creating change cannot be learned in books. Too often, academics neglect the theory generated within movements themselves, focusing instead on conceptual definitions that bear little relevance to (non-)collective actors. The grief following Choudry's passing was felt deeply within activist and academic communities (Rovics, 2021), itself a testament to how intellectual and emotional labour from the margins can produce profound epistemic and political shifts.

Faced with the dual burden of institutional censorship and the emotional toll of epistemic violence, Palestinian students, their allies, and critical scholars across Canadian campuses have increasingly turned to what Simpson (2013: 35) highlights 'generative refusal', or what Mignolo (2011) calls epistemic disobedience. This nonviolent resistance confronts what scholars of settler colonialism (e.g., Tuck & Yang, 2012) identify as the institutional erasure of subaltern narratives (including Palestinian), while embodying what Moten and Harney (2013) term the 'undercommons': a space of fugitive learning that persists despite institutional repression. Other scholars move beyond the theoretical dimension of such disobedience by introducing the concept of 'epistemic activism'. Medina (2023: 62) argues that epistemic activism—whether civil or uncivil—is 'directed against epistemic violence'.

Mignolo (2011) conceptualises epistemic disobedience as a necessary response to coloniality. He argues that critique alone is insufficient; what is required is a process of delinking from Eurocentric epistemologies—to refuse their coercive authority and to construct alternatives. This involves consciously breaking the rules of dominant knowledge systems in order to make space for marginalised epistemologies, such as Gaza encampments. As Mignolo (2011: 45) puts it, '*desprenderse*' means epistemic de-linking or, in other words, epistemic disobedience, and only through such disobedience can we open decolonial paths—plural projects that validate the knowledge of those at the 'receiving end' of colonialism. Medina (2023: 62-77)

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argues that (un)civil disobedience—manifested through confrontational politics or epistemic activism—is essential for ‘breaking silences’, ‘disrupting patterns of social invisibility’, ‘waking people up from their epistemic and political slumbers’, ‘stepping on people’s toes’, and ‘generat[ing] epistemic friction with dominant’.

Epistemic disobedience thus stands in direct opposition to epistemic violence. This disobedience needs a driver—it meant to be agony in this paper. Where epistemic violence erases and silences, epistemic disobedience asserts and recreates. Epistemic disobedience constructs counter meanings to epistemic violence. For students and scholars, particularly in Canadian universities, this practice involves refusing the marginalisation of Palestinian narratives, underscoring story-telling, building hope, dreaming, and asserting those narratives through unconventional, and often risky, pedagogical and activist methods.

A prominent example of epistemic disobedience is the creation of alternative knowledge spaces. The ‘People’s University for Palestine’<sup>14</sup> and ‘Faculty for Palestine’<sup>15</sup> are emblematic of this impulse. Denied on-campus and feeling censored all the time, students established encampments as pedagogical spaces—teaching and learning in open-air assemblies about Palestinian history, Indigenous resistance, women’s rights, decolonisation, and liberation. In these spaces, they enacted what decolonial scholars such as Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) and Anzaldúa (1987) describe as border thinking—the practice of thinking from the margins, beyond institutional boundaries. This is precisely what this article means by earlier referring to Kuokkanen’s (2007) critique of the formation of academic disciplines as mechanisms of control and as strict boundaries around what counts as within the true.

Each teach-in, discussion circle, or lecture conducted under tents was a refusal of institutional epistemic authority. Participants inverted the traditional power dynamic: rather than pleading for institutional recognition, they brought knowledge directly to the people. Mignolo (2011: 45) clearly articulates that ‘epistemic disobedience takes us to a different place, to a different beginning’, grounding knowledge in lived experience rather than institutional approval.

Even after these encampments were forcibly dismantled, the idea endured. New chapters of the People’s University emerged in cities across Turtle Island, and digital channels enabled the continuation of grassroots pedagogy. Another mode of epistemic disobedience lies in the formation of solidarity coalitions that bridge university and community, local and global. Student organisers have aligned their movements with broader decolonial and justice-oriented struggles, including Indigenous resistance in Canada and care workers’ activism, which Ethel Tungohan (2023) calls care activism.

These cross-movement solidarities, or intersectionality, enact epistemic disobedience by transgressing colonial silos of knowledge. Solidarities emphasise

that '[i]f Canada wanted reconciliation, it would stand with Palestine' (Sioufi, 2024). Solidarities reject the framing of Palestine as 'foreign' to Canadian politics, instead positioning Palestinian liberation as inextricable from domestic anticolonial commitments. Events and academic programming that connect settler colonialism in Canada to the Israeli form of it in Palestine challenge university administrations wary of such comparisons (Abdou, 2023). This reframing insists that Canada's support for Israel and its propaganda cannot be separated from its own colonial history; a nation cannot apologise for colonialism on its own land while supporting genocide on another.

Epistemic disobedience also manifests in scholarly production and pedagogy (Abu Samra, 2025). Professors committed to decolonial and critical methodologies have found creative ways to incorporate marginalised perspectives into their teaching. Assigning Palestinian authors in Canadian politics courses, supervising research projects centred on Palestinian voices, and publishing in open-access or independent outlets all subvert the epistemic gatekeeping of mainstream academia. These efforts embody what Escobar (2020: 38), Maldonado-Torres et al. (2018: 78), and Grosfoguel (2013: 88) call pluriversality—a multiplicity of epistemic sites that challenge the fiction of a single, universal (Eurocentric) truth. Each op-ed, blog post, teach-in, and classroom dialogue constitutes a small but meaningful act of epistemic defiance. It is knowledge for the people, by the people.

At the heart of these efforts is a refusal to succumb to epistemic agony. The agony remains—students continue to feel the pain of being surveilled, marginalised, or labelled as threats—but it becomes fuel for nonviolent action. Agony is transformed into political agency, fostering a culture of anti-war nonviolent resistance that calls for divestment from war profiteers, the boycott of Israeli products, and the disclosure of university investments (Canadian Federation of Students 2024)—actions that are far from merely rhetorical; they are epistemic interventions rooted in agony as resistance. Students, aligning with Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, refuse an education that demands silence in the face of injustice, choosing instead a pedagogy rooted in solidarity, truth-telling, and critical thought.

Students and academic staff draw inspiration from Said, Fanon, and Simpson—scholars whose work lives at the intersection of theory, nonviolent resistance, and liberation. This kind of education is not easily accredited, but it honours the liberatory traditions of critical scholarship. For example, and importantly, some academic staff and university officials have joined these efforts. At the University of Alberta, for example, then Associate Dean of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the university of Alberta Loveless resigned in protest over using 'militari[s]ed police against unarmed students', publicly condemning the betrayal of academic values (Bartko, 2024). Such actions carry risks—by facing backlash—but they



also demonstrate that epistemic courage is contagious.

When students witness academic staff taking principled stands, they feel validated in their own resistance. Conversely, when academic staff observe students non-violently occupying quads and classrooms to pursue justice, they align their theories with action. In this reciprocal process, a philosophy of nonviolent confrontation forms—one that transcends institutional roles, reclaims knowledge from the margins, and breathes life into the promise of epistemic emancipation.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL UNIVERSITY PRAXIS

The interplay of epistemic violence/agony/disobedience within university spaces is not merely an academic concern but a microcosm of broader political struggles in settler-colonial Canada. These dynamics reveal how epistemic injustice in higher education is structurally entangled with Canada's domestic and international colonial commitments. If Canadian universities are to fulfil their purported role as sites of truth and reconciliation, they must actively resist—rather than reproduce—the epistemic logics of the settler state. The case of Palestine in Canadian academia is a test of 'multiculturalism' and 'agnostic democracy' (also known as agonistic pluralism), functioning as a critical site of nonviolent confrontation that exposes the tensions between institutional complicity and the imperative of decolonial rupture.

A genuine movement towards epistemic justice necessitates an unflinching engagement with settler colonialism as an ongoing structure, not a historical event (Wolfe, 2006). Canada's alignment with Israel's oppression of Palestinians is not an anomaly but a continuation of its own colonial logic—one that renders Indigenous and Palestinian dispossession as mutually reinforcing processes that extinguish the global hope of decolonisation. The state's treatment of Palestinian rights as a geopolitical contingency mirrors the epistemic suppression witnessed in universities, where scholarship and activism challenging colonial narratives are disciplined under the guise of supposed neutrality. The recent violent dismantling of student encampments at the University of Alberta (Adkin, 2025), enacted in collusion with state authorities, exemplifies this repression. Such actions betray what Indigenous peoples regard as the land's role as 'a generative site for solidarity and organi[s]ing'—a space that calls upon 'communit[ies] to host a diversity of activists from around the world to engage in land-based practices [...] and cultivate a much-needed place of refuge and regeneration for a group of worn comrades passionately committed to the intersecting communities they serve and to the collective project of liberation' (Coulthard, 2025: 151-52).

Decolonial theory provides a framework for reimaging the university beyond



its colonial entanglements. Mignolo's (2011) concept of delinking demands that institutions critically interrogate their epistemic and material dependencies—whether in funding, curricula, or governance—on structures that perpetuate colonial violence. A decolonial audit of university partnerships, for instance, would expose 'how can the university become an ethical institution vis-à-vis its extractive logics that reproduced North/South divides? Is it possible to make universities realise how they are implicated in these logics and to move from there into the promotion of forms of epistemic justice?' (Icaza & Vázquez, 2018: 112). Following Grosfoguel (2013), this necessitates a radical pluriversality—one that decentres Western epistemic hegemony and affirms Indigenous, Palestinian, and other subjugated knowledge as equally legitimate.

Nonviolent confrontation also demands solidarity across struggles (see Coulthard, 2025), where shared nonviolent resistance to epistemic violence becomes a collective project. The resonances between Indigenous and Palestinian movements—evident in joint student mobilisations, comparative analyses of land dispossession, and collaborative decolonial pedagogies—demonstrate how epistemic disobedience operates as a transnational praxis. Canadian universities, also, must actively foster these intersections by integrating comparative settler-colonial studies, protecting cross-movement organising, and resisting state interference in such alliances. These efforts align with Lewis Gordon's (2019) notion of a decolonial horizon of philosophy—a futurity in which liberation is not fragmented but collectively pursued through an ethics of mutual recognition and shared struggle. Justice, in this sense, is not passively achieved but forcibly extracted through sustained nonviolent confrontation with power, through agony.

Ultimately, transforming Canadian academia requires institutionalising an ethos of *sumud*, or, in other words, hope (Kabel, 2024), against colonial erasure. The university must redefine itself not as a servant of state and capital but as a site of radical truth-telling and solidarity. As Angela Davis (2023, as cited in *Al-Jazeera*, 2023) states, Palestine functions as a litmus test: in the context of Canada, this means that if Canadian academia cannot defend the right to study, teach,

The university cannot remain a wall. The choice is clear: either perpetuate epistemic coloniality or embrace the nonviolent confrontational praxis necessary for liberation. The latter is not merely an intellectual commitment—it is a moral imperative. Justice in Canada remains incomplete until it is justice for all who resist its colonial grip.

and protest Palestinian liberation without repression, it reveals its incapacity to confront Canada's own colonial foundations.

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## NOTES

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- 1 Means catastrophe in Arabic.
- 2 According to findings from Amnesty International and the United Nations, Israel has been committing acts of genocide in Gaza since 7 October 2024. For further details, see Amnesty International's report <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/> and the United Nations press release <https://press.un.org/en/2024/gapal1473.doc.htm>
- 3 *Sumud* in Palestinian culture carries hope. It is important to note that *Sumud* can be understood as an analytical framework, a lived practice, and a response to structures of coloniality. In this article, I focus particularly on *Sumud* as a lived and collective practice. I draw from what is referred to in Palestine studies as the 'Philosophy of Confrontation Behind Bars'—a foundational text written in Arabic in 1982. This philosophy emerged as both a rejection of mass incarceration and an affirmation of collective struggle and steadfastness under conditions of extreme repression. A related account is offered in English by Lena Meari (2014) in her article '*Sumud*: A Palestinian Philosophy of Confrontation in Colonial Prisons', published in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, where she analyses *Sumud* as a decolonial praxis shaped within the carceral context.
- 4 A traditional Palestinian and Middle Eastern headdress.
- 5 A key theoretical distinction can be drawn between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in their conceptualisation of epistemic violence.
- 6 J Kēhaulani Kauanui (2020) emphasises the diverse genealogy of settler colonial studies, arguing that the field did not originate solely from Patrick Wolfe's work in the Australian context. She highlights earlier contributions such as Palestinian scholar Faye Sayegh's 1965 analysis, 'Zionist Settler Colonialism' (291). This historiographical disparity invites critical reflection on the uneven recognition and valuation of knowledge produced by colonised peoples within global academic discourse.
- 7 It is important to note that some critics, such as Yves Winter (2012), have argued that Johan Galtung—the 'father of peace studies'—offered a framework that is often 'broad and vague'. Winter contends that Galtung largely neglected the intersections of slavery,

- racism, sexism, colonialism, class domination, and other forms of structural disparity in his conceptualisation of structural violence (195). Furthermore, Winter emphasises that Galtung's framework was shaped by specific peace traditions, and that what renders a particular form of violence 'structural' is not its invisibility *per se*, but rather its intergenerational transmission (201). See also Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall (2011) for a broader critique of Galtung's influence on peace studies.
- 8 Butler (2020) also advocates for an understanding of violence that extends beyond interpersonal conflict.
  - 9 I reviewed Patel's book *No Study Without Struggle: Confronting Settler Colonialism in Higher Education* in the 'Journal of Transdisciplinary Peace Praxis' 's Eleventh Issue (Vol. 6, No. 1: 142-46) focuses on peace pedagogy and practice.
  - 10 Refolution means revolution in movement and reform in change, as Bayat (2021) argues.
  - 11 For example, Bufacchi (2005) argues against reducing the concept of violence to two narrow categories: direct and intentional 'destructive force' or the mere 'violation of rights'.
  - 12 Menakem (2017, 20-21) argues that 'clean pain hurts like hell. But it enables our bodies to grow through our difficulties, develop nuanced skills, and mend our trauma'.
  - 13 The concept of the social contract refers to the idea that individuals collectively and voluntarily form a society to protect one another's rights and freedoms. However, Charles Mills (1997) critiques traditional social contract theories for their racial invisibility, arguing that such frameworks obscure the fact that racial exploitation is a foundational element of most modern societies.
  - 14 Student-led movement for the total liberation of Palestine. It demands Treaty 6 universities (universities in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada)—particularly University of Alberta and MacEwan University—divest from genocide.
  - 15 Faculty for Palestine (F4P) is a Canada-wide network of academics committed to advancing the struggle for Palestinian liberation, justice, and equality through the academic sector. F4P is founded on anti-racist, anti-colonial, social justice principles. F4P opposes Israeli apartheid, occupation, and settler colonialism. F4P specifically organises on academic freedom, freedom of expression, and boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. See their online homepage: <https://faculty4palestine.ca/>

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# The Palestine Question and the Three Phases of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Abdullah Kiran

## ABSTRACT

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 up to the attacks carried out by Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023, the Palestine question has undergone three significant phases. These phases can be defined in terms of their historical periods as follows: 1948–1993, 1993–2024, and the post-2024 period. Each of these phases is characterised by the prominence of different actors in the Palestinian issue. During the first phase, the primary actors were the Arab states, which waged wars and made decisions on behalf of the Palestinian people. Within this period, three major wars occurred—in 1948, 1967, and 1973—all of which ended in defeat for the Arab states. Following the Oslo Peace Accords signed in 1993, most Arab states, with the exception of Syria (which largely aligned with Iran), began to withdraw from direct confrontation and instead focused on resolving the conflict through diplomatic means. From 1993 until December 2024—when the Assad regime in Syria fell—Iran emerged as the most uncompromising and steadfast defender of the Palestinian cause. Formerly bordering Israel through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Iran’s strategic position weakened after the fall of Assad’s regime in Syria and the severe blows sustained by Hezbollah in Lebanon, leading to a loss of initiative in the Palestinian issue. The fall of the Assad regime marked the beginning of a new phase in the conflict. In this current period, the primary actor is no longer the Arab states or Iran, but Hamas, which has been in active warfare with Israel since 7 October 2023.

## KEYWORDS

Palestine, Israel, Arabs, Iran, War

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout their ancient history, the Jewish people experienced various exiles and returns. After centuries of hardship and immense suffering, the Jewish people declared the establishment of an independent state on 15 May 1948 in the western part of the territory historically referred to as Palestine. While the declaration of statehood marked

the resolution of the so-called 'Jewish Question', it simultaneously inaugurated a new era defined by the Palestine issue and prolonged Arab-Israeli conflicts. In academic discourse, the term 'Arab-Israeli wars' is commonly used. However, the nature and actors of these conflicts have changed over time. From the outbreak of hostilities in 1948 until the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, the wars over Palestinian territory were waged primarily between Arab states and Israel, with clearly identifiable state actors. After 1993, a qualitative shift occurred in the Arab-Israeli conflict, with Iran emerging as a central actor. While several Arab states began normalising diplomatic relations with Israel through agreements such as the Abraham Accords in 2020, Iran actively opposed these accords and supported militant groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah in an effort to undermine them.

This article aims to analyse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by considering the historical background of the Palestine issue, and it also seeks to offer projections regarding possible future developments.

To begin, I would like to make a brief observation. Within the Islamic world, there exists a phenomenon of anti-Jewish sentiment—ranging from animosity to outright hatred. This phenomenon, with deep historical roots, often creates a major misconception: namely, that every opponent or enemy of Jews is automatically a friend of the Palestinians or a defender of the Palestinian cause. In reality, however, this is far from accurate. Moreover, the Arabs are not a people fragmented and sacrificed by imperialism in the early 20th century in the way that, for example, the Kurds were. Today, the Arab world comprises 22 independent states, all of which enjoy high levels of representation in international institutions and the global diplomatic arena. Each Arab country holds individual membership in key international organisations, including the United Nations, and thus benefits from considerable representational advantages. The total landmass of the 22 Arab countries is approximately 13,868,171 square kilometres. Within this vast territory, the disputed area of historic Palestine covers merely 6,000 square kilometres. The most recent war in Gaza, which began with the October 7 attacks, has been taking place in an area of roughly 360 square kilometres.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRST PHASE

One of the most pivotal developments that fuelled the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 20th and 21st centuries was the convening of the First Zionist Congress, held on 29 August 1897 in Basel, Switzerland, under the leadership of Austrian lawyer and journalist Theodor Herzl. The Congress brought together 197 delegates from various countries, many of whom were seeing Herzl for the first time (Herzl, 2021: 44). In his 1896 pamphlet *The Jewish State*, Herzl argued that the so-called

'Jewish Question' could only be resolved through the establishment of a Jewish state. Without a sovereign homeland, he claimed, Jews would continue to face persecution, oppression, humiliation, dispossession, and exile. At the Congress, Herzl sought to communicate these ideas to the Jewish intellectual elite and financial circles. The violent pogroms in Russia and Romania in 1882 and the Dreyfus Affair in France in 1894 had already demonstrated that, without statehood, Jews could not find lasting security or recognition, and that their wealth and status could be arbitrarily taken from them.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews in Europe were subjected to severe discrimination. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, presided over by Pope Innocent III, it was decreed that Jews should wear distinctive clothing to set them apart from Christians. Thereafter, Jews were required to wear badges or pointed hats. In many regions, Jews

were accused of disrespecting their Christian hosts and were widely blamed for misfortunes, such as the Black Death, based on superstitious beliefs. In numerous European cities, Jews were confined to ghettos. The first such ghetto was established in Venice in 1516. Similar Jewish quarters existed in cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Naples, Rome, Florence, and Prague. In Venice, the gates of the ghetto were locked at sunset, and Jews who left were required to wear coloured hats to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population (Levy, 2016).

By the late 19th century, systematic pressures on the Jewish population in Russia had become increasingly unbearable. During the reigns of Tsars Alexander III (1881-1894) and Nicholas II (1894-1917), pogroms were carried out against Jewish communities, often with the tacit encouragement of the Russian government. As a result of these policies of repression and violence, millions of Eastern European Jews left their homelands and emigrated, primarily to the United States, but also to other countries (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016: 228).

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In fact, Jewish emigration from Russia to the United States had begun as early as 1820. Between 1820 and 1880, approximately 60,000 Jews migrated to the US, while between 1881 and 1890, this number exceeded 265,000. By 1914, the number of Jews who had arrived in the United States had reached 2 million, accounting for roughly 6% of all European emigration to America. This Jewish migrant population constituted about 14-15% of the total Jewish population in Europe (Di Palma & Rossoliński-Liebe, 2021). While many of the Jewish emigrants from Russia settled in the United States, Britain, Canada, and South Africa, a small number also migrated to Palestine. Undoubtedly, Palestine held a unique symbolic and historical significance.

It can be argued that modern Jewish nationalism—which views Palestine as both an ancestral and national homeland and places strong emphasis on it—originated in Russia and flourished there. Following the wave of persecutions in the 1880s, various groups emerged with the aim of directing Jewish migration towards Palestine. These groups sought to encourage Jews to migrate to Palestine and supported those who made the decision to return. In 1884, several of these organisations united under a central umbrella group known as the Lovers of Zion (Hovevei Zion). This organisation sponsored small agricultural settlements in Palestine. However, due to financial limitations, their success was partial. Despite these challenges, the Lovers of Zion played a major role as a settlement movement in raising historical consciousness regarding Palestine.

It can be confidently stated that the Lovers of Zion organisation laid the first stones on the path towards the establishment of modern Israel. In 1882, the same year that anti-Jewish pogroms reached their peak, a seminal treatise titled *Autoemancipation* was written by Russian Jew Leon Pinsker (d. 1891), a work now regarded as foundational to political Zionism. In this manifesto-like text, Pinsker argued that, regardless of what laws might proclaim, anti-Semitism had been deeply internalised by European societies and that Jews would never be treated as equals. According to Pinsker, the only viable path to liberation from this permanent outsider status was for Jews to establish a state of their own, where they could exercise self-determination. Rather than emphasising religion, Pinsker focused on national identity, and he did not insist that the Jewish state had to be established specifically in Palestine. His message resonated strongly among young Jews in Russia and sparked a national awakening. By the 1890s, various Jewish groups had begun concentrating on solutions rooted in national identity. Although Pinsker ignited the initial spark and laid one of the foundational stones, Zionism had not yet developed into a fully coordinated political movement (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016: 228).

In the process of Jewish state-building, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) is widely recognised as the founding father of modern Zionism. With his extraordinary

energy and determination, Herzl succeeded in transforming the pre-existing ideas of Zionism into a coherent international political movement. Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Budapest, Herzl was raised in an assimilated environment. After graduating from the Faculty of Law at the University of Vienna, he worked for the progressive Viennese newspaper *Die Neue Freie Presse*. As a correspondent, he had the opportunity to travel across various cities in western Europe. Like Leon Pinsker, Herzl came to the conclusion that anti-Semitism was a deeply rooted prejudice that could not be eradicated through legal reforms alone. After analysing the conditions of Jewish communities across Europe, Herzl authored *The Jewish State* in 1896, a work that laid the ideological foundations of political Zionism. According to Herzl, Jews constituted a nation, yet lacked a sovereign state in which they could freely express their national culture. A Jewish national identity existed, but it had no corresponding political structure. Herzl argued that the only way to eliminate anti-Semitism was through the establishment of a Jewish state in which Jews would hold political sovereignty. As long as Jews remained stateless, they would be confined to a perpetually subordinate status (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016: 228).

Table 1. Jewish Immigration in Each Aliya

First aliya 1881-1900	25,000
Second aliya 1904-1913	35,000
Third aliya 1919-1923	37,000
Fourth aliya 1924-1928	70,000
Fifth aliya 1932 -1939	200,000

Source: Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, p.76

It is worthwhile to briefly address the origins of the term Zionism, which is sometimes misrepresented or misunderstood. The word *Zionism* derives from ‘Mount Zion’ in Jerusalem. In the Torah, the term ‘Zion’ is used repeatedly to refer to the city of Jerusalem. Indeed, Jerusalem—*Yerushalayim*, the ‘City of Peace’—was established upon Mount Zion. Zionism can thus be defined as modern Jewish nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Zionists aimed to unite Jews, who had been dispersed around the world due to exile, in the land of the Bible (Palestine), to establish a modern nation-state (Murphy, 2005: 270). Early Zionists often disregarded the Arab population living in Palestine, or assumed that even if Arabs remained there, they would eventually accept Jewish sovereignty.

The Jewish migration to Palestine began before the First Zionist Congress, particularly with the influx of Jews fleeing Russia and Romania in 1882. The Basel Congress later asserted that migration must culminate in statehood and that establishing a state was essential for a dignified and secure Jewish existence.



The Jewish migration to Palestine began before the First Zionist Congress, particularly with the influx of Jews fleeing Russia and Romania in 1882. The Basel Congress later asserted that migration must culminate in statehood and that establishing a state was essential for a dignified and secure Jewish existence. From the very beginning, Theodor Herzl understood that the dream of a Jewish state could not be realised without the support of Jewish capital. Though it was not easy, support from the Jewish bourgeoisie was eventually secured. The Balfour Declaration, issued in 1917, is considered the first official document on the path towards Jewish statehood.

From the very beginning, Theodor Herzl understood that the dream of a Jewish state could not be realised without the support of Jewish capital. He believed that Jews possessed both the material and intellectual capacity to create a model state (Herzl: p.83). Following the Congress, efforts to engage wealthy Jews intensified, particularly targeting families like the Rothschilds. Though it was not easy, support from the Jewish bourgeoisie was eventually secured. The Balfour Declaration, issued in 1917, is considered the first official document on the path towards Jewish statehood. British Foreign Secretary Arthur J Balfour addressed the declaration to Lord Rothschild, one of the most prominent representatives of Jewish capital at the time. One of its most significant outcomes was that the British Empire, then the dominant global power, recognised Palestine as the national home of the Jewish people and endorsed their right to establish a state on that territory.

When the Balfour Declaration was issued, the Arabs had already revolted against the Ottoman Empire, and Mecca had fallen on 12 June 1916. Nevertheless, British Prime Minister Lloyd George believed that cooperating with the leaders of the Zionist movement would serve the interests of the British Empire. Initially, however, the British were not particularly enthusiastic about the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine under British

protection. Chaim Weizmann, a Russian-born Jew who had later settled in Britain and emerged as a leading figure in the Zionist movement, had known Lord Balfour since as early as 1906. At first, Lord Balfour attempted to persuade Weizmann to accept Uganda as a potential Jewish homeland. However, Weizmann firmly rejected this proposal, insisting that the Jewish state must be

established in Palestine. The Zionist movement, which was highly organised and influential in Britain at the time, successfully carried out lobbying efforts before the British government. Chaim Weizmann, a close friend of *Manchester Guardian* editor C P Scott, was able to meet with Prime Minister Lloyd George multiple times through Scott's mediation and also secured the support and sympathy of Foreign Secretary Sir Mark Sykes (Al-Rodhan, Herd & Watanabe, 2015: 66).

Leading figures of the Zionist movement likened the Balfour Declaration to the memorable patronage extended by the Persian King Cyrus to the Jewish people. Even Nobel laureate and former Israeli President Shimon Peres regarded the Cyrus Declaration as a precursor to the Balfour Declaration, symbolising the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland (Kiran, Bilgi-Bellek, 2008).

## THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF JORDAN

The Balfour Declaration triggered fear and distrust among the Arab population, who were concerned that their demands would be disregarded in the post-war settlement. Certainly, it was not only the Arabs who harboured concerns; Jews, too, had serious reservations. By dividing the historical territory of Palestine, Britain would initially disappoint the Jews before the Arabs.

Broadly defined, historical Palestine included the eastern banks of the Jordan River and the entire territory historically known as Judea and Samaria (today's West Bank).<sup>2</sup> However, in 1921, the British divided Palestine into two separate political entities and established a monarchy—unrelated to the local population—over 75% of Palestine's territory. The Emirate of Transjordan, established on the eastern side of the Jordan River, was later renamed 'Jordan'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the territory of Jordan became part of the Palestine Mandate but was exempted from the obligations of the Balfour Declaration (Cleveland, 2008:187).

In a letter to Churchill in early 1921, Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann argued that it was a grave injustice to deprive Jewish settlers of the most fertile lands around the Sea of Galilee and the upper Jordan Valley, claiming that the de facto situation contradicted the spirit of the Balfour Declaration (Fromkin, 1989: 513-14). A historic document submitted by the British government to the United Nations in 1947 stated the following regarding the partitioning of the geographical territory of historical Palestine: 'The northern frontier of Palestine was determined in accordance with an Anglo-French Convention of the 23rd December, 1920, and its eastern frontier by virtue of the recognition, in 1923, of the existence of an independent Government in Trans-Jordan' (United Nations, 1947)

### Map: Palestine During the Monarchy



Source: 'Library of Congress Online Catalogue', New York: G W and C B Colton & Co [1895?] (1,678,776)

Nevertheless, the Jewish leaders of the time did not strongly oppose the plan to administratively separate Jordan from Palestine. This was likely because the United Kingdom needed to reach an agreement with France regarding the borders of Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. It is probable that the British had persuaded the Jewish leaders that this arrangement would be temporary.

Therefore, the Palestine we refer to today is what is geographically known as Western Palestine. After the largest portion of historical Palestine was transferred

to Jordan, the territory over which Jews and Palestinians would fight corresponded roughly to the size of the US state of New Jersey. Yet, this land was far from ordinary. For Jews, Palestine is the historical homeland of the Jewish faith, and this heritage can only be secured through the continued existence of the State of Israel. For Muslims, Palestine has been a symbolic target of the West since the Crusades, as part of a broader attempt to erase Islam and its grandeur. For Christians, Palestine is the land where Jesus was born and the site of Christianity's holiest shrines. In truth, Palestine is a sacred land for all three Abrahamic religions, and none of them is willing to relinquish their claims. Reaching a solution that satisfies all sides remains extraordinarily difficult (Palmer, 2007: 88).

## CHURCHILL, WHITE PAPER(S) AND THE SHIFT IN BRITISH POLICY

Although initially sympathetic towards Zionism, Churchill later recalibrated his stance to prioritise British strategic interests. He classified Jews into three political categories and believed that establishing a Jewish state in Palestine under British auspices would be beneficial (Fromkin, 2001: 519). At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Zionist delegation led by Chaim Weizmann clarified that they did not seek an autonomous Jewish government but rather a mandate administration that would facilitate the annual immigration of 70,000-80,000 Jews and allow Hebrew-language education to cultivate a Jewish national identity (United Nations, 1947). However, growing Arab resistance in Palestine during the early 1920s prompted Britain to pursue a more balanced policy. Through the White Papers of 1922 and 1930, Britain limited Jewish immigration based on the country's economic capacity and emphasised that Palestine was not intended to become an exclusively Jewish state (Gilbert, 1975; United Nations, 1947). By the 1922 census, Palestine's population was about 752,000, including 84,000 Jews, though the Jewish population was rapidly increasing due to immigration (United Nations, 1947).

Between 1920 and 1929, roughly 100,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine. This trend accelerated significantly after the Nazi rise to power in 1933, bringing the Jewish population to approximately 384,000 by 1936 (United Nations, 1947). Concurrently, significant emphasis was placed on Hebrew-language education, culminating in the founding of the Hebrew University in 1925. The 1939 White Paper marked a pivotal shift in British policy, declaring that any further expansion of the Jewish National Home would hinge on Arab consent and explicitly rejecting the notion of transforming Palestine into a Jewish state. It also introduced restrictions on Arab land sales to Jews (United Nations, 1947). Yet, this policy satisfied neither side; the Zionist Congress of 1939 categorically rejected the

White Paper, denying its both legal and moral validity (United Nations, 1947).

### THE 1936-39 ARAB REVOLT

Arab nationalists who opposed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine launched a series of actions between 1936 and 1939 targeting both Jewish settlers and British forces. In 1936, all Arab organisations and factions came together to form the *Arab Higher Committee*, selecting Grand Mufti Amin al-Husseini as their leader. This organisation, which advocated for Palestinian independence, declared a general strike and refused to pay taxes in an effort to halt Jewish immigration to Palestine. Over time, the strike escalated into a full-scale revolt that lasted until 1939. The events of 1936 heightened Palestinian awareness of their national identity and brought the Palestine issue to a pan-Arab dimension for the first time, turning it into a cause of concern across the Arab world (Choueiri, 2000: 128).

As violence intensified, the British removed Amin al-Husseini from his position as Mufti and declared the *Arab Higher Committee* illegal. In response, al-Husseini fled to Lebanon in 1937, and two years later escaped again—this time to Iraq. In 1941, he participated in an anti-British uprising in Iraq and eventually sought refuge in Nazi Germany (Goldschmidt & Davidson, 2010: 290).

To investigate the Arab revolt that began in 1936 and continued until 1939, a Royal Commission was appointed in August 1936 under the chairmanship of Lord Peel. In the report submitted by the Peel Commission members to the British government, it was stated that finding a solution in Palestine that would satisfy both Arabs and Jews was impossible. The report declared: 'To put in one sentence, we cannot—in Palestine as it is now—both concede the Arab claim to self-government and secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home.' The Peel Commission proposed that the British Mandate in Palestine be terminated and recommended the establishment of an independent Jewish state in the northern and western parts of Palestine, with the remaining territory to be annexed to the Kingdom of Jordan (United Nations, 1947).

### THE FIRST PHASE OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

#### *The British Withdrawal of Palestine*

When Britain, which had governed Palestine under a Mandate since the end of World War I, referred the Palestine issue to the United Nations in February 1947, the UN established UNSCOP (United Nations Special Committee on Palestine) to find a permanent solution. The committee consisted of representatives from 11 member states, including Iran. After five weeks of fieldwork in Palestine, the

committee presented its report to the UN in August 1947.

Two separate proposals were drafted. The majority report, supported by seven countries, proposed a two-state solution: one state for Jews and one for Arabs. It also recommended placing Jerusalem under international administration. The minority report, prepared by Iran, India, and Yugoslavia, proposed the creation of a 'United Federal State of Palestine', composed of Arab and Jewish federal entities. These entities would have internal autonomy, but there would be a single Palestinian nationality and citizenship.

On 29 November 1947, the UN General Assembly voted in favour of partitioning Western Palestine and establishing two states in the region.



On 29 November 1947, out of the 56 countries that participated in the UN vote, 33 voted in favour of the two-state solution, 13 voted against it, and 10



On 29 November 1947, out of the 56 countries that participated in the UN vote, 33 voted in favour of the two-state solution, 13 voted against it, and 10 abstained. According to the UN resolution, the Jewish state would be established in the Negev Desert, the coastal strip between Tel Aviv and Haifa, and parts of Galilee. The Arab state would be established in the West Bank, Jaffa, and other parts of Galilee.

abstained. According to the UN resolution, the Jewish state would be established in the Negev Desert, the coastal strip between Tel Aviv and Haifa, and parts of Galilee. The Arab state would be established in the West Bank, Jaffa, and other parts of Galilee. Jerusalem—home to the historic Temple of Solomon (the Western Wall) and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, both considered sacred by Jews and Muslims—was to be placed under United Nations trusteeship (Friedman, 1995: 14).

With Resolution 181 (the Partition Plan), the UN aimed to satisfy both Palestinians and Jews. In reality, neither side was entirely pleased with the outcome. However, the Jews accepted the decision, recognising the advantages of establishing a state. The Zionists, in particular, wanted the Gaza Strip to be included within Israeli territory, believing that full control over the entire

coastal region would significantly enhance security.

According to UN General Assembly Resolution 181, 56.47% of Western Palestine (approximately 14,100 km<sup>2</sup>) was allocated for the Jewish state, while 42.88% (about 11,500 km<sup>2</sup>) was reserved for the Palestinian state (Kamel, 2022).

## THE ARABS' HISTORIC MISTAKE

Despite their aspirations to govern all of Jerusalem and Western Palestine, the Zionists under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion accepted UN Resolution 181. On 14 May 1948, the day the British completed their withdrawal from Palestine, the Jews declared

**Secondly, at the time, seven Arab states—Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia—were already members of the United Nations. These states believed they provided sufficient diplomatic and political representation for the Arab world as a whole. Thus, the establishment of an additional Arab state, particularly under the shadow of Israeli sovereignty, was not viewed as imperative.**

the establishment of their state. One day after Israel’s declaration of independence, the armies of Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq launched an attack on Israel in support of the Palestinians. Their goal was to prevent the establishment of Israel and to take control over all of Western Palestine.

By the end of the war, the Israelis not only retained the territories allocated to them by the UN, but also captured some of the land designated for the Palestinian state, including West Jerusalem. Following the war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes and became refugees. The population of Gaza, which had been 80,000 prior to the war, rose to 280,000, while the population of the West Bank increased from 425,000 to 785,000. The remaining land that had been designated for Palestinians was occupied by Jordan and Egypt—Jordan annexed the West Bank and Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip. In short, the Arab states did not manage to seize land from Israel during the 1948 war; instead, they occupied territory meant for the Palestinian state. After the war, Israel signed separate armistice agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.

Table 2. Palestinian Refugees of 1948 War

Total Arab population of Palestine in 1948	1,400,000
Arab inhabitants under the Israeli control 1948	900,000
Total displaced from Israel	846,000
Prewar population of West Bank	425,000
Postwar population of West Bank	785,000
Prewar population of Gaza	80,000
Postwar population of Gaza	280,000
Refugees’ distributions	
West Bank	360,000
Gaza	200,000
Jordan	100,000
Syria	82,000
Lebanon	104,000

Source: Samih K Farsoun & Christiana E Zadharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977, p.137

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**When the State of Israel declared its independence in 1948, the Arab states refused to declare a Palestinian state for two principal reasons. Firstly, they adhered rigidly to the conviction that the entirety of the land of Palestine was rightfully Arab. This attitude persisted among Palestinian leadership from 1948 until the Oslo Accords of 1993. Even in the post-Oslo period, the recognition of Israel was often grudging and strategic rather than ideological.**

This territorial maximalism led to a paradoxical stance: they preferred the dismantlement of Israel over the realisation of Palestinian statehood. In their political calculus, the existence of Israel was perceived as a greater threat than the absence of a sovereign Palestinian entity. This attitude persisted among Palestinian leadership from 1948 until the Oslo Accords of 1993. Even in the post-Oslo period, the recognition of Israel was often grudging and strategic rather than ideological.

Secondly, at the time, seven Arab states—Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia—were already members of the United Nations. These states believed they provided sufficient diplomatic and political representation for the Arab world as a whole. Thus, the establishment of an additional Arab state, particularly under the shadow of Israeli sovereignty, was not viewed as imperative. The prevailing sentiment was that as long as Israel could be delegitimised or prevented from consolidating its statehood, the creation of a Palestinian state could remain indefinitely

deferred. In retrospect, this refusal to pursue Palestinian statehood alongside Israeli statehood constitutes a historic miscalculation—one whose consequences have proven exceedingly difficult to reverse.

The Jewish presence in the Middle East and North Africa dates back to the pre-Islamic era. Following the 1948 war, the Zionist movement employed all available means—including acts of terrorism—to facilitate the return of Jews from Arab countries to Israel. The movement was almost entirely successful in bringing the Jewish populations of Iraq and Yemen to Israel, as these communities emigrated en masse in 1948-49. However, the policy of encouraging Jewish emigration to Israel was only partially effective in Morocco and Tunisia. As of the early 1990s, there were still approximately 30,000 Jews living in Morocco and around 20,000 in Tunisia. Most of the Jewish population in Egypt left the country following the 1956 invasion by Israel, France, and the United Kingdom. In 1870, France granted French citizenship to the Jewish population in Algeria through the Crémieux Decree. When Algeria gained its independence from France in 1961, approximately 130,000 Algerian Jews relocated to France, while an estimated

5,000 to 10,000 moved to Israel (Corm, 1988: 22).

Until 1967, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank remained under the control of Egypt and Jordan, respectively. However, neither Egypt nor Jordan allowed the Palestinians to establish autonomous self-rule in these territories under their sovereignty.

Even after the armistice agreements with Israel, Palestinian resistance groups continued to launch attacks on Israel from neighbouring Arab countries. In 1964, during an Arab League summit and upon the suggestion of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Palestinian resistance factions were united under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). One of the key motivations behind the formation of the PLO was the Arab leaders' fear that the Palestinian issue—and other critical matters—might pass out of their hands and into those of the people. Led by Egypt, the PLO was also intended to help control the activities of Palestinian resistance groups known as *fedayeen*, which had emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and to prevent an untimely war with Israel (Corm, 1988: 65). Until 1969, Arab states used the PLO as a tool for their own regional purposes. However, with the rise of Yasser Arafat to the leadership of the organisation in 1969, the PLO gradually escaped the control of Arab regimes.

## THE 1967 WAR:

### A TURNING POINT NASSER COULD NOT ESCAPE

The 1967 War constituted a pivotal turning point in the Arab-Israeli conflict, with its roots traceable to the 1956 Suez Crisis. In response to Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, Britain and France, alarmed by potential disruptions to oil routes and Egypt's support for the Algerian revolution, coordinated with Israel for military action. Israel, feeling threatened by Egypt's blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba, invaded the Sinai Peninsula in October 1956. Although Egypt suffered a military setback, the intervention ultimately ended under international pressure, resulting in Britain and France losing control over the Canal while Nasser gained significant political prestige (Goldschmidt & Davidson, 2010: 311-12). Following the crisis, Nasser's popularity surged as he positioned himself as the leader of the Arab world, exemplified by the 1958 union between Egypt and Syria forming the United Arab Republic (UAR), although this union disintegrated in 1961 due to political tensions and Syrian resistance to Egyptian dominance (Kamrava, 2013: 113; Corm, 1988: 63).

Despite repeated failures at Arab unity, Nasser remained committed to asserting Egypt's leadership. His intervention in Yemen's civil war, intended to support republican forces against the monarchy, ultimately drained Egypt's resources and entangled it in a protracted conflict, with up to 70,000 Egyptian troops deployed in Yemen (Kamrava, 2013: 114). Simultaneously, tensions between

Israel and Syria escalated, particularly after Syria's 1966 coup and the subsequent increase in Palestinian *fedayeen* attacks. The Soviet Union warned of Israeli troop mobilisations against Syria, prompting Nasser to sign a mutual defence pact with Syria in November 1966, despite prior animosity (Kamrava, 2013: 117). While Nasser privately admitted Egypt's military was not ready for war, regional pressures forced his hand. In May 1967, Egypt expelled the UN Emergency Force and blocked the Straits of Tiran, heightening tensions. Jordan and Iraq joined a defence pact under Egyptian command, setting the stage for inevitable conflict (Mansfield, 2004: 257, 273).

Israel, perceiving an existential threat, launched a preemptive strike on 5 June 1967, decimating the Egyptian air force and rapidly advancing across the Sinai Peninsula. Within six days, Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, fundamentally altering the regional balance of power. Arab casualties were severe, with approximately 20,000 soldiers killed and significant territorial losses, including the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, Egyptians, and Syrians (Kamrava, 2013: 275). In the war's aftermath, Nasser briefly resigned but returned to power amid mass demonstrations, only to purge several close allies, including Field Marshal Amer, who allegedly committed suicide later that year. The Soviet Union intervened with substantial military support, yet neither Nasser nor the ideology of Nasserism ever regained their previous influence (Kamrava, 2013: 122).

## THE PLO-JORDAN CONFLICT AND THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR

The aftermath of the 1967 war led to a significant increase in the Palestinian refugee population, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon, where the refugee camps enabled the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to operate as a 'state within a state', interfering in the domestic affairs of these host countries. Tensions peaked in September 1970 when the PLO hijacked four airplanes, prompting King Hussein of Jordan to decisively expel Arafat and the PLO after fierce clashes known as 'Black September', resulting in over 3,000 Palestinian deaths (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016: 334). Following this expulsion, many Palestinians relocated to Lebanon, where Lebanese Muslims saw the PLO as a means to challenge Maronite Christian political dominance. However, the delicate confessional balance established in 1943 began to crumble as Muslim demographics grew, leading to heightened tensions. The Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975 after sectarian violence escalated, culminating in massacres that marked the conflict's onset, and transforming Lebanon into a war-torn nation. Syrian intervention in 1976 further complicated the conflict, with Syria eventually exerting significant

control over parts of Lebanon (Friedman, 1995: 17).

Lebanon's significant Shia population and its proximity to Israel attracted Iran's strategic focus, particularly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran established military and religious training facilities in Baalbek, leading to the formation of Hezbollah in the early 1980s, largely from splinters of the Shia Amal movement. Iran consistently supported Hezbollah, viewing it as an instrument to project influence and promote revolutionary ideology in the region (Mohaddessin, 1993: 122; Al-Rodhan, Herd & Watanabe, 2015: 126). Meanwhile, Lebanon's internal divisions deepened. In 1982, after the assassination of President-elect Bachir Gemayel, Israel invaded Lebanon, aligning with Maronite factions. Subsequently, the Phalangist militia massacred Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps, provoking regional outrage (Friedlander, 1991: 96). Western peacekeeping forces withdrew in 1983 after deadly attacks. Despite the 1989 Taif Agreement calling for disarmament, Hezbollah remained armed and influential. Israel withdrew from most of Lebanon by 1985 and completely by 2000. Yet, tensions persisted, culminating in the 2006 war, during which Hezbollah launched around 4,000 rockets into Israel, leading to significant casualties on both sides (ICRC, 2012).

## THE OSLO ACCORDS AND THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT

The 1973 war, launched by Egypt and Syria to reclaim the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights, ultimately failed to defeat Israel militarily, though it precipitated a global oil crisis. A historic shift followed when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, signalling Egypt's willingness to pursue peace in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. The subsequent Camp David Accords, brokered by the United States in 1979, led to Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, effectively neutralising half of the Arab world's opposition to Israel (Hammond, 2016: 88). However, the Camp David Accords, alongside the 1979 Iranian Revolution, fractured Arab unity. While Iraq and Syria rejected Egypt's

Camp David Accords, alongside the 1979 Iranian Revolution, fractured Arab unity. While Iraq and Syria rejected Egypt's unilateral move, other Arab nations expressed disapproval without joining the rejectionist front (Held & Ulrichsen, 2012: 263). In the ensuing decades, further divisions emerged as Iraq's invasions of Iran and Kuwait weakened the prospects for a cohesive Arab stance.

**Despite all the difficulties, during the first phase of the conflict (1948–1993), in which Arab states and the PLO played the leading role, Palestinians made significant progress towards statehood by securing a status in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. However, during the second phase (1993–2024), when Arab states withdrew from the foreground and Iran emerged as the main defender of the Palestinian cause through its influence on Hezbollah and Hamas, the situation changed drastically.**

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The Oslo Accords of 1993 marked another significant milestone as Israel formally recognised the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which assumed governance over parts of Gaza and the West Bank (Knell, 2023). Yet, efforts to achieve a lasting peace faltered, exemplified by the 2000 Camp David summit where US President Bill Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat failed to reach a comprehensive agreement. Arafat adamantly rejected concessions on Jerusalem, declaring that surrendering on this issue would undermine the entire Palestinian national movement (Hanieh, 2001: 75-97). Deep mistrust persisted, with Israel prioritising security and rejecting the Palestinian right of return, while Palestinians insisted on full recognition of their rights under international law (Palmer, 2007: 88). As Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin asserted in 1995,

Israel would not revert to its pre-1967 borders (Hammond, 2016: 92). The deep-rooted conflict was encapsulated in David Ben-Gurion's acknowledgment that Israel's founding entailed dispossession of Palestinian lands, feeding ongoing grievances and complicating peace efforts (Goldschmidt & Davidson, 2010: 310).

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## THE SECOND PHASE OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

With the signing of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, the nature of the Arab-Israeli

wars in the Middle East fundamentally shifted. Between 1948 and 1993, the Arab-Israeli battle primarily involved Israel on one side, and major Arab states such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan on the other. In nearly every war—1948, 1967, and 1973—the Arab states set aside their internal disputes to present a united front against Israel. Even after the military coup in Yemen in 1962 led to a prolonged proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the latter still declared its alignment with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the 1967 war, affirming its place within the anti-Israel Arab bloc. This forty-five-year period, which I refer to as the first phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict, was characterised by a conventional state-based confrontation over the Palestinian issue.

Following the Oslo Accords in 1993, a significant shift in actors occurred within the conflict. Arab states, once central players in the Palestinian cause, began to retreat, and gradually, Iran emerged to fill the vacuum left by these retreating powers. Through the Oslo process, both Palestinian factions and several Arab states officially recognised Israel's right to exist, abandoning their earlier stance that called for the complete eradication of Israel from the region. Egypt had already taken the first step towards peace by recognising Israel through the 1979 Camp David Accords, despite widespread condemnation from the Arab world. Subsequently, on 25 July 1994, Jordan signed the Washington Declaration with Israel, formally recognising Israel on the basis of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 (Government of Israel & Government of Jordan, 1994).

Between 1993 and December 2024, over a period of approximately 30 years, Iran adopted the most rigid and uncompromising stance against Israel concerning the Palestinian issue. Iran had hegemonic ambitions over the region, and the Palestinian cause provided an unparalleled tool for garnering sympathy across the Arab and Islamic world. Immediately after the 1979 revolution, Iran swiftly intensified its activities, especially in countries with significant Shiite populations such as Syria and Lebanon. In August 1979, the Iranian government deployed troops to Syrian territory to fight against Israel and support Syria. Iran's anti-Israel posture greatly pleased Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, who, in October 1979, welcomed the Iranian revolution with the following words: 'The Iranian revolution is our revolution and its victory [is] for the Arabs and the Muslims against Israel and Zionism' (Haas, 2012:131).

Iran's anti-Israel and anti-imperialist discourse also appealed to Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The Syrian branch of the Brotherhood described the Iranian revolution as 'the revolution of all Islamic movements in the world' (Olmert, 1990:173). In 1982, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati described Iran's relations with countries such as Syria and Libya as follows: 'Our close relations with the regional progressive countries stem from their revolutionary, anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-reactionary stands.

We are convinced that the ties and solidarity with Syria and Libya are strategic bonds' (Goodarzi, 2002: 163).

Iran's anti-Israel narrative elevated Iran-Syria relations beyond the scope of Syria's ties with other Arab states. During the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, while nearly all Arab countries supported Iraq, Syria stood firmly beside Iran. From the beginning of the war in 1980, weapons supplied through Lebanon were transported to Iran via Syria. In March 1982, Iran and Syria signed a ten-year economic cooperation agreement under which Syria would export phosphates, agricultural, and textile products to Iran, while Iran would provide petroleum to Syria. This agreement also included the transfer of military equipment from Syria to Iran. One of the most strategically significant developments for Iran's war effort came in April 1982, when Syria decided to shut down the pipeline carrying Iraqi oil to the Mediterranean. This move dealt a severe blow to Iraq's economy, as the pipeline had enabled the export of 700,000 barrels of oil per day. The closure significantly hampered Iraq's ability to finance its war against Iran (Haas, 2012: 135).

Following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Iran began providing military and technical assistance to Hezbollah, training the group in carrying out terrorist operations against its adversaries. Hezbollah learned methods such as suicide bombings, kidnappings, and hostage-taking directly from Iranian support (Maloney, 2025). Hezbollah, which was established by Iran's own initiative, did not officially claim responsibility for the 1983 bombings in Beirut that killed 258 US Marines and 58 French soldiers, but US courts later ruled that Hezbollah was responsible for the attacks. Not since the Battle of Iwo Jima against Japan in 1945 had the United States lost so many Marines in a single day (Pintak, 2003).

Iranian leaders considered themselves at the forefront of the Islamic world in their opposition to Zionism and the West. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati stated: '... the only way we can fight the Zionist regime is through our aid to Syria, to the Palestinians, and to the Muslim groups in Lebanon who are determined to fight on. If we fail on this, we will be ridiculed all over the world as do-nothing phrase-mongers' (Goodarzi, 2002: 119).

In the 1990s, Iran began to strengthen its ties with Hamas by inviting Hamas leaders to the meetings of the Institutes for Political and International Studies (IPIS), the Foreign Ministry's think tank for international affairs. In Tehran, Hamas leaders were treated as Palestinian heroes and were warmly received by Iranian officials. On 15 December 2015, during his visit to Tehran, the Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Khaled Meshal, commented on the tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear programme with Israel, stating: 'Just as Islamic Iran defends the rights of Palestinians, we defend the right of Islamic Iran. We (Hamas) are part of a united front against the enemies of Islam. Each member of this front defends



itself with its own means in its region. We carry the battle in Palestine. If Israel launches an attack against Iran, we will expand the battlefield in Palestine.’ Meshal also praised then-President Ahmadinejad for his courage and his anti-Israel stance (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007: 105).

The relationship between Iran and Hamas entered a new political and strategic phase following Hamas’ victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. After their electoral success, the Hamas government chose not to visit an Arab country first, but rather made its inaugural foreign visit to Tehran. In 2006, Iran had thus not only positioned itself as a direct neighbour to Israel through Hamas but had also secured a significant role in the heart of the Arab world concerning the Palestinian issue (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007: 104).

The principal supporter of the war launched by Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023 was not the Arab states, but Iran itself. Israel’s assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh on 31 July 2024, did not occur in any Arab country, but rather in Tehran—a fact that was no coincidence<sup>4</sup> Israel targeted Haniyeh in Iran because it knew that Iran was the principal backer of the October 7 attacks. Had the war that began on 7 October 2023, been a traditional Arab-Israeli war, Israel would not have been able to repeatedly strike targets in Yemen along the coast of the Gulf of Oman using the airspace of Arab nations.

In the second phase, another development that must be counted as a loss for the Palestinians was Israel’s declaration of Jerusalem as its capital and the United States’ official recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital on 6 December 2017.

## THE THIRD PHASE AND CONCLUSION

With the fall of the Assad regime in Syria on 8 October 2024, the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict changed for the third time. The attacks of 7 October 2023 played a decisive role in the downfall of the Assad government. The Syria-Lebanon axis had been the most significant front for Iran’s proxy war against Israel. As a result, following the 7 October attacks, Israel repeatedly struck the Syria-Lebanon front, targeting not only Iranian positions but also directly attacking Syrian forces. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Israeli airstrikes in Syria in 2024 killed 416 Syrian soldiers (BBC Türkçe, 9 December 2024). In the collapse of the Assad regime, Israel played a far more crucial role than the Syrian opposition.

The fall of the Assad regime dealt a severe blow to Iran’s 40-45-year-old project of implementing its Neo-Persian ambitions through access to the Mediterranean via Syria and Lebanon. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran had gradually expanded its influence through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon—essentially becoming Israel’s neighbour. However, with the collapse of Assad’s regime, Iran



was forced to retreat back to its border with Iraq. Following the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on 28 September 2024, and the disruption of the logistical support corridor via Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon lost its former power and influence. Its most experienced leaders were eliminated.

Between 7 October 2023, and 8 December 2024, when the Assad regime collapsed, Hamas from Palestine, Hezbollah from Lebanon, and the Houthis from Yemen carried out attacks against Israel on three fronts, occasionally putting Israel in a difficult position. However, after the fall of the Assad regime, Israel gained a strategic advantage. Rather than returning the Golan Heights to Syria, Israel has further expanded the buffer zones along its border with Syria. The Druze population living along the Israeli-Syrian border now prefers unification with Israel rather than remaining under a centralised Syrian regime dominated by Damascus (Kiran, 2025). The Kurdish region of Syria (Rojava), which has had a *de facto* government for 13 years, insists on a federated Syria. Following the collapse of Assad, Israel's frequent airstrikes on Syria signal its clear refusal to allow the emergence of a centralised, unitary, and potentially jihadist regime that could threaten Israeli security in the future.

While occasional missile attacks continue from Yemen, the conflict in Gaza is now primarily between Hamas and Israeli security forces. In other words, in this third phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel is no longer facing all Arab states or even Iran. Instead, it is facing Hamas, which Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas angrily referred to as 'sons of dogs'. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, from 7 October 2023 until the end of 2024, approximately 45,000 people were killed in Gaza, 11,000 reported missing, and with the outflow of residents, the population decreased by about 6% (Ruiter, 2025).

In comparison, the total casualties suffered by Palestinians and Arab states in the three major wars of the first phase (1948–1993) were less than half, perhaps even a quarter, of the losses recorded in Gaza alone during this current conflict. The same is true for Israeli losses. The outcome of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas remains uncertain. However, when considering the territory and the death toll, it is estimated that for every 5–6 square metres in Gaza, there is one casualty.

In this second phase, Palestinians failed to achieve any meaningful political gain and instead experienced internal division. In 2005, Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority for a four-year term (a position he still holds). In the last parliamentary elections in 2006, Hamas won a majority. Geographically disconnected, Gaza and the West Bank also became politically fragmented. Failing to establish a unified and internationally recognised administration, Hamas took full control of Gaza in 2007 after days of violent clashes with Fatah. Neither did

Mahmoud Abbas step down after his term expired, nor did Hamas relinquish power.

The war that began on 7 October 2023, with explicit support from Iran, resulted in a dramatic shift by 8 December 2024, with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and Iran's retreat from the regional scene. In this third phase of the conflict, Israel and Hamas were left facing each other directly. The long-standing Arab position—that peace required Israel's withdrawal to pre-1967 borders and the recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine—has now become a relic of the past. At this stage, even the prospect of Palestinians regaining full control over Gaza appears increasingly unlikely. Both the United States and Israel have openly discussed plans for the depopulation of Gaza. In this third stage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, conditions are shifting increasingly—and radically—against the Palestinians.

Otto von Bismarck once stated, 'You may decide where, how, and when a war begins, but you can never predict where, how, and when it will end.' Hamas launched the latest war by killing 1,200 people and taking 251 hostages in a single day; yet it is clear that they failed to calculate how, when, and under what conditions the war

would conclude. Indeed, who could have anticipated that the 7 October attacks would lead to the end of the Assad regime in Syria, dismantle Hezbollah in Lebanon, and push Iran—once adjacent to Israel—back to the Iraqi border?

The attacks of 7 October marked a pivotal turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, significantly complicating the already tenuous prospects for peaceful coexistence. Historically, peace negotiations engaged a centralised Palestinian leadership; however, the current landscape is characterised by deep internal fragmentation. The Palestinian territories are now governed by two divergent and often antagonistic authorities: Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. This internal political bifurcation has severely

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Simultaneously, regional dynamics have shifted in ways that further marginalise the Palestinian cause. The once-vocal support of Arab states has notably diminished. A growing number of Arab governments have either formally normalised relations with Israel or tacitly accepted its regional legitimacy. Neither Iran nor any Arab state appears willing to risk direct military confrontation with Israel over Palestinian issues. This regional recalibration reflects a broader strategic pragmatism, whereby state interests increasingly eclipse pan-Arab ideological commitments to Palestine.

This new phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict—distinguished by Hamas's elevated role—has paradoxically coincided with a surge in global rhetorical support for Palestinian rights. Yet this symbolic solidarity has not translated into substantive changes in the power dynamics on the ground. On the contrary, the cumulative effects of internal division, regional disengagement, and asymmetric military realities have increasingly tilted the balance against Palestinian political aspirations.

## NOTES

- 1 According to the Torah, during the reign of King David, the Jews captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites. After the city was taken, the name of the Fortress of Zion was changed to the 'City of David'. See: *Old Testament*, 1 Chronicles 11: 6-7
- 2 The term *West Bank* began to be used after 1950. During the 1948 war, the Kingdom of Jordan took control of the West Bank and annexed it to Jordan. Between 1948 and 1967, the West Bank remained under Jordanian sovereignty.
- 3 The partitioning of Palestine by the British was undoubtedly to the detriment of the Jews. In the matter of the partition, the Arabs had cooperated with the British. In a letter to Lord Curzon, Winston Churchill expressed satisfaction with Abdullah's collaboration with the British regarding the Arab question, stating:  
'Abdullah turned around completely under our treatment of the Arab problem. I hope he won't get his throat cut by his own followers. He is a most polished and agreeable person...', Fromkin, D, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989
- 4 According to *The New York Times*, Ismail Haniyeh was killed in Tehran by a remotely detonated explosive device that had been planted in his residence two months earlier. The residence, a highly secured four-story building near Sadabad Park, was used by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to host high-level guests and conduct confidential meetings. Haniyeh was among the guests visiting Tehran to attend the inauguration ceremony of Iranian President Pezeshkian. Once it was confirmed that Haniyeh had settled into the guesthouse, the explosive device was remotely triggered at approximately 2:00 am, See: *The New York Times*, 'How Hamas Leader was Killed in Iran', 31 July 2024

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# Building Peace Through Connection

## The Baltimore Cross-Community Reconciliation Project as a Model for Racial Healing and Community Resilience

Shelly Clay-Robison & Robin Todd McDonough

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the work of the Baltimore Cross-Community Reconciliation Project (BCCRP) as a model of peace praxis that addresses racial division and relationships in Baltimore, Maryland. Developed by the Global Peace Foundation, the BCCRP invited black and white residents to join a six-month facilitated, values-based dialogue focused on the concept of shared humanity. Using a qualitative approach to engage with and analyse the project, this research explores how participants engaged in conversations around race while also working to build sustainable relationships. Through dialogic practices and the development of ‘safe and brave’ spaces, participants were able to stay with the discomfort that can arise during discussions around power, privilege, and justice. The project demonstrates how grassroots dialogue, relational commitment, and institutional collaboration can foster long-term reconciliation. The BCCRP offers a framework for building peace in racially divided cities and illustrates how social and relationship transformation alongside community-centred engagement can sustain reconciliation and contribute to peaceful futures.

### KEYWORDS

Racial Reconciliation, Dialogue, Managed Contact, Grassroots Peacebuilding, Baltimore

### INTRODUCTION: TWO BALTIMORES

Many outsiders only know Baltimore through the HBO series ‘The Wire’, which showcases the city’s struggles with crime, drugs, failing schools, and corruption, or from the headlines after Freddie Gray’s murder by Baltimore police and the subsequent unrest in the city in 2015. However, for those in the know, Baltimore is a deeply historical and proudly culturally diverse city with a passionate love for Orioles baseball and Ravens football. There is also a strong sense of civil rights in ‘Charm City’ and yet, in her book *Trauma and Repair: Confronting Segregation*

*and Violence in America* (2020), Annie Stopford discusses the ‘Two Baltimores’. This is short-hand for the differences between safer, middle-class neighbourhoods and the unsafe, treeless neighbourhoods with boarded up homes. She discusses the stark differences between communities that often fall along racial lines.

Baltimore was the first American city to pass a housing segregation law in 1911, called the Residential Segregation Ordinances with the goal of, ‘...preserving peace, preventing conflict and ill feeling between the white and coloured races in Baltimore city by providing...for the use of separate blocks by white and coloured people for residences, churches, and schools’ (Power, 1982: 305). While the United States Supreme Court ultimately made these ordinances unconstitutional, the legacy of this segregation remains in Baltimore and disproportionately disadvantages black communities economically, politically, socially, and psychologically (Stopford, 2020).

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, reinvigorated racial justice conversations in Baltimore. While it brought back painful memories of Freddie Gray’s death, it also highlighted the need for racial healing. In response, the Global Peace Foundation (GPF), an international non-profit organisation committed to values-based peacebuilding, recognised the need for local interventions that could address the racial divide in Baltimore. Founded on the principle of ‘our shared humanity’, GPF promotes an approach to peacebuilding that emphasises the inherent dignity of all people and centres on the belief that sustainable peace requires not only structural change but also transformation of relationships within communities. This study examines one such initiative: the Baltimore Cross-Community Reconciliation Project (BCCRP), a structured dialogue programme designed to build relationships between black and white residents in Baltimore, Maryland.

The BCCRP represents a community-centred peace praxis initiative that addresses a fundamental question in contemporary peacebuilding: Can sustained cross-racial relationship-building serve as a foundation for transformative reconciliation in historically divided communities? Through qualitative analysis of participant experiences over six months of facilitated dialogue, this research evaluates this values-based reconciliation approach. The project and research contribute to the field of peace praxis by demonstrating how community-centred approaches can complement structural reforms in addressing America’s persistent racial divide.

## THE BALTIMORE CROSS-COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION PROJECT

The Global Peace Foundation (GPF) is an international non-profit organisation



that promotes an innovative values-based approach to peacebuilding guided by the vision of our shared humanity. Influenced by the May 2020 murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black male in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by a white police officer, GPF convened a Committee on Racism and Justice in 2021 to address the challenges of racism in the United States. Composed of a national team of key stakeholders, the Committee members recommended establishing a pilot peacebuilding committee in the United States with members dedicated to building relationships and trust among diverse community members.

After reviewing several locations, GPF determined that Baltimore City would be a good location for a pilot cross-community engagement project due to its racial history and its close proximity to GPF's headquarters in Lanham, Maryland. The Baltimore Cross-Community Engagement Project (BCCEP) was launched in December 2022 with the goals of reducing racial bias and discrimination, increasing understanding and empathy, and strengthening connections among Baltimore's diverse community members. To deliver it, GPF collaborated with Project Pneuma, a Baltimore-based non-profit organisation founded in 2014 to help young black males in Baltimore City's fourth through eighth grades reach their fullest potential.

Following the successful completion of the BCCEP in May 2023 with twelve diverse graduates having participated in the pilot project, GPF partnered with the United Way of Central Maryland in April 2024 to launch its second cohort, the Baltimore Cross-Community Reconciliation Project (BCCRP). Like the pilot project, the initiative brought together black and white residents from Baltimore City and surrounding areas to engage in meaningful dialogue around race, aiming to foster long-term relationships and reduce racial bias.

Sessions for both the pilot project and the BCCRP were hosted at the Baltimore City Police Education and Training Center, located in the University of Baltimore Learning Commons in the heart of the city. The facility offered a spacious meeting venue that was convenient for participants as it was easily accessible via public and private transportation and offered ample parking. More importantly, though, the venue embodied a cross-sector collaboration among education, law enforcement, and non-profit. The location of the project sessions demonstrates the positive impact of relationship-building among organisations with the same goal of serving the community. Several people helped to finalise the venue, including a BCCEP/BCCRP project team member and University of Baltimore alumnus, several staff members of the community-centric University of Baltimore, the director of the Baltimore City Police Education and Training Center, and the executive director and founder of Project Pneuma.

While the project recruited over 20 participants who began sessions together, eight participants ultimately graduated after completing ten bi-weekly, two-hour



sessions requiring a six-month investment of time, effort, and energy from influential individuals preoccupied with their jobs, families, and community leadership. The BCCRP culminated in a multicultural event that involved significant community effort on 12 October 2024, at the Eastern United Methodist Church in Baltimore's diverse Hamilton neighbourhood.

The eight participants graduated as recognised peacebuilders at a ceremony on 23 October 2024. A Baltimore Community Peacebuilding Committee will continue to support participants' peacebuilding efforts through fellowship, learning, and community engagement. Additionally, as a project outgrowth, the project team provides recurring two-and-a-half-hour sessions on 'Our Shared Humanity' or new Baltimore City Police Department recruits every ten weeks. Four sessions have been held through June 2025, with a total of over 200 trainees participating in the training.

The sessions were based on values-based dialogue and 'shared humanity' as a peacebuilding framework applied by GPF that '...emphasises universal principles and shared values as a basis to address conflict, promote equitable and sustainable development, and engage all members of the human family as necessary and valuable contributors to building a culture of peace.'<sup>1</sup> The participants interacted freely and safely without fear of judgement or reprisal, and differences were celebrated rather than frowned upon. According to Gustafson (2025: 52), 'Humanising dialogue centers on fostering empathy, understanding, and respect through sharing the everyday experiences that define common humanity.'

## RACIAL RECONCILIATION AND VALUES-BASED DIALOGUE AS PRAXIS

The Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) field has long linked reconciliation efforts with truth commissions like the South African, Sierra Leonean, Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare, and Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (Graybill, 2002; Stobbe, 2019; Collins & Watson, 2022; Unobe, 2022). These reconciliation processes tend to be formal, public, and aim to help a society transition from conflict by uncovering the truth about past injustices. However, reconciliation efforts can also occur in less formal settings that may not be obvious to the public. Proponents of social reconciliation after violence see it not as a one-time or static occurrence, but rather one where former 'adversaries' create new relationships as a practice or process (Krondorfer, 2018). Reconciliation in this way involves individuals and small groups who are looking to create long-term, stable peace (Ghoussoub & Noujaim, 2023). It is also a process that can occur in the midst of violence, but requires all parties to actively develop trust and empathy (Barakat, 2018), so that they can move from a divided past

to a shared future (Bloomfield, 2003). While reconciliation efforts may centre around apologies (Verwoerd & Little, 2018), faith and religious practices (Šiljak & Funk, 2018), economic reparations (Gumede, 2017) and memory work (Rosoux 2018), the BCCRP focused on the use of values-based dialogue and relationship development. Values-based dialogue is steeped in GPF's underlying principles of social cohesion, ethical leadership, and community-driven solutions that come from respecting and trusting others and their inherent dignity as humans. In situations where conversations could have spun out of control, these guiding values helped participants to actively listen to each other and to do so with empathy. Not only does this approach help participants stay on topic, but it provided guiderails to help them have deeper and harder conversations with each other. This kind of reconciliation, focused specifically on race, sought to respond to the harm of racism by mending relationships and building community (Jemal, Bussey &

Young, 2020). The BCCRP recognised the 'moral imagination' (Lederach, 2010) in its participants and their ability to create new and unexpected paths towards peace and reconciliation in the midst of violent and fractured social structures.

Motivated by Gordon Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis', often referred to as 'managed contact theory', which encourages interpersonal contact as a way to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups, the BCCRP sought to manage contact between black and white residents. The ultimate goal was to increase community resilience by reducing racial bias and by strengthening connections among community members from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Motivated by Gordon Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis', often referred to as 'managed contact theory', which encourages interpersonal contact as a way to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups, the BCCRP sought to manage contact between black and white residents. The ultimate goal was to increase community resilience by reducing racial bias and by strengthening connections among community members from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Typically, managed contact theory stipulates that in order for discrimination to decrease, groups need to have equal status, share common goals or tasks, maintain intergroup cooperation in pursuit of these goals, and have an 'authority' that supports the contact and interactions. The goal then is to increase positive contact that is also managed and facilitated instead of random interactions. This stands in contrast

to 'everyday life contact' that may produce negative outcomes like prejudice towards or avoidance of other groups (McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

Any adult Baltimore community member was welcome to join the BCCRP, but it quickly became evident that the people who self-selected to join were open to and hoping to contribute to racial reconciliation. None of the participants were openly hostile or discriminatory towards each other, and the intergroup friendships that developed could have been attributed to the fact that participants were already thinking positively about the other group (Manevska, Achterberg & Houtman, 2017). While positive aspirations may have been present, it is still necessary to investigate whether managed contact can lead to social change. Hässler, Ulug, Kappmeier and Travaglino (2020) note previous research indicating that positive contact between groups may create a 'sedative effect' for minority groups, which is associated with a reduction in support for social change. Essentially, if the disadvantaged group comes to like and befriend the other group, then they may be less likely to protest against the dominant group or narratives and this may reduce the push for social change. While this may not be a universal experience with intergroup dynamics (Pettigrew, 2021), it is important to consider which circumstances will encourage support of social change that advantages both groups and to be actively aware that mediated conversations can privilege dominant groups (Bush & Folger, 2004).

When it comes to fostering social change through racial reconciliation, Zimitri Erasmus (2010) argues for incorporating a critical understanding of race through a reflective praxis in order to ensure that the contact is anti-racist. This requires a shift from studying 'the other' to a focus on self-reflection within the socio-historical context and by actively building 'communities of transformative practice' that move away from assimilation and towards the creation of new forms of belonging rooted in social justice. Similarly, racial reconciliation must include accountability and restorative aspects to its work in order to be transformative (Jemal, Bussey & Young, 2020).

The BCCRP sought to create a community of transformative practice that reached beyond the six-month project. While dialogue as a practice may lead to personal transformation or reconciliation (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001), it is necessary for practitioners in conflict resolution and peacebuilding contexts to consider how dialogue can be used effectively at the collective or community level as well. It may not be enough to assume that positive personal or interpersonal contact will generate social change (Nagai-Rothe, 2015). Discussions of race and racism in the United States can feel uncomfortable or even taboo. They raise feelings of discomfort, frustration, sadness, and anger that can sometimes block authentic dialogue, which in turn allows for the continuation of an oppressive status quo (Jemal, Bussey & Young, 2020). Because of this, it is critical that contact

be managed through skilled facilitation that represents and promotes the lived experiences of all parties present (Miller & Donner, 2000) and that participants strive for authentic relationships that focus on transformation (Sherrod, 2020).

The power of dialogue as a path towards racial reconciliation lies in its ability to showcase how people are, ‘reconciling their identities as people of particular race with their desire to bring the community as a whole together, [and how] people are attempting to reconcile the desire to respect diversity with the desire to nevertheless come together as a community’ (Cramer Walsh, 2007: 5). In this way, dialogue can occur in alternative spaces that promote resistance to hegemonic narratives and provide space for groups to express their concerns inclusively, meaningfully, and from the bottom-up (Saffari, 2012).

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The BCCRP was designed to bridge the widening racial divide in Baltimore by creating a ‘safe and brave’ space for black and white community members from Baltimore City and surrounding areas to engage in meaningful dialogue related to race-related topics. The project objectives were to: Strengthen cross-racial relationships and reduce racial bias; enhance empathy, understanding, and collaborative problem-solving; Foster community resilience through civic engagement; and Reframe traditional diversity goals as justice-oriented outcomes: relational healing, bias interruption, and collaborative resilience.

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## *Participants and Partners*

Project participants were black and white adults aged 18 and older who lived in Baltimore City and its surrounding areas. The participants’ backgrounds were diverse, with both lifelong residents and transplants from other locations

engaged throughout the project. Their racial experiences and work lives offered a diverse perspective on racism and the potential for positive change in Baltimore. Participant demographics included men and women of working-age adults and one retiree, with work experience in multiple professions, including education, law, real estate, transportation, non-profit, government, and volunteerism.

GPF's working model is to partner with local organisations to deliver community-driven projects. As such, GPF joined forces with the United Way of Central Maryland, a non-profit that fosters equity and provides basic needs services to people in the greater Baltimore area. Multi-sector stakeholders, such as educators, law enforcement officers, faith leaders, and community activists, with an inherent interest and keen desire to improve race relations in Baltimore, guided the project.

### *Dialogic and Embodied Practice*

Ten in-person sessions were held bi-weekly at the University of Baltimore Learning Commons in space leased by the Baltimore City Police Education and Training Center. For many of the sessions, participants were assigned suggested readings, podcasts, and/or videos on topics of interest. In addition, participants designed and delivered a community service project. Session content was based on GPF's foundational principle of our shared humanity, where all human beings have innate dignity, are treated with respect, and are valued for their diversity.

Each session opened with food-sharing and 'connection before content' exercises designed to encourage participants to engage with each other, build connection and trust, and ease the journey into more difficult conversations. Through open and honest dialogue, the participants worked to better comprehend racial dynamics (histories, grievances, incidents, policies, etc) and provide a platform for reconciliation and change. They learned and grew together by sharing personal experiences, discussing their racial history, developing a vision of the future, and conferring on how the vision will be realised.

Relationship building is a central BCCRP tenet for building trust and reconciliation among diverse groups. Throughout the sessions, the last one held on 4 September 2024, participants engaged in various interactive activities requiring both small group and large group discussions led by in-house and external experts. Participants selected the topics of housing, education, and community policing in Baltimore to explore historical injustice in Baltimore. These topics were supplemented with discussions on identity-based conflict, racial reconciliation, and conflict transformation to provide participants with theoretical peacebuilding concepts.

### *Sessions were Divided into Meaningful Blocks*

Sessions one to three were designed for participants to get to know each other and begin to develop relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

Sessions four through six were designed to give participants a platform to discuss ‘What does race mean to you?’

Sessions seven and eight were designed for participants to gain knowledge on current peacebuilding activities and tools to plan action steps for moving forward, including the initial planning to design their community service project.

Sessions nine and ten were designed for participants to gain additional knowledge about peacebuilding theories and tools and finalise a community service project.

As a final activity, the participants collectively designed and delivered a community service project featuring a multicultural event that was held on 12 October 2024, at the Eastern United Methodist Church in Baltimore’s diverse Hamilton community. This event continued the participants’ journey to deepen their bond as they worked together as a team and achieved the heart of reconciliation with each other. This activity also provided them with an opportunity to experience the value of service to others on both an individual and group level.

### *Methodological Listening, Witnessing, and Co-Production of Knowledge*

The skilled and empathetic facilitation team was a critical component of the BCCRP’s success. Project team members and facilitators were selected based on their experience, education, and deep desire to help bring about positive change in Baltimore. Three diverse BCCEP graduates and a UWCM (United Way of Central Maryland) project manager facilitated the sessions. In addition, a project director who was a project manager/facilitator with the pilot project and two GPF coordinators who were instrumental in initiating GPF’s cross-community reconciliation projects in the United States supplemented the project facilitators as needed.

The project team’s makeup provided both continuity and innovation as the new members, two black and two white, provided a fresh perspective on session design, community involvement, and city-focused experience. With unique backgrounds in education, mental health advocacy, and non-profit community services, along with a recent young adult college graduate with a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology, the facilitators not only understood the BCCRP’s goals and objectives, but they also knew how to effectively interact with the participants.

Further, the existing team members brought a wide range of professional

experience, including the two GPF coordinators with extensive national and global experience in value-based peacebuilding and the project director with executive leadership in the railroad industry and a Master's Degree in Negotiations and Conflict Management.

Team members relied on their extensive experience facilitating meetings through prior engagements in their professional lives, including a city school principal, to collectively reach the project's goals and objectives. When sessions focused on highly charged subjects such as community policing, the facilitators were able to rely on their diverse backgrounds and experiences to help participants navigate the subject with empathy and compassion.

While the project's goals focused on racial reconciliation through relationship development, there were also research goals seeking to determine attitudes and beliefs around race and conflict in Baltimore. Specifically, we used a qualitative approach to assess whether these attitudes and beliefs around race and relationships may shift over the course of the facilitated dialogues and beyond. Our approach included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, as well as pre and post-session surveys.

Each session included participant observation where we observed interactions between participants but also took part in discussions and activities. This was also an opportunity to build rapport and trust with the participants and include them in the co-production of the research and knowledge. Several weeks after the final community service project, we conducted two focus groups with participants and facilitators to discuss the project and attitudes and beliefs regarding the project itself, but importantly, to gauge how participants understood their role in the community at the conclusion. Three months later, we conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with participants to better understand individual attitudes and beliefs around their own experiences, conversations inside and outside the project, and what Baltimore can do as a community to alleviate racial and conflict tensions.

### *Findings: Navigating the Terrain of Racial Dialogue*

Before the programme began, half of the participants reported feeling unwelcome in areas of their lives or at least uneasy due to their race. Many had been targeted by racist comments and behaviour, and there were expressions of fear of retaliation for speaking out about racism. Most participants came into the project believing that cross-racial empathy was possible and that they could develop relationships with others of a different race or ethnic group. Many also indicated a strong willingness to act as an ally for others experiencing racial injustice. Several themes emerged when participants shared their attitudes and beliefs:



'We need to build a collaborative safe zone in Baltimore. Some people are afraid to look at another perspective. And it can be easier to blame others. But we need to be able to talk about these things without worrying that we'll be scolded', shared one participant. Having these discussions not only gave participants confidence to pursue relationships across the divide, but they also brought real perspectives and lived experiences into the open when they might have otherwise gone unheard.

### *Having Productive Conversations Around Race*

'We need time to gather. Being in the same room with each other is so important' (BCCRP participant). Dialogue as a cornerstone of reconciliation was emphasised throughout the project. This is the power of authentic human connection and effective communication, which was not always easy and produced a variety of emotions. It could be that many of the emotions felt, like humour, frustration, hope, and annoyance to name a few, amplified the project experience and motivated the participants to care more about their work together and each other (Tomkins, 2009). Each participant came to the project with their own histories and worldviews, but it became important for them to address their own racial biases and preconceived ideas in order for them to have productive conversations. Often, it was reported that they wanted more time for discussion on issues like housing, redlining, access to resources, and the racial history of Baltimore. There was a sense that they wanted to go deeper and make the conversations 'messier' in order to learn and grow as individuals and as a community.

All participants agreed that discussions around race relations are necessary in Baltimore, but that they need to be facilitated and mediated by an experienced person who knows how to handle group dynamics when topics and conversations become emotionally charged. One participant noted, 'We need safe and brave spaces so that we can have deeper conversations.' Another agreed, 'We need someone to ask us hard questions about ourselves and about race.' Participants indicated that they worked to balance their desire to learn with the fear of making mistakes and feeling the discomfort of knowing they may have said something perceived as 'racist'. During the session conversations, it was reported that true learning happens when people feel safe to ask questions and engage, even if they might initially get things 'wrong'. Participants reported that reconciliation efforts need to involve learning and growth and that doing so in a group helps the process.



‘We need to build a collaborative safe zone in Baltimore. Some people are afraid to look at another perspective. And it can be easier to blame others. But we need to be able to talk about these things without worrying that we’ll be scolded’, shared one participant. Having these discussions not only gave participants confidence to pursue relationships across the divide, but they also brought real perspectives and lived experiences into the open when they might have otherwise gone unheard.

### *Emotional Dimensions of Transformative Dialogue*

‘Fear and guilt are what is keeping us from talking to each other. We’re territorial in Baltimore, so we need to expose ourselves to each other’ (BCCRP participant). While many discussions and presentations were intellectual, sessions also included opportunities for participants to investigate their emotional reactions to discussions around race in Baltimore. It was noted that moments of silence and reflection provided during the programme may have initially felt uncomfortable, but the experience helped participants see the value in allowing time for contemplation and processing their feelings and thoughts before speaking. This is not something that regularly happens in everyday life, and they recognised how critical that is for reconciliation efforts. Another participant drew a connection between racial conflict and grief, noting that both involve being able to accept change. This kind of personal growth requires letting go of past expectations, beliefs, and biases, similar to the grieving process. It was noted that participants could sometimes hold on strongly to beliefs about race that may have felt like a part of themselves or their identities. During the BCCRP process, there was a shedding of these older ideas, worldviews, and core beliefs gained in childhood, and that was often difficult. While this was ultimately seen as a good thing, one participant in particular noted that it was similar to a grieving process, where there is acceptance about ideas that are not ‘right’, but that are a part of a worldview regardless. This may be different from grieving the loss of a loved one or getting fired from a job for example, since those losses may feel like they were done to the participant without permission. The grieving process at the BCCRP is different in that the participants chose to be a part of this process and in a way, chose the grief and the pain and the growth that comes from it as well.

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, but how it is handled can be transformative. Participants noted that having opportunities for authentic human connection and acknowledgement of their lived experiences are critical during polarised times. They saw that the emotional dimensions of reconciliation included grief, guilt, and frustration. This was why the intentional creation of a ‘safe and brave space’ was important to navigating uncomfortable and oftentimes vulnerable topics. They reported that the tolerance and acceptance shown in the sessions helped to

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dismantle stereotypes and inspire small acts of kindness, which can have a profound impact on people who may be struggling individually. Participants reported an increase in emotional literacy around race, unacknowledged histories, relationship-building, and injustices.

## NEW RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPANDED NETWORKS

‘We have to be with each other and rub elbows and share food and have tea. That’s where the change happens’ (BCCRP participant). A realised goal of this project was to see participants develop relationships with new people, especially across the racial divide. Several participants reported that the project provided a safe space for them to be vulnerable and authentic, which they found helpful in developing friendships and professional connections during and after the project’s conclusion. Almost every participant

reported that having specific opportunities for personal connections was critical for a successful project, but also for long-term reconciliation. Sharing food as well as personal stories became critical for this to occur and set the stage for longer-term relationships.

It was noted that personality and generational differences can make it difficult to build relationships, but that the shared desire for change was a unifying factor. Participants actively engaged in change through new relationships and by taking responsibility for creating the world they envision. One participant noted, ‘A barrier to reconciliation is identity groups. When I reach out to help others, it’s based on who I’m familiar with, so we need to expand who we’re familiar with if we want to break down these barriers.’ Both during and after the project, interracial bonds formed across previous divides, leading to new professional collaborations and personal relationships.

## *The Complexity of Real-World Peace Praxis: Tensions and Unfinished Work*

After months of working together, reflection, and discussion, participants reported that reconciliation efforts in Baltimore should continue to create new safe and

brave spaces for vulnerable conversations and increasing empathy for others through intentional shared experiences. These spaces are ones where individuals are dedicated to creating a positive and progressive community for all people, and one in which ideas and beliefs can be shared and considered with empathy and without fear.

As can be expected with social conflict work, friction between participants and around ideas arose. At times, there were frustrations around reconciling intellectual engagement with embodied or emotional learning. While participants appreciated engaging with intellectual discussions around race, ethnicity, history, and conflict, some felt that these discussions did not go deep enough and that they were placeholders for taking action to alleviate the pain of injustices. Many participants voiced a desire for a deeper, 'messier' dialogue that could push discussions into a space for growth despite the discomfort it might create. However, there were also repeated expressions of fear of misspeaking or saying the 'wrong thing'. This can be a tricky dynamic for participants, but especially for facilitators to handle and one that is critical for conflict transformers to carefully consider: How can we balance a desire for safe and brave spaces where people can ask questions and make mistakes without fear of being labelled offensive or wrong, and where individuals can still hold each other accountable?

Two participants voiced frustration for very different reasons. One participant, who is the executive director of an at-risk youth leadership programme in Baltimore City, shared his frustration regarding projects that seek input and support from community members and activists but seem to give little back to the community. He felt that these types of partnerships, where organisations gather information that is used for their benefit, are often one-sided in favour of the sponsoring organisation. He advocated for furthering the partnership with the University of Baltimore's conflict management programme to include internships or other community support activities.

Another participant felt that discussions about race often avoid focusing on the non-minority perspective. For example, she noted that at times she felt isolated being a white woman in a biracial marriage with an infant son, where she was excluded from certain programmes in her Baltimore City community because of her race. In addition, she needed to feel confident that the project environment was supportive of such discussions. A facilitator followed up with the participant after a session about her concerns; however, this is an area where facilitators can be more diligent to ensure that all voices are heard during the session when a participant appears hesitant to share their viewpoint. Projects like BCCRP, designed to create empathy and bridge the racial divide, need to be sensitive to all voices so that meaningful conversations can occur and relationships can be built on trust and mutual respect. It was hard work at times. People got frustrated. Many

asked, ‘What’s next? How are we keeping this going?’ The project team saw this desire to continue as evidence of a successful project, but one that is not finished.

### *Praxis-Informed Recommendations for Future Work*

In conjunction with project participants and programme facilitators, we developed the following recommendations for future racial reconciliation work in the United States:

#### *Connecting Across Cultures and Generations*

Perceived differences between racial groups play a significant role in how participants communicate and how they interact with others. These differences can lead to frustration, but they can also lead to opportunities for learning and mentorship across the divide. Creating in-person, face-to-face spaces for inter-community engagement is central to alleviating racial tensions from segregation and fostering long-term reconciliation. The intergenerational interactions also created opportunities for growth despite some individual frustrations. While meetings were low-tech, the inclusion of online communication for the final project created tension for some older participants who had a learning curve that the younger ones did not. These tensions were not insurmountable, but they did create a miscommunication around formal and informal online communication styles. Additionally, the ways that different generations discussed concepts around race were significant enough to take notice. Older generations were taught to use language that included ‘not seeing race’ or phrases like ‘race doesn’t matter’, to indicate ‘colour-blindness’ or acceptance of others. On the other hand, younger generations have been socialised to believe that it is impossible not to see race and that these statements are themselves inherently violent. It became apparent that words and phrasing around race do not always mean the same across the generations and connotation varies, so it is a

The power of sharing a personal narrative emerged as a key pillar of this reconciliation process and created nuance as well as complexity. People want and need to tell their own stories about race so that they can challenge the feeling of being pigeonholed.

Facilitating opportunities for people to tell their stories about race creates opportunities for nuance and embracing complexity.

useful place to stop discussion and talk about the interplay between language, culture, and generational learning.

### *Narrative Justice through Storytelling*

The power of sharing a personal narrative emerged as a key pillar of this reconciliation process and created nuance as well as complexity. People want and need to tell their own stories about race so that they can challenge the feeling of being pigeonholed. Facilitating opportunities for people to tell their stories about race creates opportunities for nuance and embracing complexity.

### *Prioritise Empathy and Accountability*

While empathy is important to reconciliation efforts, there are barriers to fully understanding others due to differing lived experiences. Opportunities for cross-cultural engagement should prioritise accountability for one's thoughts, actions, and interactions, as well as empathetic listening within groups.

### *Creating Opportunities for Facilitated Face-to-Face Dialogue*

Effective mediation and facilitation are essential to ensure that all voices are heard and that discussions remain productive without becoming entrenched or one-sided.

### *Utilise Community Leaders*

Outreach to community leaders for participation in future cross-cultural engagement is a key way to break down barriers while fostering inclusion. Social change can happen at the grassroots level when individuals engage proactively within their own communities to shift perspectives. When community leaders value and promote reconciliation, others will follow.

### *Developing and Reaching Common Goals*

The final group project allowed participants deeper access into each other's lives and to see how others operate in the world when tasked with specific actions around a collective plan. It was in the making of the final community service project that mattered, not necessarily the project itself. The process of developing the final project was not always a smooth one and co-facilitators did have to step in to help provide structure and support at times. But participants set their goals high and developed an ambitious community engagement project that they were

excited about. Many of them also had full-time jobs and family obligations, and had to navigate the intergenerational tensions, so adding another project to their lives was sometimes stressful, but they wanted to do something that had a ‘big impact’ and for them that meant intercultural communication and education. Once participants found their groove through trust and communication, they were able to organise and come together to develop a project plan.

The purpose of the final community service project was to create the energy of a team so that all the talking, trust, and relationship building could then express itself through a project with everyone participating. It was this transition from conversation to collective action that illustrated how dialogue can ultimately manifest in a shared commitment to social reconciliation and change.

## CONCLUSION:

### *Towards a Racial Reconciliation Praxis*

The desire to continue this kind of racial reconciliation work beyond the BCCRP, despite the emotional difficulty and conflict frustrations, illustrates the project’s transformative impact. It also signals that this work is never truly finished, but requires ongoing commitment, is future-oriented, constructive, and goes beyond self-interested action (Kronendorfer, 2018). Serendipitously, in the middle of the

The desire to continue this kind of racial reconciliation work beyond the BCCRP, despite the emotional difficulty and conflict frustrations, illustrates the project’s transformative impact. It also signals that this work is never truly finished, but requires ongoing commitment, is future-oriented, constructive, and goes beyond self-interested action.

BCCRP project, team members met with the director of the Baltimore City Police Education and Training Center to deliver a two-and-a-half-hour training session on ‘Our Shared Humanity’ to new police trainees. This became a way to embed a racial reconciliation praxis into a public system and into policing practice that had previously been deemed unconstitutional (Baltimore Police Department, 2016). In 2017, the City of Baltimore and the Department of Justice entered into a Consent Decree with the goal of dismantling harmful practices that lead to Freddie Gray’s death, and instead build community trust, address racism, and move away from ‘us vs them’ mind-sets.

The cross-sectoral integration of GPF’s work with a government law enforcement

agency reflected a shared desire to familiarise the recruits with the concept of our common foundation as humans instead of the negativity often associated with our racial, cultural, ethnoreligious, and other differences. The sessions were designed for the police recruits to gain knowledge about basic concepts of peace, such as peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding; the role of individual and group identity in conflict; and the collective benefits associated with a shared identity based on our common humanity.

Each session ended with a large group discussion with the trainees providing responses to the following questions and input on the overall value of the session:

1. How does recognising the value and dignity of every individual influence the way you interact with those who hold differing values?
2. How can building relationships within the community enhance your potential to perform your job?
3. What is your experience of the unique culture of Baltimore?
4. How will what we discussed today impact your job?

This unexpected, but serendipitous new relationship between Baltimore PD and GPF circles back to Lederach's (2010) 'moral imagination'. If Baltimore is to be a place of racial reconciliation, it must promote the power of relationship transformation while also dismantling harmful structures to be replaced with new ones. While these sessions were not included in the original BCCRP, the project team sees this relationship as a promising way to continue reconciliation work in Baltimore and have a far-reaching influence.

Returning to the BCCRP, participants occasionally mentioned how sharing and understanding commonplace experiences with each other could be difficult. However, when it comes to peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, it is not necessarily about finding agreement but about finding a variety of ways to form a relationship, even if we cannot understand each other's experiences and worldviews. Common ground is a goal that requires actively, authentically listening to each other so that assumptions could be questioned. In this way, finding common ground in our shared humanity was reframed, not necessarily as an agreement, but as a relational commitment.

Participants agreed that risk-taking is important and that going out of their way and comfort zones to learn about each other's families and cultures is a way forward to reconciliation. There was an increasing interest in expanding discussions to include people experiencing multiple injustices or marginalisation. Participants became frustrated when discussions would include generalisations about race and socioeconomics, in particular, and they came to want more nuance and complex discussions. During one session in particular, there was discussion about the word 'reconciliation' and if it was appropriate considering that there may not

be anything for black and white communities to reconcile since the relationship began with the violent system of enslavement. This was an opportunity to also reframe what reconciliation can look like. It does not have to mean consensus or going back to what was. Within BCCRP, it became this relational commitment in the face of differences and inequalities.

At the BCCRP graduation, participants invited their families to join them in celebrating their work and the conclusion of the project. They were proud of what they had done and wanted to share food as well as the larger experience with their loved ones. Participants came to the BCCRP not necessarily to be taught, but for the speakers, the other participants, and the facilitators to give them something to talk about. The wisdom to connect, grow, and reconcile was already inside them, but the project gave them the platform to carry it out. In order for racial reconciliation to continue in Baltimore, citizens need opportunities to develop familiarity, empathy, and bonds that transcend identity groups.

## NOTE

1 <https://globalpeace.org/our-approach/>

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# National Dialogue as Peace Praxis: Lessons from Tunisia for Nigeria's Fragmented Federation

Adeolu Ojedokun

## ABSTRACT

National dialogues have emerged as a vital tool in peacebuilding praxis, offering inclusive platforms for conflict transformation in deeply divided societies. This article examines how national dialogue processes can facilitate political compromise and unity in fragmented states, drawing comparative lessons from Tunisia's successful 2013–2014 National Dialogue and Nigeria's experiences with national conferences in 2005 and 2014. Tunisia's dialogue, led by a quartet of civil society organisations amid a post-revolution political crisis, forged a consensus roadmap that rescued its democratic transition

Through a transdisciplinary lens bridging theory and practice, the article reviews the literature on national dialogue as peace praxis and presents two in-depth case studies. A comparative analysis highlights differences in process design, inclusivity, convening authority, and outcome implementation. The findings underscore that credible convenors, broad inclusion of stakeholders, clear mandates, and commitment to enact reforms were key to Tunisia's success and largely absent in Nigeria.

and earned a Nobel Peace Prize. In contrast, Nigeria's attempts at nationally owned dialogues—the 2005 National Political Reform Conference and the 2014 National Conference—sought to address foundational issues in its fractured federation but fell short in implementation. Through a transdisciplinary lens bridging theory and practice, the article reviews the literature on national dialogue as peace praxis and presents two in-depth case studies. A comparative analysis highlights differences in process design, inclusivity, convening authority, and outcome implementation. The findings underscore that credible convenors, broad inclusion of stakeholders, clear mandates, and commitment to enact reforms were key to Tunisia's success and

largely absent in Nigeria. The article concludes with policy and peacebuilding recommendations for Nigeria, advocating a renewed, truly inclusive national dialogue to renegotiate its social contract and foster sustainable peace and unity. The analysis balances academic insight with practitioner-oriented perspectives, aiming to inform both scholarly discourse and real-world peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria's multi-ethnic federation.

## KEYWORDS

National Dialogue, Peace Praxis, Conflict Transformation, Political Opportunity Structures, Secessionist Movements, Comparative Peacebuilding, State Fragmentation, National Unity

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is at a critical juncture of national cohesion, characterised by deepening ethnic and religious cleavages and recurrent conflicts over the federation's structure. Recent events, such as the contested 2023 general elections and the tensions following the presidential victory of Bola Tinubu, have highlighted the country's polarisation (Maclean, 2023; Princewill, 2023). Agitations for true federalism, regional autonomy, and even secessionist movements (most notably the renewed calls for Biafra in the southeast) underscore long-standing grievances about Nigeria's political arrangement (Abada, Okafor & Omeh, 2020; Omeje, 2005). As one of Africa's most diverse nations—often described as a fragile giant or a fragmented federation—Nigeria faces the urgent task of rethinking the terms of its unity and addressing the national questions that have persisted since its formation (Obiajulu, Obi & Iwuoha, 2016; Suberu, 2005).

One approach gaining traction in peacebuilding practice is the use of national dialogue processes to bridge divides and renegotiate the social contract in divided societies (Paffenholz, Zachariassen & Helfer, 2017; Stigant & Murray, 2015). National dialogues are broadly inclusive forums that bring together major stakeholders—government, opposition, civil society, and often marginalised groups—for deliberation on fundamental political issues or conflicts. As Stigant and Murray (2015) observe, national

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dialogues have become increasingly popular tools for political transformation and conflict resolution in the past decade. They offer a platform for collectively diagnosing conflict drivers and generating consensus on reforms, thereby functioning as a form of peace praxis that operationalises conflict transformation theories into concrete dialogue and decision-making (Paffenholz, Zachariassen & Helfer, 2017; Gerzon, 2006). The term peace praxis refers to the reflective and transformative practice of peacebuilding that connects theory with lived experience, emphasising local agency, moral imagination, and iterative engagement (Lederach, 2005; Freire, 1970). It goes beyond institutional reform to include grassroots participation, inclusive dialogue, and sustained relational work in contexts of deep fragmentation.

This article explores the potential of national dialogue as a peace praxis mechanism by comparing two contexts: Tunisia and Nigeria. Tunisia's 2013 National Dialogue is widely regarded as a success story in the aftermath of the Arab Spring—a process that pulled the country back from the brink of conflict and set it on a democratic path (International Crisis Group, 2015; Gobe, 2015). Nigeria's experience, by contrast, includes multiple attempts at national dialogue (notably in 2005 and 2014) that produced extensive recommendations for political reform but failed to resolve the underlying conflicts or achieve implementation (Adeniji & Ibrahim, 2015; Suberu, 2015). By examining these cases, the article seeks to identify why national dialogue succeeded in one case and faltered in the other and what lessons Nigeria can learn from Tunisia.

The introduction outlines the problem and the comparative approach. Next, a literature review discusses national dialogue as a concept and peacebuilding tool. Then, two case studies provide empirical details on Tunisia's National Dialogue and Nigeria's national conferences. Finally, the conclusion offers lessons and policy recommendations for Nigeria, suggesting how a carefully designed national dialogue—drawing on Tunisia's example—could help address Nigeria's fragmentation and foster sustainable peace.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: NATIONAL DIALOGUE AS PEACE PRAXIS

National dialogues have emerged in recent years as a prominent mechanism for conflict resolution and political transition, often employed in societies experiencing deep internal crises or post-conflict transitions (International IDEA, 2021; Papagianni, 2014). In essence, a national dialogue is a broad-based, inclusive process of deliberation that seeks to redefine the foundational consensus of a nation-state—it aims to bring all major stakeholders into a conversation about the nation's future, ideally leading to a new social contract or at least a set

of agreed reforms. The appeal of national dialogues lies in their promise to overcome internal rifts and rebuild state-society relations through genuine dialogue (International IDEA, 2021; Berghof Foundation, 2017). Unlike exclusive elite negotiations, national dialogues aspire to incorporate a wide array of voices, extending beyond the ruling elites to include opposition parties, civil society groups, women, youth, minorities, and other marginalised communities (Berghof Foundation, 2017; Paffenholz, 2014).

Scholars and practitioners note that, when successful, national dialogues can serve as platforms for peaceful transformation. Germany's and Switzerland's support for dialogue processes in countries like Yemen, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia reflects an understanding that inclusive dialogue can facilitate national reconciliation and prevent a relapse into violence (International IDEA, 2019; Berghof Foundation, 2017). The Berghof Foundation's National Dialogue Handbook (2017) emphasises that inclusivity is not just a normative ideal but a practical necessity and that conflict resolution processes must be as inclusive as possible and involve a broad range of political actors by going beyond a limited set of political players to include society at large. Such inclusivity helps ensure that outcomes have broader legitimacy and public buy-in, thereby increasing the chances of implementation and long-term stability.

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Key principles for effective national dialogues have been identified in peacebuilding literature. Inclusive participation is of paramount importance: all key interest groups and conflict parties should be invited to the table. Stigant and Murray (2015) argue that a dialogue that excludes significant segments of society will likely fail to address core grievances and may even exacerbate feelings of marginalisation. In practical terms, inclusion means not only involving political elites but also ensuring the representation of ethnic and regional groups, women, youth, and civil society actors. For example, a study on dialogue processes notes that elitist settlements tend to fall short of yielding valuable peace dividends such as social cohesion and political tolerance. By contrast, when people who have been

historically excluded are given a voice, the dialogue can address long-festered issues and build wider ownership of the peace process (Paffenholz et al, 2016).

Another critical factor is the credibility of the convenor or facilitation mechanism (Papagianni, 2014B). National dialogues may be convened by incumbent governments, presidents, parliaments, or independent bodies—but regardless of form, the convenor must be perceived as impartial or at least broadly acceptable to the various sides (Berghof Foundation, 2017; Papagianni, 2014B). If the legitimacy of the convenor is in question, as was initially the case in some dialogue attempts in Zambia and Cameroon, distrust can undermine the process before it even begins. In some contexts, a third-party mediator or a coalition of neutral domestic actors can lend credibility. The Tunisian case illustrates this principle by having a quartet of respected civil society organisations (rather than the ruling party alone) steer the dialogue—an arrangement widely credited with building trust among participants (International IDEA, 2021; Yerkes, 2017). By contrast, if a dialogue is seen as a unilateral initiative of a regime to advance its own agenda, opposition actors may boycott or engage in bad faith (Berghof Foundation, 2017; Papagianni, 2014B).

Transparency and public participation are also cited as best practices in national dialogue design (International IDEA, 2019; Paffenholz, 2010). While some negotiations inevitably occur behind closed doors, successful dialogues often include mechanisms for communicating progress to the public, soliciting citizen inputs (e.g., via consultations or submissions), and managing public expectations. This openness can enhance the legitimacy of the process and prevent misinformation. However, transparency must be balanced with the need for confidentiality in sensitive bargaining—a balance that requires careful process design (International IDEA, 2019; Paffenholz, 2014).

The scope and mandate of a national dialogue must be carefully defined. Some dialogues focus narrowly on resolving a specific political impasse or drafting a new constitution (as in Tunisia or South Africa's CODESA talks), while others take on a broad range of issues in a comprehensive reform agenda (as in Kenya's 2008 National Dialogue and Reconciliation, or numerous 'national conferences' in West Africa in the 1990s). A mandate that is too narrow may fail to address root causes, whereas an overly broad agenda can become unwieldy and diffusive. Research suggests that having clear priorities or phased approaches can help; for instance, Tunisia's dialogue explicitly prioritised establishing a caretaker government and completing the constitution as urgent steps (Yerkes, 2017; International IDEA, 2021). Dialogues should tackle core conflict drivers but may need to leave some less critical issues for later, complementary processes (Berghof Foundation, 2017; Papagianni, 2014B).



Finally, the question of implementation looms large. A frequent critique is that national dialogues produce voluminous reports and recommendations that gather dust. Indeed, one study refers to the implementation gap as a common challenge—without concrete mechanisms and political will to carry outcomes forward, dialogues risk becoming talk shops (International IDEA, 2019; Papagianni, 2014B). Recommendations from a dialogue may require legal or constitutional changes, which in turn demand action by parliaments, executives, or even referenda (International IDEA, 2019; Berghof Foundation, 2017). Therefore, designing an implementation strategy (such as integrating recommendations into formal institutions or setting up follow-up commissions) is often recommended to ensure that the dialogue’s work translates to real change. Public cynicism can increase without implementation, and the entire exercise may be seen as a wasted opportunity—a concern that has indeed materialised in Nigeria’s previous dialogues, as discussed later.

In summary, the literature on national dialogues as peace praxis highlights inclusivity, credible leadership convening, clear and feasible mandates, public buy-in, and guaranteed implementation pathways as pillars of success. These factors will frame our comparative examination of Tunisia and Nigeria. Tunisia’s case offers an example of a relatively successful application of these principles, whereas Nigeria’s cases illustrate the pitfalls when these conditions are absent or only partially met. As this paper draws out those comparisons, we turn to a detailed look at each case study.

## CASE STUDY

### *Tunisia’s National Dialogue (2013–2014)*

Tunisia’s 2013 National Dialogue is often hailed as a textbook example of how inclusive dialogue can defuse a national crisis and facilitate a peaceful political transition. The dialogue took place against the backdrop of the Arab Spring and Tunisia’s nascent democracy struggling to take root. After the popular revolution that toppled long-time dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, Tunisia held free elections for a National Constituent Assembly (NCA) tasked with drafting a new constitution (Marks, 2014). The elected interim government—led by the Islamist party Ennahda in coalition with two secular parties (the ‘troika’ government)—faced increasing resistance from opposition parties and segments of society, who accused it of mismanagement and feared an Islamist power grab (Gobe, 2015; Yerkes & Yahmed, 2014). Political tensions mounted from 2012 into 2013, exacerbated by a deteriorating security situation with rising extremist



violence (International Crisis Group, 2013).

In February 2013, the assassination of Chokri Belaid, a prominent secular opposition leader, sent shockwaves through the country (Mark, 2014; Yerkes, 2013). Public outcry over Belaid's murder led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali and his replacement by Ali Laarayedh (another Ennahda figure) in an attempt to stabilise the situation (Wolf, 2017; Gobe, 2015). However, this was only a prelude to a deeper crisis. In July 2013, a second opposition politician, Mohamed Brahmi, was assassinated—triggering massive protests and a suspension of the constitutional drafting process (Wolf, 2017; Yerkes, 2013). About one-third of the NCA members (primarily opposition) withdrew from the assembly in protest, demanding the government's resignation (Gobe, 2015; Yerkes & Boukhars, 2013). Tunisia's transition appeared on the verge of collapse, which raised fears that the country could descend into chaos or even civil conflict, as in other Arab Spring states.

At this critical juncture, the idea of a national dialogue gained traction. On 30 July 2013, the powerful Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) formally called for a national dialogue to resolve the political deadlock (Gobe, 2015; Yerkes & Boukhars, 2013). The UGTT—Tunisia's largest trade union federation with a long history of social activism—was widely respected across the political spectrum. Soon, it was joined by four other influential civil society organisations: the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA, an employers' union), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (Gobe, 2015; Yerkes & Boukhars, 2013). These four organisations formed what became known as the National Dialogue Quartet. Acting as a collective convenor and mediator, the quartet had the moral authority and neutrality that neither the government nor the opposition alone possessed at that moment. Their initiative was backed by widespread public support and pressure from a population eager for a peaceful solution.

The National Dialogue process was launched in late 2013 with the participation of 21 political parties, representing a broad spectrum from the ruling Islamists to secular opposition groups (Wolf, 2017). The agenda of the dialogue was framed in a roadmap agreement, which all major parties signed in September 2013. This roadmap outlined a sequenced plan to end the crisis: it called for the government led by Ennahda to resign and be replaced by a neutral technocratic caretaker government, for the completion and adoption of the new constitution, and for preparations for new elections (Yerkes & Boukhars, 2013). Notably, the roadmap did not seek to resolve every policy dispute in Tunisia; instead, it focused on key steps to unblock the transition. This focus on a limited set of objectives—forming a consensus government, finalising the

constitution, and setting an election timeline—is credited with keeping the dialogue manageable and goal-oriented (Stepan, 2012).

### *Process and Design*

The Tunisian National Dialogue was relatively small in format compared to some dialogues elsewhere. Instead of hundreds of delegates, it involved the top leaders or representatives of the main political parties, facilitated by the quartet as chairpersons or guarantors. Dialogue sessions were held behind closed doors, but the quartet regularly communicated general progress to the public and maintained pressure on all sides to compromise. The UGTT's Secretary-General, Houcine Abassi, often acted as a chief mediator in tense moments, using the union's leverage (with its capacity to mobilise mass strikes) to keep parties at the table (Wolf, 2017; Gobe, 2015). Importantly, the process was nationally owned—although international actors (like the EU and Western diplomats) supported it from the side-lines, the solutions were negotiated by Tunisians themselves, which strengthened legitimacy (Gobe, 2015; Stepan, 2012).

### *Inclusivity*

In terms of inclusion, the dialogue had broad political representation—from the Islamist current (Ennahda) to secular leftist and nationalist parties (such as Nidaa Tounes, which was a major opposition bloc). Civil society's inclusion was guaranteed through the quartet's central role. However, it should be noted that the format was elite-driven in that ordinary citizens did not directly participate, and negotiations were among political and civil society leaders (Yerkes & Boukhars, 2013; Gobe, 2015). Yet, because the quartet's member organisations themselves represented large constituencies (workers, employers, human rights activists, lawyers), there was an indirect representation of societal interests. One critique has been that women, youth, and smaller grassroots groups had less visibility in the process—the dialogue's primary actors were senior male figures from political and civil circles, reflecting existing power dynamics. Nonetheless, women's organisations and youth activists were active in the broader civic pressure that supported the dialogue. The inclusive intent of the process was evident in the acceptance of a wide array of parties, some of whom had fiercely opposed to each other under the facilitation of non-partisan actors. This contrasts sharply with later dialogues attempted in Tunisia under President Kais Saied in 2022, which notably excluded key opposition and civil society groups—a move widely seen as undermining the spirit of the 2013 dialogue (Yerkes, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2022). The 2013 dialogue, by comparison, is remembered for its

inclusiveness of all major stakeholders in the political crisis.

### *Outcomes*

The Tunisian National Dialogue achieved its core objectives in a remarkably short span of time. After weeks of protracted negotiations, an agreement was reached: Ennahda accepted to step down from power in favour of a temporary technocratic administration, demonstrating a significant compromise by the ruling party. In January 2014, a non-partisan caretaker Prime Minister, Mehdi Jomaa (a technocrat and former industry minister with no strong party affiliation), was selected to lead the interim government (Wolf, 2017; Yerkes, 2014). This fulfilled the first part of the roadmap. The National Constituent Assembly, which had resumed work, then passed the new Tunisian Constitution with an overwhelming majority on 26 January 2014. The new constitution was lauded internationally for its progressive elements, including strong protections for human rights and gender equality, and it represented a consensus compromise between Islamist and secular visions for the state (Gobe, 2015; Yerkes, 2014). Following the constitution, the caretaker government oversaw the organisation of general elections. By late 2014, Tunisia held a successful parliamentary election and a presidential election—the first under the new constitution—which led to a peaceful transfer of power to a new government (a coalition led by the secular Nidaa Tounes party, with Ennahda conceding defeat and transitioning into opposition) (Wolf, 2017; Arieff, 2015).

The smooth implementation of these steps—resignation of the old government, enactment of a new constitution, and free elections—testified to the effectiveness of the dialogue. Tunisia managed to navigate the most dangerous phase of its transition without descending into the violence or authoritarian relapse that plagued several other post-Arab Spring states. The international community recognised this achievement: in 2015, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its significant role in ‘building the political basis for profound constitutional and institutional reform’ through dialogue (Nobel Prize, 2015; Yerkes, 2015). The Nobel Committee hailed the quartet’s work as an example of the power of civil society in conflict resolution and democratic transition.

It is important to acknowledge that Tunisia’s journey after 2014 has not been without challenges. The dialogue did not magically resolve all socio-economic issues or political rifts; Tunisia continued to face economic difficulties, sporadic unrest, and in later years, a serious political crisis culminating in President Kais Saïed’s controversial power grab in 2021 (International Crisis Group, 2022; Yerkes, 2021). However, the 2013–2014 National Dialogue stands out as a moment when Tunisians, through an inclusive and nationally owned process, averted a

looming conflict and set a course towards democracy. For the purposes of this article, the Tunisian case illustrates what a successful national dialogue process can look like in terms of design (impartial convenor, clear focus, time-bound roadmap), inclusivity (major stakeholders represented), and outcomes (actual political transformation and implementation of agreements). The lessons from Tunisia's national dialogue will be further drawn out in comparison with Nigeria's experience. We now turn to Nigeria, where the concept of national dialogue has a more extended and more chequered history.

## NIGERIA'S NATIONAL DIALOGUES

Nigeria's quest for a stable and inclusive national framework has prompted several attempts at convening nationwide political dialogues. The two most prominent cases in recent history are the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) of 2005 under President Olusegun Obasanjo and the National Conference (CONFAB) of 2014 under President Goodluck Jonathan (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005, 2014). These conferences were essentially Nigeria's versions of national dialogue—large assemblies of appointed delegates tasked with discussing the country's political and constitutional problems and proposing reforms (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2005, 2014). Unlike Tunisia's ad hoc crisis-driven roundtable, Nigeria's dialogues were more formal, conference-style events, each spanning several months and covering a sweeping range of issues. While both gatherings produced extensive recommendations aimed at addressing Nigeria's structural challenges, both ultimately failed to be translated into concrete reforms, due to a combination of political, procedural, and legitimacy issues.

### *National Political Reform Conference (NPRC), 2005*

After Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, pressures began mounting for a frank national conversation about the terms of the federation (Suberu, 2001). Decades of military rule had suppressed open debate on the national question, but the new democratic era saw resurgent calls for a Sovereign National Conference to address grievances ranging from federal structure and resource control to state-religion relations and minority rights (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). By 2005, President Olusegun Obasanjo—in his second term—acceded to these calls by convening the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC). The NPRC was inaugurated in February 2005 in Abuja, bringing together around 400 delegates drawn from each of Nigeria's 36 states and various stakeholders (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005). Participants included politicians, traditional rulers, academics, professional bodies, and civil society representatives (as selected by the government). The

conference's mandate was broad: to deliberate on the political and constitutional arrangements of Nigeria and recommend changes to strengthen unity, stability, and good governance (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005).

Over the ensuing months (February–July 2005), the NPRC committees debated a host of national issues—electoral reforms, federal structure, the form of government (presidential vs parliamentary), fiscal federalism (revenue sharing), state creation, religious conflicts, and more (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005). The very breadth of the agenda reflected Nigeria's myriad fault lines and the ambition that the conference would comprehensively address them. However, from the outset, the NPRC was dogged by questions of legitimacy and inclusiveness. Key civil society organisations and opposition figures were sceptical of the conference, arguing that its convocation lacked grassroots input and was orchestrated from the top to down (Ibeanu, 2007). Critics pointed out that the delegate selection process was not transparent or democratic—most delegates were appointed by the federal and state governments, which meant the ruling party (PDP at the time) had a significant influence on composition (Aiyede, 2006). This perception that the NPRC was government-owned rather than people-owned led some activist groups to boycott or dismiss it.

Tensions came to a head over suspicions that President Obasanjo intended to use the NPRC to advance a tenure elongation (third term) agenda. Midway through the conference, rumours spread that a constitutional amendment would be introduced to allow the president (who was due to leave office in 2007) to run for a third term (Ibeanu, 2007). This highly controversial issue deeply divided the delegates and the public. A coalition of opposition parties under the banner of the Conference of Nigerian Political Parties (CNPP) vehemently opposed any such move and questioned the motives behind the entire dialogue (Omotola, 2006). Parallel to the official NPRC, a group of prominent pro-democracy activists and opposition figures convened what they called the Pro-National Conference Organisations (PRONACO) conference—essentially a 'shadow' national conference not sanctioned by the government (Jinadu, 2011). PRONACO, led by figures like Chief Anthony Enahoro and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, held its own sessions to draft a 'people's constitution', highlighting the sentiment in some quarters that the official process was not truly sovereign or inclusive.

In the end, the NPRC's final weeks were marred by walkouts and dissent. The delegates did approve a set of recommendations—including some noteworthy ideas like stronger federalism and perhaps an adjusted revenue formula—but no consensus was reached on the most contentious issues (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005). Crucially, the conference collapsed over the issue of presidential tenure: when a committee quietly recommended a constitutional amendment for a third

term, many delegates rejected it, and the proposal failed to pass (Omotola, 2006). The NPRC ended in 2005 without concrete achievements, and its report had little impact. The third term agenda was later formally defeated in the National Assembly in 2006, and Obasanjo left office in 2007 as the constitution required (Suberu, 2007).

Analyses of the NPRC identify several reasons for its failure: first, it lacked buy-in from civil society and key political elites—many saw it as the president’s conference, not a truly national one. Second, the selection process was perceived as biased and undemocratic, limiting the legitimacy of the delegates (for example, women were grossly underrepresented—reportedly only a handful of the 400 delegates were women, giving them virtually no voice in decisions). Third, the NPRC had no legal footing or clear path to implementation—it was an advisory gathering whose recommendations would still need legislative or executive action, which was never guaranteed. Finally, the spectre of ulterior motives (the third-term issue) eroded trust in the process. By the time the NPRC adjourned, whatever goodwill it started with had evaporated, and Nigerians’ cynicism towards government-led dialogues was perhaps deeper than before. The unmet demands for genuine restructuring of the federation continued to simmer, carried forward by various groups in subsequent years.

### *National Conference (CONFAB), 2014*

Nearly a decade later, the idea of a national dialogue re-emerged in Nigeria’s politics. Goodluck Jonathan, who became President in 2010 (initially completing the term of the late President Umaru Yar’Adua and then elected to his own term in 2011), faced growing unrest across Nigeria: an Islamist insurgency (Boko Haram) in the northeast, militancy in the Niger Delta, ethnic tensions in the Middle Belt, and loud calls for ‘restructuring’ from southern leaders (Campbell, 2013). In 2013, as the country inched closer to a tense 2015 general election, President Jonathan convened a new National Conference—widely referred to as the 2014 CONFAB—to address Nigeria’s future. The National Conference was inaugurated in March 2014 in Abuja with much fanfare (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). It assembled 492 delegates representing a cross-section of Nigerians—including delegates nominated by state governments, professional associations, ethnic and regional groups, religious institutions, the diaspora, youth and student bodies, and more (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). The Conference was chaired by retired Chief Justice Idris Legbo Kutigi, lending it an aura of seniority and neutrality (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). For about five months (March to August 2014), the delegates deliberated on Nigeria’s political, economic, and social challenges, organised into 20 committees covering topics such as governance,

devolution of power, national security, politics and electoral matters, judiciary, energy, economy, religion, land tenure, etc (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

The 2014 National Conference (CONFAB) was arguably Nigeria's most ambitious attempt at a comprehensive national dialogue, both in terms of the diversity of delegates and the breadth of issues addressed. Deliberations were often intense, revealing deep-seated divisions in the federation. Contentious themes included the structure of the state (with some delegates advocating the creation of new states or the merger of existing ones), fiscal federalism and revenue allocation, the secular–Sharia balance, regional power-sharing arrangements, resource control by oil-producing areas, and the form of government—specifically the debate between maintaining a presidential system or adopting a parliamentary or hybrid alternative (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Despite these divisions, the Conference successfully reached consensus on hundreds of matters. According to its final report, over 600 resolutions were passed, documented in a report spanning more than 10,000 pages, which was submitted to President Goodluck Jonathan in August 2014 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

Among the most notable recommendations were proposals that echoed long-standing grievances dating back to independence. These included the creation of 18 new states to achieve a more balanced federation by equalising state distribution across the geopolitical zones and addressing minority marginalisation. The CONFAB also proposed revising the revenue allocation formula by reducing the federal government's share and increasing allocations to states—along with potentially raising the derivation percentage for oil-producing regions. Another significant reform was the abolition of the existing local government structure as a constitutionally recognised third tier, allowing states to determine their own local governance models, in part to curb corruption and reduce costs. In terms of political structure, the Conference endorsed a modified presidential system blending presidential and parliamentary features—such as electing a president who must choose a vice president from the legislature and appoint a prime minister. Power rotation was also emphasised: it recommended constitutional provisions to rotate the presidency and other key offices among the six geopolitical zones and within states. Other resolutions included adopting a new national anthem (a return to Nigeria We Hail Thee), granting advisory roles to traditional rulers, and implementing land tenure reforms (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

These recommendations reflected bold attempts to address complaints of marginalisation (more states and rotation to include minorities), over-centralisation (more resources to states, weaker central control over local governments), and political tension (power-sharing mechanisms). When the conference ended, there was a sense among its proponents that if implemented, these resolutions could fundamentally reshape Nigeria for the better. President Jonathan praised



the conference while receiving the report and promised to implement its recommendations, stating that he would forward the constitutional ones to the National Assembly and act on those within executive purview (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

However, translating the 2014 CONFAB's outcomes into reality proved exceedingly difficult. Opposition to the CONFAB and its report emerged swiftly. Sceptics had all along viewed the conference with suspicion, much as with the 2005 NPRC. Some in the opposition (notably figures in the then-opposition party APC) claimed the conference was a political ploy. One narrative was that President Jonathan convened it on the eve of the 2015 elections to placate certain constituencies and possibly to create a campaign talking point, rather than out of genuine intent to restructure Nigeria (Mustapha, 2015). The delegate selection, while broad, was still criticised in some quarters as influenced by the presidency (for example, the President handpicked the chairman and some at-large delegates). This fed a perception that the process lacked full independence and inclusion, especially since some vocal opposition politicians declined to participate, branding it a diversion from more pressing issues, like the Boko Haram insurgency, which was raging at the time (Mustapha, 2015).

By the time the CONFAB report was submitted in late August 2014, political attention was shifting towards the 2015 election. The ruling party's dominance was being challenged by a newly consolidated opposition (Omotola, 2014). Ultimately, President Jonathan lost his re-election bid in March 2015, and Muhammadu Buhari of the APC became president. This electoral outcome was fatal to the CONFAB report's prospects (Campbell, 2015). The incoming administration had little interest in advancing an initiative it had largely opposed. Indeed, the 2014 CONFAB recommendations were effectively shelved—neither the Jonathan government in its final months nor the Buhari government took steps to implement them (Mustapha, 2015). Some proposed ideas (like creating new states or changing the constitution) would have required amendments passing through the National Assembly with super-majorities, a process that was never initiated (Suberu, 2015).

Analysts have identified a number of political and institutional obstacles that contributed to the failure of the 2014 National Conference to effect meaningful change. Chief among these was the timing and political perception of the conference. Convened less than a year before the 2015 general election, many opposition actors viewed the CONFAB as a strategic move by President Jonathan to appeal to southern constituencies and create a political legacy, rather than a genuine attempt at constitutional reform (Mustapha, 2015). This perception weakened bipartisan support and sowed distrust from the outset, particularly among members of the then-opposition All Progressives Congress (APC). The lack of constitutional or legal backing further undermined the conference. Initiated by



executive fiat rather than legislative mandate, the CONFAB lacked legal standing, and its recommendations held no binding authority (Suberu, 2015). The National Assembly did not endorse the process, and many legislators—protective of their constitutional roles—viewed it as an attempt to circumvent established legislative channels (Omotola, 2014).

These dynamics reflect what Tarrow (1998) describes as the fluctuation of political opportunity structures—that is, the perceived openings or constraints in the political system that shape whether actors believe reform is achievable. Nigeria's political climate in 2014, characterised by weak bipartisan support, imminent elections, and executive-legislative dissonance, offered little structural incentive for transformative constitutional change. Without a supportive opportunity structure, even widely endorsed recommendations struggled to gain traction.

Substantive content issues also played a role. The CONFAB's bold and far-reaching recommendations triggered public debate and, in some cases, outright opposition. For instance, the proposal to abolish Nigeria's 774 constitutionally recognised local government areas provoked resistance from local government workers, union leaders, and politicians who saw it as an undemocratic erosion of grassroots representation (Amuche, 2017). Similarly, the call for the creation of 18 new states—while welcomed in some quarters—was met with scepticism about feasibility, sustainability, and the risk of further fragmentation (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). These and other ambitious proposals, though reflective of long-standing grievances, were politically polarising and lacked the broad national consensus needed for constitutional change (Mustapha, 2015).

Furthermore, the absence of an implementation mechanism sealed the report's fate. There was no legally binding process or transitional roadmap for adopting the CONFAB's recommendations—no referendum, no legislative fast-track, and no mechanism for public ratification was provided by the delegates (Suberu, 2015). Implementation was left entirely to the president's discretion, and Jonathan's electoral loss rendered that promise moot. The incoming Buhari administration had different priorities—namely, anti-corruption, security, and economic stabilisation—and showed no intention of revisiting the CONFAB's outcomes (Campbell, 2015). In 2017, President Buhari even commissioned a separate committee on restructuring and effectively bypassed the 2014 report (Mustapha, 2015). Without institutional continuity or political will, the report faded from national discourse, and its ambitious resolutions were left to gather dust on the shelves of history.

Beyond institutional and political explanations, it is also essential to consider the cultural, social, and economic contexts that shaped the divergent outcomes of dialogue in Tunisia and Nigeria. Tunisia's relatively homogenous society—with a shared language (Arabic), dominant religion (Sunni Islam), and a tradition of

secular civic activism rooted in institutions like the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT)—facilitated a stronger civil society platform for mediation (Yerkes, 2017; Gobe, 2015). Nigeria, by contrast, is marked by extreme ethno-religious fragmentation, deep regional disparities, and a long history of violent state-society relations, which complicate consensus-building (Suberu, 2001; Omeje, 2005). Tunisia’s dialogue was forged in the wake of a unifying popular revolution, whereas Nigeria’s dialogues have often been elite-driven, top-down processes with limited grassroots legitimacy (Adeniji & Ibrahim, 2015; Mustapha, 2015).

In sum, Nigeria’s 2014 National Conference demonstrated that even a well-organised and far-reaching dialogue can flounder if the political context is not conducive to implementation. This failure can be further explained through William Zartman’s (2000) Ripeness Theory, which posits that negotiations are most likely to succeed when conflicting parties face a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’ and perceive a way out. In both 2005 and 2014, neither the ruling elites nor aggrieved stakeholders viewed the national condition as ripe for compromise. The absence of this shared urgency weakened the incentive for real concessions and undermined follow-through after the dialogues concluded. While the conference itself showcased moments of unity (its Chairman, Kutigi, famously noted that initial fears of Nigeria breaking up were allayed as ‘we are more united today than ever’, those optimistic vibes did not translate into policy change (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). By 2020, virtually none of the core recommendations (new states, new governance structure, etc.) had been realised in Nigeria’s polity.

Nigeria’s repeated flirtations with national dialogue reflect the depth of its unresolved national issues. The failures of 2005 and 2014 were disappointments, however, calls for dialogue persist. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, voices across Nigeria—former officials, civil society, regional groups—continued to demand a ‘genuine national dialogue’ or restructuring conference to address the country’s contradictions (Akinyemi, 2020). The cycle of unmet expectations has perhaps bred some public cynicism. However, many analysts contend that Nigeria has little choice but to keep trying dialogue in some form, given that forceful suppression of grievances (e.g., military crackdowns on separatists or protest movements) only postpones

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Finally, the persistence and evolution of secessionist movements in Nigeria—especially the resurgence of the Biafra cause—underscore the enduring structural fragility of the Nigerian state. As I argued in a recent review of *Secession and Separatist Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa*, these movements are not anomalies but rather embedded in colonial cartographies, exclusionary state structures, and the political economy of ethno-regional grievances.

crises (Ibeanu & Orji, 2018). The key challenge that remains is how Nigeria can design a national dialogue process that not only avoids the pitfalls of past efforts but also draws lessons from successful models such as Tunisia.

Finally, the persistence and evolution of secessionist movements in Nigeria—especially the resurgence of the Biafra cause—underscore the enduring structural fragility of the Nigerian state. As I argued in a recent review of *Secession and Separatist Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa*, these movements are not anomalies but rather embedded in colonial cartographies, exclusionary state structures, and the political economy of ethno-regional grievances (Ojedokun, 2025). Drawing from comparative African cases such as Eritrea, South Sudan, and Somaliland, the review highlights how the failure of national cohesion efforts—often due to elite capture, military repression, and international non-recognition—has allowed separatist narratives to fester. In Nigeria's

case, the absence of a sustained, inclusive dialogue has meant that secessionist demands continue to re-emerge in various forms—from armed insurgencies in the Niger Delta to the ideological mobilisation of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast. Therefore, a national dialogue that fails to reckon with these deep-seated separatist logics risks becoming another missed opportunity in the country's long quest for unity.

## CONCLUSION: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NIGERIA'S PEACEBUILDING PRAXIS

Drawing on the contrasted experiences of Tunisia and Nigeria, it becomes evident that national dialogue can be a powerful instrument of peace praxis or a damp squib of unmet expectations. For Nigeria, a country still wrestling with violent conflicts, separatist agitations, and crises of national identity, the idea of a National Dialogue remains highly relevant. The question is how to design such a dialogue

to avoid the pitfalls of the past and maximise the chances of success. Below, the paper outlines key lessons from the comparative analysis and recommends strategies for a future national dialogue in Nigeria that could meaningfully contribute to peace and unity in its fragmented federation.

### *Ensure a Credible and Impartial Convenor*

A successful Nigerian national dialogue must be convened or facilitated by actors who are perceived as neutral and fair arbiters. This could take the form of a multi-stakeholder committee of eminent Nigerians (respected former statesmen, religious leaders, elder stateswomen, etc) or a hybrid convenor that includes representatives from government as well as civil society and perhaps the international community as observers (Kew & Oshikoya, 2020). The Tunisian Quartet model—where civil society took the lead—suggests that when the government is a party to the conflict (as in Nigeria’s case on issues of central power), it may need to relinquish sole ownership of the dialogue process. Nigeria could, for instance, empower a neutral body (with constitutional or legal backing from the National Assembly to give it authority) to organise the dialogue. What’s crucial is that key stakeholders, especially those sceptical of the government, have a say in shaping the process from the start. This will help counteract suspicions and encourage buy-in.

### *Foster Genuine Inclusivity—‘All Stakeholders Mean ALL’*

The dialogue’s participant list should be as inclusive as possible of Nigeria’s diverse society—not only the usual political elites. This means significant representation for women, youth, ethnic minorities, religious groups, civil society organisations, traditional rulers, and even armed/non-state groups (wherever feasible). Past conferences had many categories covered on paper but were still elite-heavy. Future dialogues might explore innovative selection methods: for example, some of the delegates could be

In resonance with Stigant and Murray’s (2015) conclusion that the exclusion of disaffected or marginalised groups from national dialogue processes often reinforces the very drivers of conflict that such dialogues are meant to address. Therefore, the inclusive design of a future national dialogue in the Nigerian context is not merely a democratic ideal but a pragmatic necessity for legitimacy and sustainability.

elected or nominated through open consultations by various interest groups rather than being hand-picked by the presidency. Special care should be given to include voices from restive regions—e.g., representatives of pro-Biafra groups, Niger Delta militants (through intermediaries if needed), Middle Belt farmers/herders, etc., so that grievances are aired inside the dialogue instead of on the battlefield. In resonance with Stigant and Murray's (2015) conclusion that the exclusion of disaffected or marginalised groups from national dialogue processes often reinforces the very drivers of conflict that such dialogues are meant to address. Therefore, the inclusive design of a future national dialogue in the Nigerian context is not merely a democratic ideal but a pragmatic necessity for legitimacy and sustainability.

Inclusion also means ample women's representation—learning from 2005's mistake. Nigeria should follow the example of many peace processes that set gender quotas—requiring a minimum percentage of delegates to be women—to ensure that gendered perspectives on peacebuilding and governance are meaningfully included (Olonisakin, Barnes & Ikpe, 2011). Empirical evidence from countries like Liberia, South Sudan, and Rwanda underscores the transformative impact of women's inclusion in national dialogues and post-conflict governance. In Rwanda, following the 1994 genocide, constitutional reforms and electoral quotas established one of the world's highest levels of female parliamentary representation—exceeding 60%—which has helped institutionalise social welfare, gender equity, and reconciliation policies within national governance frameworks (Burnet, 2011). Similarly, in Liberia, women's organisations, notably the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, played a decisive role in pressuring warring factions towards peace. Their advocacy culminated in securing seats at the 2003 Accra Peace Talks, contributing to a gender-sensitive post-conflict settlement and the subsequent election of Africa's first female president (Gbowee, 2011). In South Sudan, the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict explicitly mandated 35% female representation in governance structures—a measure that, while inconsistently implemented, marked a critical acknowledgment of the international norm that peace processes must be inclusive to be sustainable (Olonisakin, Barnes & Ikpe, 2011).

### *Clearly Define the Mandate and Manage the Agenda*

Given Nigeria's plethora of contentious issues, a new national dialogue should have a well-defined mandate that is achievable and not overly broad. One approach might be to prioritise a few fundamental constitutional questions that underlie others. For example, the dialogue could focus on agreeing on a new federal arrangement (number of federating units and their powers), a revenue sharing formula, and mechanisms for power-sharing/rotation—these are core issues that, if

resolved, provide a framework to tackle secondary matters. Other topics could be scheduled for subsequent phases or handled by specialised technical committees. It may also be wise to avoid issues that could derail consensus if they are not essential to the mandate. Tunisia's dialogue deliberately did not try to solve every policy dispute—Nigeria might similarly leave divisive symbolic issues (like anthem or flag changes, or very detailed policy matters) for another day, to keep the dialogue from bogging down. A focused agenda will help maintain momentum and public clarity about the dialogue's purpose.

### *Legalise the Process and its Outcome*

One of the clearest lessons from Nigeria's earlier attempts is the need for an implementation mechanism. The process should be legislated to prevent the dialogue's recommendations from being ignored. For instance, the National Assembly could enact an enabling law that establishes the dialogue, its composition, and stipulates what will happen to its outcomes—such as requiring that agreed recommendations (perhaps above a certain majority threshold) either be automatically sent to a referendum or be introduced in the legislature with fast-track procedures. Another mechanism could be to integrate the dialogue with the formal constitutional amendment process: the dialogue could produce a draft constitution or set of amendments that are then put to a national referendum. If the people ratify them, they become binding, thus bypassing potential legislative sabotage. In short, before the dialogue even begins, all parties should know how its results will be adopted, so that implementation does not depend solely on the goodwill of a possibly new government (as it disastrously did in 2014).

### *Time it Right and Build Consensus Early*

The timing of a national dialogue within a country's political calendar is crucial. Holding such a process too close to general elections—such as Nigeria's 2014 National Conference—risks being overshadowed by electoral

**In Nigeria's context, engaging state governments, opposition leaders, and civil society actors in co-designing the process could increase legitimacy and foster broad-based ownership. If opposition figures endorse the framework from the outset, they are more likely to respect the outcomes, even in the event of a change in government. This approach reflects a transdisciplinary and participatory model—viewing national dialogue not as a one-off event, but as a layered process involving consultation, design, deliberation, and follow-through.**

calculations and partisan positioning. Ideally, a dialogue should occur early in an administration's term or during a relatively stable political period, allowing space for its recommendations to be debated, adopted, and implemented without the distortions of campaign pressures. Moreover, investing in preparatory consultations—what some refer to as a 'pre-dialogue dialogue'—can help build consensus around the dialogue's mandate, rules, and agenda. In Nigeria's context, engaging state governments, opposition leaders, and civil society actors in co-designing the process could increase legitimacy and foster broad-based ownership. If opposition figures endorse the framework from the outset, they are more likely to respect the outcomes, even in the event of a change in government. This approach reflects a transdisciplinary and participatory model—viewing national dialogue not as a one-off event, but as a layered process involving consultation, design, deliberation, and follow-through.

### *Emulate Tunisia's Spirit, Not Just Its Form*

Tunisia's success was not simply due to a formula, but a spirit of compromise that emerged when all sides recognised the necessity of agreement. Nigerian stakeholders—from the federal government to secessionist agitators—must similarly recognise that the country's unity and stability require compromise. Zero-sum approaches have led to stalemates or conflicts. The dialogue should inculcate a 'we are in this together' ethos, possibly through confidence-building measures. For example, ahead of the dialogue, the government could take goodwill steps like releasing certain political detainees or addressing a minor demand of a restive region, to signal seriousness about reconciliation. Conversely, opposition and rebel groups must pause hostile actions to give dialogue a chance. This kind of mutual confidence-building created the space for talks in Tunisia (e.g., suspension of protests when dialogue commenced), and it is equally important in Nigeria's more complex context.

### *Leverage Support but Maintain Ownership*

International actors (the UN, African Union, ECOWAS, etc) and domestic observers (academia, the press) can play supportive roles—offering technical advice, facilitation expertise, or even mediation. However, the process should remain Nigerian-owned to have legitimacy. The African Union's principle of 'African solutions to African problems' could encourage the AU to perhaps co-sponsor or endorse a Nigerian national dialogue, lending continental legitimacy and discouraging spoilers, without undermining local ownership (Murithi, 2009). Similarly, learning from other national dialogues (like those in South Africa,



Kenya, Sudan, etc) through expert exchanges can enrich the process design.

### *Manage Public Expectations and Communicate Progress*

Throughout the dialogue, transparency and communication with the public will be the key requirement. Regular briefings, civic education programmes, and media inclusion can help Nigerians feel invested in the process. This was one aspect Tunisia handled well—the public knew generally what the dialogue was striving for. In Nigeria, given the size and diversity, it is even more important to carry the populace along. A well-informed public can also serve as a moral force pressuring delegates to reach meaningful agreements and pressuring political actors to implement them. It converts the dialogue from a closed-door elite affair to a national movement for change.

In conclusion, national dialogue as peace praxis holds promise for Nigeria, but only if it is approached with lessons of history firmly in mind. The failure of past dialogues in Nigeria was not due to a lack of ideas—indeed, the 2014 Confab report remains a rich repository of suggested reforms. Instead, failure stemmed from process flaws and political reluctance. By addressing those flaws—credibility, inclusivity, mandate focus, legal backing, and commitment to implementation—Nigeria can improve the odds that a future national dialogue will produce the transformative impact of Tunisia’s.

The stakes are high for Nigeria’s fragmented federation. Without a peaceful platform to renegotiate coexistence, agitations will likely turn increasingly violent, and mistrust among groups will further erode national unity. A successful national dialogue could help forge a new consensus on Nigerian federalism, perhaps leading to constitutional amendments that finally settle debates on state structure, resource sharing, and governance frameworks. It could also serve as a cathartic process, allowing historical grievances to be heard and addressed through deliberation rather than conflict.

Ultimately, the Tunisian example teaches that even in moments of profound crisis, dialogue—when well facilitated and sincerely pursued—can yield a ‘courage of compromise’ that saves a nation (Laurence, 2015). With its much longer list of crises, Nigeria would

**With its much longer list of crises, Nigeria would do well to invest in such a dialogue as a proactive peace praxis. The road will not be easy, but the alternative—continuing on the current path of polarisation and sporadic violence—is untenable. A national dialogue, properly executed, offers a path towards a more unified, peaceful, and democratic Nigeria. The time to act on this lesson is now, before further fragmentation makes dialogue even more difficult.**



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# Women Re/Storying their Lived Experiences of Violence and Trauma Using an Arts-Based Peacebuilding Approach

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## ABSTRACT

In conflict-affected settings where violence has shattered lives, women survivors continue to be storied through generic frames and linear intervention models that supersede their personhood and experiences. Drawing from fieldwork with a group of women survivors of violence, this study uses a participatory photography and narrative lens that engages survivors' creative faculties, confers agency in the research process, and creates opportunities for women to re/story their own experiences. The findings demonstrate the continuous tensions women navigate in the healing journey to reclaim personhood, agency, and dignity against entrenched cultural stigmas, marginalisation, and social exclusion. The methods employed facilitate non-linear trauma healing processes and empower survivors to choose their own symbolic frames of representation through images they themselves capture to represent their experiences and narrate their stories. The article suggests that bridging participatory photography and narrative practice can contribute towards the creative re-visioning of addressing psychosocial trauma and healing for survivors whose lives have been ruptured by violence.

## KEYWORDS

Peacebuilding, Violence, Trauma Healing, Narrative, Participatory Photography

## INTRODUCTION

In conflict-affected contexts where violence against women has ruptured individual lives and communities, women survivors continue to be storied through generic frames and linear intervention models that supersede their personhood, agency, and experiences. During the last two decades, the peacebuilding field has advanced arts-based approaches for understanding and addressing conflict, violence, psychosocial trauma, and reconciliation (see Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011; Jeffery, 2024; Lederach, 2013; Lederach & Lederach, 2010; Mitchell et al, 2020; Paterson-Young et al, 2015; Pruitt, 2011; Schirch, 2005; Shank & Schirch, 2008). This visual turn

in peacebuilding to arts-based methods, such as participatory photography, has created new frames for conflict transformation and repair (Baú, 2015; Fairey et al, 2024). More broadly, participatory photography has proven useful in engendering healing, promoting agency in the research process, and supporting posttraumatic growth for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (see Christensen, 2018; Duffy, 2018).

Arts-based methods call for ‘conceptually grounded, elicitive, contextually appropriate and transformative processes’ that can be used together with appropriate peacebuilding tools to address critical problems (Shank & Schirch, 2008: 219). Art as used here is based on a broad understanding and includes a wide range of visual, textual, verbal, and non-verbal art forms. In this sense, arts-based peacebuilding approaches can support non-linear artistic processes that can create opportunities for repair, promote dialogue, and build awareness of salient issues impacting conflict-affected communities (Baú, 2015; Fairey et al, 2024; Smith, 2016). Arts-based methods, therefore, can serve to create spaces and opportunities for people to engage their affective, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, and symbolic faculties (see Cohen, Varea & Walker, 2011; Jeffery, 2024; Lederach & Lederach, 2010; Shank & Schirch, 2008).

To further understanding of how women make sense of their lived experiences in the aftermath of violence, this study utilises a participatory photography and

**Bridging participatory photography and narrative methods supports survivors in exploring traumatic violence in meaningful spaces that enable them to re/story their own experiences, facilitates artistic and non-linear healing processes, and shifts the emphasis from externally imposed framings to survivor inspired.**

narrative lens that draws on fieldwork with a group of Indonesian women. In contrast to the ways in which photography is used to impose dominant perspectives and voices, and to perpetuate images of women’s victimisation, participatory photography offers women survivors the opportunity to engage with traumatic experience and healing using frames that they themselves choose to capture (see Christensen, 2018; Duffy, 2018). The findings from this study demonstrate that bridging participatory photography and narrative methods supports survivors in exploring traumatic violence in meaningful spaces that enable them to re/story their own experiences, facilitates artistic and non-linear healing processes, and shifts the emphasis from externally imposed framings to survivor inspired.

This study uses an inclusive definition of violence against women, which is informed by

that of the United Nations (UN). According to the UN, violence against women (VAW) is ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’ (WHO, 2024).

## WIDENING THE TRAUMA HEALING LENS FOR SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

It is widely agreed that the social context prior to, during, and post-conflict shapes how individuals, groups, and communities experience and navigate the aftermath of violence (see Bracken, 2002; Kirmayer, Lemelson & Barad, 2007). According to Yoder (2005), ‘understanding trauma-physiologically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually may help to explain a wide range of phenomenon, including feelings of insecurity, loss of cultural identity, racism, or extreme nationalism, and violence in general’ (p.6). In contrast to ordinary stress that people experience in daily life, traumatic events ‘involve threats to lives or bodies, produce terror and feelings of helplessness, overwhelms an individual’s or group’s ability to cope or respond to the threat, lead to a sense of loss or control, and challenge a person’s or group’s sense that life is meaningful and orderly’ (Yoder, 2005: 10).

Considering contextual relevance and the complexity of traumatic experience in conflict-affected contexts, constructions of trauma and approaches vary significantly (see for example Dwyer & Santikarma, 2007; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Hamber & Gallagher, 2015; Hinton et al, 2013; Robben & Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Trauma healing for survivors of violence is a complex, multidimensional, and enduring process that necessitates multiple culturally competent approaches (see Hamber & Gallagher, 2015; Jeffery, 2024; Lederach, 2013; Lederach & Lederach, 2010; Yoder, 2005). In underscoring the importance of understanding the full impacts of traumatic events, Yoder (2005) highlights the limitations of dominant biomedical frameworks and raises ongoing concerns regarding the use of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) framework in non-Western societies, in large-scale events, and to address on-going traumas.

Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad (2007) posit that ‘trauma is not a natural category, but a culturally constructed way to mark out certain classes of events’ (p.4). Growing concerns over the general application of the PTSD model with diverse populations highlight its limitations in understanding individuals’ polysemic experiences (see Bracken et al, 1995; Drozdek & Wilson, 2007; Good & Hinton, 2016; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Summerfield, 1995). Cultural factors play an important role in determining the degree of rupture and dislocation individuals face in times of conflict, and how they cope with, manage, and seek help to address their

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suffering (Summerfield, 2000; Good & Hinton, 2016). Scholars note that 'while the symptoms of PTSD may be identifiable across distinct cultures and contexts, the diagnostic construct captures a very limited part of the experience, concerns, and needs of survivors' (see Drozdek & Wilson, 2007; Good & Hinton, 2016; Hinton & Kirmayer, 2013; Kirmayer, Lemelson & Barad, 2007: 4) .

Notwithstanding these concerns, it is accepted within the trauma literature that dominant models used to diagnose and treat trauma are effective in revealing aspects of survivors' trauma experience, and the effects of trauma can impact individuals in similar ways across cultures. The following section discusses the combined methods of participatory photography and narrative practice employed in this study. It highlights the usefulness of these

approaches for working with survivors of violence and trauma.

## METHODS: PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE PRACTICE

### *Participatory Photography*

Originally conceived as a form of social action research to empower disadvantaged communities, the Photovoice method of participatory photography has been adapted for use across a wide range of disciplines and purposes to stimulate discussion and change at individual, group, and community levels. The Photovoice method was developed by Wang and Burris (1997) and is based on providing participants with a camera to take photographs. Participants then share their experiences through their own voices and chosen images in efforts to advance community development and policy changes (see Wang, 1999, 2006; Wang & Pies, 2004). Photovoice has been implemented with various groups who have experienced different forms of violence and trauma, including the use of Photovoice as a therapeutic intervention for women survivors of gendered violence (Christensen, 2018).

Research that focuses on trauma healing for women survivors of violence tends to draw primarily from clinical, health, and psychological perspectives that largely dominate the literature. Scholars highlight different approaches that have been used to address trauma 'including psychoeducation (Herman, 1992), cognitive



interventions (Kubany & Watson, 2002; Resick & Schnicke, 1992), and mindfulness approaches (Briere, 2012)’ (cited in Christensen, 2018). According to Rolbiecki et al (2016), treatment of trauma symptoms that are mainly based on cognitive and behavioural interventions ‘are not specifically designed to foster posttraumatic growth and empowerment for survivors’ and ‘some women do not fully respond to these treatments, and symptoms continue to resurface over time’ (p.242).

Photovoice has proven useful in supporting women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence since it enables survivors to engage with traumatic experience beyond the textual dimension and it creates opportunities for survivors to engage different faculties towards enabling posttraumatic growth (see Christensen, 2018; Rolbiecki et al, 2016). In some Photovoice studies participants are invited to select images for a group/community reflection process. Group dialogue and reflection on the images displayed can take place in a public community gathering or within the study group. This aspect of the Photovoice method encourages people to listen to each other’s stories and bear witness to their own suffering and the suffering of others, which can help in building understanding, to open dialogue, and to inspire mindset change.

Studies have shown the positive impacts of Photovoice in enabling people to process trauma, reduce anxiety, process difficult emotions, encourage deeper understanding and self-regard, and build hope and resilience (cited in Fairey et al, 2024; see also Baú, 2015; Christensen, 2018; Duffy, 2018; Smye et al, 2021). The Photovoice method has also been used to further understanding of peace in conflict-affected communities in Colombia (Fairey et al, 2024), to promote dialogue and open lines of communication after violence in Kenya (Baú, 2015), and to investigate the discursive politics and gendered violence that shape women’s experiences in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina (Smith, 2016). The use of participatory photography can promote an elicitive, contextually sensitive, and culturally relevant approach, in which participants have agency in the research process and are valued as co-creators (Fairey et al, 2024).

For this study the Photovoice method was adapted to work with women survivors of trauma resulting from physical and sexual violence in an Indonesian cultural context. Based on survivors’ concerns this study did not include public engagement as part of the participatory photography process. The photographs

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taken by the participants in this study were used specifically to elicit narratives to understand the ways survivors engage with experiences of traumatic violence and healing in their lives. The images survivors took were used to support the evolution of narrative in the reflexive conversational process between the researcher and participants during in-depth interviews.

### *Narrative Practice*

A therapeutic narrative approach, according to Madigan (2011), proposes that 'the complexity of life, and how lives are lived, is mediated through the expression of the stories we tell' (p.30). Consistent with this proposition and using a multi-storied concept, White and Epston (1990) assert that 'stories are shaped by the surrounding dominant cultural context, and the stories that are told or not told are performed, live through us, and have abilities to both restrain and liberate our lives' (cited in Madigan 2011: 30). Traumatic experience damages the threads that give meaning to people's lives, and the trauma ruptures the individual's ability to narrate the experience itself (Brison, 2002; Langer, 1991). The overwhelming sense of loss, insecurity, fractured moral agency, and damaged identity that result from trauma shatters the individual's world and disrupts her sense of meaning making in daily life (see Brison, 2002; Langer, 1991; Nelson, 2001; Yoder, 2005).

When violence has disrupted meaning making, the 'performance of new meanings and the generation of new stories' can emerge in 'externalising conversations', which can help people 'to unravel some of the negative conclusions they have usually reached about their identity under the influence of the problem' and highlight 'unique outcomes' from both a current and a historical perspective (White, 2007: 26; White & Epston, 1990). White (2007) calls attention to the 'selective aspects of lived experience that are deemed meaningful and often become the familiar storylines of our lives versus those that do not'. According to White (2007), the 'unregistered events and experiences' in people's lives can be 'potentially significant' for providing entry points for people to develop 'alternative story lines' (p.219). The narrative practitioner supports the evolution of narrative through a reflexive process of generative dialogue and conversation with the individual.

A critical narrative perspective therefore recognises the intersectionality of personhood, and can challenge notions of unquestioned authority, power and privilege in the dominant discourse (Madigan, 2011). According to Madigan (2011), unlike conventional psychological approaches, 'narrative therapy places the site of the problem within the relational action of person, culture, discourse, power, and, as a result, not inside the person's body' (p.65). As women re/story their lived experiences of violence they can develop alternative storylines and

counterstories that contest, resist, and have the potential to shift essentialised constructions of victimhood and marginalisation (Nelson, 2001; White, 2007). Survivors are then able to reclaim agency in the complexity of their own stories. The narrative framework adopted in this study draws upon the interconnected processes of ‘narrative elaboration’, which adds complexity back into the story (Cobb, 2013); ‘externalisation’ of the trauma narrative, which can support a deeper understanding of the issue, trauma processing, and emergent narratives (White, 2007); and ‘re/storying’, which can support the development of alternative storylines and counterstories (Brison, 2002; Nelson, 2001; White, 2007). A critical narrative framework together with participatory photography engages both visual imagery and narrative processes that can open unique entry points for survivors to reflect on their experiences.

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research presented in this article is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the city of Yogyakarta in Java, Indonesia, during 2018. This study examines how women survivors make sense of their lived experiences of violence and trauma healing using a combined participatory photography and narrative approach. The study was conducted over four weeks with five women, all of whom had experienced some form of physical/sexual violence in her life. Participants ages ranged from 20 to 45 years, and each had prior exposure to some form of support services. Participants were recruited with the help of a local organisation in Yogyakarta. This study was designed and implemented by the author with input from participants to support their concerns and needs. Necessary steps were also taken to avoid re-traumatisation and secondary trauma to the extent possible, and full consent was obtained from the five participants. Understanding the sensitive nature of working with violence survivors, attention was placed on research ethics and relational dynamics by creating safe, context-sensitive, and supportive spaces for discussion.<sup>1</sup>

This study is based on three interconnected parts implemented in the following sequence:

- (a) focus group discussion;
- (b) a participatory photography process with in-depth interviews; and
- (c) a workshop on strategies for building trauma awareness and resilience.

The research presented in this article is based on the focus group discussion and the photography

The overwhelming sense of loss, insecurity, fractured moral agency, and damaged identity that result from trauma shatters the individual's world and disrupts her sense of meaning making in daily life.

component. Each participant was provided with an introduction to basic photography techniques and guidance on the process. Each survivor was then given a disposable film camera with five days to take photographs. Participants were each asked to select two photographs for discussion during the in-depth interviews. The process of capturing the images themselves, choosing which two photographs they wished to discuss during the interviews, and the illumination of only those aspects of their stories they wished to share gave participants agency in the research process.

The study was conducted in English with Bahasa Indonesian language translation support from local research partners who were proficient in English. Participants were also conversant in English. The data analysed in this article is drawn from the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews. Although the narratives analysed are primarily representative of participants' voices, due to the nature of interpretation and analysis the findings presented are also reflective of the analysis of the author. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using a narrative thematic analysis that allowed for the emergence of key themes from the narrative data. Challenges included the limited study duration, the language barrier, and logistical and resource constraints. Since privacy was a key concern for participants, pseudonyms bearing no relation to real identities are used in this article.

## RESEARCH FOCUS AND THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

Considering the diversity of peoples, geographies, cultures, and histories in Indonesia, this study does not treat Indonesian women as a homogenous group nor is it representative of Indonesian women's experiences in general. It is also important to note that this study does not present an investigation of violence against women (VAW) in Indonesia, rather, it places emphasis on exploring how women survivors make sense of violence and trauma healing in their lives using an arts-based peacebuilding approach. However, as the research progressed, it became clear that women's experiences of violence and their notions of identity, womanhood, and morality are deeply intertwined with the Indonesian discourse on these issues (see Brenner, 2011; Dasilva et al, 2025; Kuntjara, 1997; Platt et al, 2018; Porter, 2003; Wieringa, 2002, 2003, 2015). As such, the findings highlight the tensions between survivor narratives, social marginalisation, cultural and gender norms, and the stigmas that function to shape women's experiences.

Indonesian women are exposed to potential violence in public, private, and cyber spaces. The 2024 National Women's Life Experience Survey (SPHPN) found that one of every four women in Indonesia has experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence in her lifetime (UNFPA, 2024). And many cases of sexual violence often involve family members as perpetrators. The

Indonesian government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) three decades ago and passed a Domestic Violence Law in 2004 and a Sexual Violence Crimes Law in 2022 (UNFPA, 2024). The government has since committed to take active measures to address VAW, including laws and policy adoption, awareness campaigns, education, advocacy, and communal provision of support services (UNFPA, 2024). The widespread occurrence of VAW in Indonesia points to the grave challenges facing the Indonesian government, and advocacy, human rights, women's rights, and other social and activist groups in fighting against the normalisation of VAW in the country.

Issues related to VAW include silence, underreporting, limited support services, lack of justice, and problematic cultural norms and expectations that engender social marginalisation of survivors (see Dasilva et al, 2025; Hamdy & Hudri, 2022). Notwithstanding the formal existence of government laws, policies, and frameworks, scholars highlight critical concerns regarding policy adaptation and implementation (Wolter et al, 2024) and data accuracy and reporting (Khaerul et al, 2021). Additionally, the dominant gender discourse, norms, and cultural constructions of womanhood are deeply embedded in the discourse and narratives that have been promoted by the state and non-state actors over successive political movements in Indonesia's contemporary history (see for example Dwyer, 2004, 2009; Platt et al, 2018; Porter, 2003; Wieringa, 2002, 2003, 2015).

According to Wieringa (2015), the discourse on women and gender issues can be traced to three separate political movements when a particular form of women's sexuality, morality, and subjectivity entered the public consciousness of contemporary Indonesia. Wieringa (2015) claims that state institutions and conservative religious groups restrict women's rights and curtail advancements towards women's empowerment and gender equality. In the fight to advance gender reform, women's organisations, which have existed in Indonesia since the beginning of the early twentieth century, have both challenged and fought to maintain traditions, gender norms, and discourses that function to construct Indonesian women's roles and identities (see Kuntjara, 1997; Platt et al, 2018; Porter, 2003; Wieringa, 2002, 2003, 2015). These salient issues underscore women's ongoing struggles with contested notions of identity, gender, religion, morality, and sexuality that are cloaked in discourses promoted by state and non-state actors in Indonesia.

Despite ongoing efforts to address VAW, advance women's rights, and promote gender reform, the cultural norms and social marginalisation associated with VAW continue to negatively impact survivors and the widespread incidence of VAW remains a critical problem across Indonesia (Hamdy & Hudri, 2022; UNFPA, 2024; Wolter et al, 2024). In the following section the findings from this study are

presented, which draw upon survivor narratives to highlight and trace intersectional aspects of women's experiences of violence and trauma healing as they navigate personal and social challenges to reclaim personhood, dignity, and agency.

## TRAUMA, SOCIAL MARGINALISATION, AND THE REPAIR OF FRACTURED IDENTITIES

Scholars have demonstrated that the profound feelings of emotional suffering, fractured moral agency, and damaged identity that result from traumatic experience disrupt individuals' sense of meaning making (Brison, 2002; Langer, 1991; Nelson, 2001). Drawing upon her own experience of sexual violence, Brison (2002), offers a compelling analysis of the complexity of the experience of trauma, and the journey to recovery that the individual confronts in the aftermath of rape. In her attempt to give voice to the 'unspeakable' experience of sexual violence, Brison (2002) draws attention to the power of narrative and the relational aspects of recovery in enabling survivors of sexual violence to slowly piece together their shattered lives and to begin the process of identity repair. Personal identity according to Nelson (2001) is a 'complicated interaction of one's own sense of self and others' understanding of who one is, [which] functions as a lever that expands or contracts one's ability to exercise moral agency' (p.xi).

Identities in this sense are 'narratively constructed and narratively damaged', and therefore, allow for the possibility of narrative repair for damaged identities (Nelson, 2001: xii). The participants in this study observed that survivors are

'People think it is normal for women to experience domestic violence, it's the woman's duty to serve, and cases of sexual and gender-based violence are taboo and look bad...women don't get enough support'.

treated as 'crazy' or 'damaged' in private and public spheres. In their attempts to negotiate their sense of self in the aftermath of violence, participants still find themselves constrained today, not only by how the dominant culture treats survivors of sexual/physical violence, but also by their own self-doubt, self-blame, and sense of loss. Commenting on how women survivors are constructed in the society in relation to her experience, Nayla says, 'people think it is normal for women to experience domestic violence, it's the woman's duty to serve, and cases of sexual and gender-based violence are taboo and look bad...women don't get enough support'. Another survivor, Kartika, shares the following:

It's not common to talk about past bad experiences. People have difficulty describing their trauma. For

me trauma can cause certain emotions and feelings related to anxiety, guilt, self-blame. It makes me uncomfortable. It is something that I don't want to remember. Even the psychologists and psychiatrists, including women therapists judge women who have experienced sexual violence and treat them like they are crazy. The notion of expressing trauma or feelings around your experience is perceived as a personal flaw. The women often blame themselves and feel guilty sharing their experience. They feel they have no power in this situation, and they cannot do anything, her experience is dismissed.

(Author interview, Kartika, 2018)

These accounts demonstrate that women survivors constantly navigate between their own sense of self-worth versus whom the dominant society deems to be worthy of full moral respect. And this ongoing mental battle weaves a web of self-doubt into the narrative threads of the survivor's consciousness. This type of harm to women's personal identity, which Nelson (2001) calls 'infiltrated consciousness', limits the survivor's ability to express her own moral agency (p.xii). During the focus group discussion, survivors highlighted the challenges they face negotiating their own internal struggles with the way VAW survivors are treated in the wider community. Indah states that 'support for sexual violence victims is difficult to find because sexual violence issues are taboo. Even to express the experience is very hard because people will judge you. They will judge your actions, and your dress, and it makes the trauma worse'.

Gadis shares the following regarding her own internal struggles:

I have two internal voices. They contradict each other, I judge myself, I have self-blame, why did I let the assault happen? Why didn't I run? Why didn't I know? I also have another voice saying no—you sensed it, you tried to hide. Why didn't anyone try to find me?

(Author interview, Gadis, 2018)

The narratives of Nayla, Kartika, and Gadis reveal the deeply entrenched cultural and gender norms, stigmas, and stereotypes that serve to police women's suffering and identities in the wider society. Additionally, ideas of what it means to be a 'good', acceptable, and moral woman as highlighted in survivors' observations are deeply entangled with the dominant discourse and policing of women's identities (see Wieringa, 2002, 2015). Women's narratives reveal aspects of their fractured identities, the loss of ability to make sense of their experience at times, and their longing to achieve self-conscious personhood (Nelson, 2001). Survivors'

**Women's stories of sexual and gender-based violence are subject to condemnatory reception, which reinforces dominant power relations and contributes to the perpetuation of cultural stigmas and social marginalisation associated with VAW.**

narratives also underscore how the impositions of moral and dress codes for women function to constrain women's subjectivity and continually attempt to measure women's morality against dominant interpretations in the society (see Hamdy & Hudri, 2022; Wieringa, 2015).

Survivors also observe that sexual violence is relegated to the private, domestic sphere, and according to the dominant moral underpinnings of the society should be kept silent and within the family. Indah shares that she is haunted by her 'bad memories', she says that she feels 'bad, guilty, sad, and alone' sometimes, and that people consistently 'judge' her. People judge the clothes she wears, her physical body, and they call her names. Like Kartika and Gadis, Indah is left continually grappling with

her shifting sense of identity and what it means to be accepted in the social realms of family, community, and society. The women's narratives reveal how they continually grapple with their sense of self-worth against social exclusion and the cultural norms that cast a shadow over their moral worth.

Fears of stigmatisation and marginalisation prevent some women from seeking help and from speaking out about their experiences of violence, which may negatively impact posttraumatic growth for some survivors. Since sexual/physical violence against women is viewed as a private matter to be kept within the family, survivors fear that if their identity and story were exposed it could impact their job, their personal lives, and external perceptions of their capabilities and psychological state of mind. As such, women's stories of sexual and gender-based violence are subject to condemnatory reception, which reinforces dominant power relations and contributes to the perpetuation of cultural stigmas and social marginalisation associated with VAW. In this sense, silence protects women from humiliation and social marginalisation, while at the same time, it inhibits reporting and help-seeking behaviour and places the burden of sexual/physical violence on the woman.

Since stigmatisation and marginalisation occurs in private and public spheres, survivors observed that they and many women fear that speaking out about their experience 'will cause more harm than help', and so they remain silent about their experiences. Speaking about their fear of exposure and the ways in which cultural stigmas impact their lives, Kartika and Indah shared the following during the focus group discussion.

Women's issues are getting worse because of the secrecy and not wanting anyone else to know about their experience. I don't have courage to share in public. In my work they know I am strong... They could take advantage of my personal issues to attack me. They will bring personal issues into my [professional] issues. It will affect my work and [the people] I try to help. It's a choice.

(Kartika, 2018)

I feel ungrateful when I talk about my own struggles and challenges, because people judge your experience and say other people have worse lives than you. So I have that in my head. Half of my self believes that, and half of me believes that each struggle is different. It is tough to talk about my experience because my mind is controlled and dominated by the stigma.

(Indah, 2018)

The focus group discussion provided a meaningful and safe space for women to openly engage in a shared group dynamic. Survivors were able to elaborate upon and question their own understanding and beliefs as they bore witness to the stories of other women in the group. In addition to the focus group discussion, the participatory photography and narrative processes of externalisation, elaboration, and re/storying also enabled participants to explore deeper insights and understanding in their experiences.

Brison (2002) claims that a narrative 'is a social interaction—actual or imagined or anticipated or remembered—in which what gets told is shaped by the (perceived) interests of the listeners, by what the listeners want to know and also by what they cannot or will not hear' (p.102). This emphasises the complexities of the narrative process, including its limitations, and the fundamental relational character of the self (Brison, 2002). To illustrate the narrative disjuncture between notions of the self and the perceptions of others, and the normalisation of violence in the society, I draw upon the observations of Nayla regarding her experience of violence. She says:

Not everyone can accept my experience. People think it is not unusual, they think it is normal and nothing special. It hurt me a lot physically, psychologically, and emotionally, it's terrible. Now I live with it. I feel unworthy. I need people to hear me, believe what my experience is, and accept me for who I am now...if they don't accept me, it is difficult... now I live with my disabilities.

(Author interview, Nayla, 2018)



Nayla's narrative underscores her desire to live with acceptance, dignity, and respect for self and from others, while simultaneously being able to live with the woundedness of her traumatic experience. According to Brison (2002) 'one's survival as an autonomous self' is deeply intertwined with the ways in which 'the self is created and sustained by others and, thus, is able to be destroyed by them' (p.62). In the preceding narrative example, Nayla's fundamental assumptions of herself, the embodied suffering of the violence she experienced, and the personal and societal narratives she continually negotiates are in continuous tension with what Brison (2002) describes as the survivor's autonomous self. Here, the individual's autonomous self is shaped by the extent of others' 'ability and willingness to listen', as well as by the stories others tell, and the survivor's own ability to narrate her experience (Brison, 2002: 62).

One survivor observes that 'people don't want to know the reasons behind the issue [sexual/physical violence] because of the potential consequences'. This observation highlights the challenges around talking about sexual/physical violence without being stigmatised and underscores the ways in which 'women's suffering is suppressed'. From this perspective, the dominant discourse that circulates in the society reinforces an oppressive system that continually works to construct women survivors of sexual/physical violence as inferior and undeserving of full acceptance. Women are therefore caught in a psychological and emotional battle between their autonomous selves and what it means to be a VAW survivor within a dominant culture that dictates who is worthy of moral respect and which stories are worthy of expression.

## TRAUMATIC MEMORY, RUPTURE, AND RECLAIMING THE SELF

Survivor narratives call attention to the shifting and variable ways in which they grapple with trauma memories in their daily lives as they simultaneously confront cultural stereotypes and social marginalisation. Here, I draw upon Langer's (1991) work with holocaust testimonies, which offers some useful insights into how traumatic memory shapes trauma narratives. Langer (1991) describes 'anguished memory' as a type of memory that occurs when 'the past of the disaster casts its net over a redeeming future and corrupts its purity' (p.75). To illustrate this point, I draw on aspects of Kartika's narrative elaboration. Haunted by the violence of her past, Kartika shares that every time she tries to share a children's story, the story she narrates to her children often has a 'terrifying ending that leads to the [her] expression of tears and crying'.

Kartika says, 'It's terror for me to tell them stories. I don't want to, but it's like that, it's dark.' The storytelling act overwhelms Kartika emotionally and

psychologically. Here, the anguished memory of Kartika's traumatic experience is deeply interwoven into the constructed storytelling process that Kartika engages in with her children. In this example, anguished memory has corrupted the narrative purity of what is for Kartika the act of storytelling itself. Kartika's experience also points to the ways in which anguished memory transcends generational boundaries and can work to shape the experience of new generations for whom the original traumatic experience may be unknown.

Kartika's traumatic memory is also representative of a kind of 'deep memory', which prevents the imagination from finding refuge from the violent assaults that shatter the individual's sense of meaning making (Langer, 1991). In this sense, the deep memory of the traumatic experience of sexual/physical violence acts to cast a shadow over the life of Kartika today (Langer, 1991). While Kartika is a storyteller, she is also hostage to a painful traumatic past that defies language itself (Langer, 1991). Illustrating the experience of both anguished and deep memory, Nayla says:

It happened. I didn't want to experience it. It is an unplanned situation when memory rises. It makes me feel guilty, I have bad dreams and nightmares, I lose confidence and feel inferior and afraid.

(Author interview, Nayla, 2018)

Based on Kartika's and Nayla's accounts, traumatic memory is not "chosen," but is rather 'inflicted' (Brison, 2002: 69). These survivor narratives point to the ways in which survivors of sexual/physical violence wrestle with their experiences in non-linear, random, and chaotic fragments, pointing to the notion that traumatic memory and trauma narratives are neither linear, sound, nor continuous (paraphrasing Brison, 2002). Additionally, some emotional aspects of trauma cannot be experienced, and thus narrated, until the survivor has already made a certain amount of progress towards recovery, whatever that may be for the individual (Brison, 2002). Kartika describes the unsettling and ongoing impacts of her traumatic experience as follows:

It's up and down. It's difficult to manage anger sometimes. I am easily triggered by simple things. I target my anger to those who contributed to the experience I had. I feel like I don't deserve to be happy. I'm doubtful about healing. I have constant bad dreams. I am easily triggered by simple things.

(Author interview, Kartika, 2018)

Since traumatic memory and trauma narratives are neither linear nor continuous, survivor narratives call attention to the significance of arts-based methods such

**Since traumatic memory and trauma narratives are neither linear nor continuous, survivor narratives call attention to the significance of arts-based methods such as participatory photography in facilitating non-linear processes and enabling survivors to creatively explore emergent aspects of trauma healing through engaging different faculties.**

as participatory photography in facilitating non-linear processes and enabling survivors to creatively explore emergent aspects of trauma healing through engaging different faculties. The unspeakable and disruptive aspects of traumatic memory that Kartika and Nayla underscore shatters their attempts at sense-making and infiltrates their consciousness with fear, doubt, insecurity, and volatile emotional states that make it difficult to integrate aspects of the traumatic experience. Writing about her personal experience of sexual violence, Brison (2002) states that the 'communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events, not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can be reintegrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world', but also that this process enables survivor reintegration 'into a community, re-establishing bonds of

faith and trust in others' (p.xi). Of the five women who participated in this creative process, one had never shared her story within a group setting before. She says of her experience bearing witness in the group, 'talking like this is good'.

As the research process evolved, survivors became more trusting of the group, the researcher, the process, and themselves, as they began to exercise their imagination to share and reclaim their stories. The participatory photography and narrative approach used in this study enabled survivors to explore re/storying and meaning making processes that engaged different faculties to help them in their long-term efforts towards slowly building trust and reclaiming to some degree their own sense of self-acceptance, self-worth, agency, and imagination. Speaking to the complexity of trauma and its long-term impacts, Nayla shared the following about her experience:

When I get mental support, it helps a little. I feel happy and accepted when people can accept my past... I felt desperate, lost hope, really ashamed it happened. I still feel the trauma rise and it's never gone.

(Author interview, Nayla, 2018)

As the study progressed along with their reflections and engagement with the photography component, survivors were able to narrate aspects of their experiences that emerged through their reflective processes. Nayla, chose to take some photos

in a nature park. Engaging with the visual imagery of the photographs that she chose during the interview process, Nayla elaborated on her experience of living with the aftermath of violence. Describing her trauma healing experience with a photograph of a park she visited, Nayla says, 'I feel stronger now...sometimes it's bad also, but if I can tell myself I am strong, then it helps, but it's hard...I know how to heal myself. I visit places of nature that I like' (indicating the picture she took of a nature park).

Since the research process enabled survivors to choose their own frames of symbolic representation and to narrate aspects of their stories that they themselves chose to share, survivors expressed agency, creativity, and ownership in their own trauma healing journeys. Pointing to her second photograph, an image of a cat, Nayla shares:

I feel peaceful and calm with the cat. It makes me laugh when I am stressed or feeling emotional again. The cat makes me calm. It makes me forget about my stress and trauma. The way the cat behaves makes me feel funny. I love cats. The cat suddenly comes to my room and when I pet the cat I feel like I exist. It gives me hope. The cat gives me a feeling of hope. I feel love. It is a different language with the cat. The cat cannot talk to me. I feel like the cat understands me and I feel humans cannot accept me for who I am. Not everyone can accept my experience.

(Author interview, Nayla, 2018)

Nayla's narratives indicate the movement towards a sense of self-worth and self-acceptance in defiance of the lack of acceptance by the dominant society. In a way, she is confronting oppressive narratives that constrain women's roles by spending time in a park in the countryside alone, where she finds 'a sense of healing and emotional calm'. Nayla is actively engaging with and reclaiming her sense of self and identity. White (2007) states that in the process of constructing alternative storylines that can contain 'significant events or experiences that may have been previously neglected or invisible, people often work to recruit their lived experience, to stretch their minds, to exercise their imagination, and to employ their meaning-making resources' (p.62). The evolution of Nayla's narrative identity illuminates her efforts to recruit her identity and reclaim her experience.

Participants also found some degree of emotional satisfaction in their creative processing. Speaking to her experience with the research process, Nayla shared that she enjoyed the photography aspect and that she went to the countryside to take photos—a place where she finds healing and inspiration. During her explorations in the countryside, she says, 'I saw women working in the rice fields and I felt hope', she continued, 'I found a park and I felt peaceful around the

plants and flowers.’ Nayla’s narratives reveal the ongoing struggles she confronts in her efforts to live with her experience of violence, her internal negotiation with societal acceptance for who she is now, and the impact this has on her sense of identity and self-worth.

Through the artistic processes, survivors returned to places and activities that they had forgotten or had not engaged with for a long time or felt they had lost. One survivor remembered how much she loved drawing, another found renewed inspiration in collage making, and one found greater appreciation for the beauty of nature. Another illustration of the processes of identity repair, creative agency, and the reclamation of the self is illustrated in the following narrative excerpt. This narrative is related of one of the photos Santika took that depicted an image of wild grass. She says:

This picture helped me to relate to myself. It is wild grass flowers—grass which is not useful for others. But it reminded me of my childhood. I used to walk and pick flowers and make a headband. The flowers were swaying in the wind. They have shadows. Moving without clear direction. They are wild, beautiful, swaying. The swaying movement helps my mind to be clear. They never say grass is beautiful. Grass can grow anywhere, and they are wild and still beautiful. Where I took the picture, the afternoon is very beautiful during sunset. The environment, mood—it is the first time I encountered it in this way, in this light, setting—it is unique. This is me. People think this [wild grass] would be useless, but people who know me will stop and take note. The top, young [wild grass] flower, is striving for the light with confidence—this is me.

(Author interview, Santika, 2018)

In this example, Santika reflects upon and recognises places in herself where she is challenged. Santika engages with her narrative self as she navigates her own sense of identity in relation to the social marginalisation she confronts in her life. Through the artistic process, she reclaims a sense of confidence and self-worth in relation to the dominant societal norms that she resists and struggles against. The sense of autonomy and freedom depicted by the ‘swaying’ wild grass in Santika’s chosen image represents her desire for inclusion and moral acceptance in the society as she struggles against the stigmatisation and social marginalisation that she and many women survivors confront in their daily lives.

Santika begins with ‘It helped me to relate to myself. It is grass flowers—not useful for others.’ Here, she draws a parallel to the ways in which the dominant society often views women survivors—as ‘damaged’ and ‘crazy’—just as wild grass is often perceived as being of little use or value. In her final statement, Santika’s

expression functions to disrupt and challenge the dominant stories told about women survivors in the society. She illustrates the possibility of the journey of remaking and reclaiming the self with the final words: ‘The top, young [wild grass] flower is striving for the light with confidence—this is me.’ This narrative excerpt illustrates Santika’s encounter with repair of her narrative identity. The re/storying of her experience emerges as she develops her own counterstory (Nelson, 2001) that resists the dominant discourse that treats women survivors of violence as inferior and undeserving of moral respect.

In *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach writes, ‘the artistic process initially breaks beyond what can be rationally understood and then returns to a place of understanding that may analyze, think it through, and attach meaning to it. This is much like the process of reconciliation. Brokenness wanders all over our souls. Healing requires a similar journey of wandering’ (2005: 160). In the artistic processes that constituted this study, the emergent narratives of Kartika, Gadis, Indah, Nayla, and Santika capture the essence of the enduring and fluctuating journey of brokenness and healing that confronts those who live with the aftermath of violence and trauma. In their ongoing and undulating inner struggle, survivors remembered and reclaimed, even if only temporarily, places within themselves, and beyond, in the long journey of trauma healing.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the survivor narratives presented in this article, it is evident that the visual images together with the narrative processes employed open spaces for self-inquiry, self-regard, self-compassion, and narrative expression, which can sometimes remain inaccessible for some survivors of sexual/physical violence (Brisson, 2002). Significantly, the two photographs chosen by each woman to represent her experience provided unique entry points for the potential of narrative repair, re/storying, and the development of alternative storylines by the women themselves. With the understanding that aspects of traumatic experience remain unspeakable until the individual arrives at some point of emotional healing (Brisson, 2002), bridging visual photography (non-textual) and narrative methods supports the evolution of narrative in safe and meaningful ways. These enabled survivors to engage in trauma healing processes and to express only those aspects of their experience that emerged as narratable in the moment.

The methods employed in this study therefore facilitated a more nuanced, collaborative, and creative exploration during the research process. It created opportunities for the evolution of narrative and trauma healing by engaging survivors’ imagination, curiosity, affective, cognitive, sensory, somatic, and symbolic faculties. Notably, the methods used offered survivors the opportunity to work

**...developing meaningful and creative spaces for survivors of violence to safely explore their lived experiences offers women opportunities to engage in meaning-making processes, build resilience, and contest dominant narratives that function to marginalise their personhood.**

with the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of their experiences in artistic and non-linear processes. Importantly, survivors were empowered to choose their own symbolic frames of representation through images they themselves captured to represent their experiences and narrate their stories.

The findings from this study suggest that developing meaningful and creative spaces for survivors of violence to safely explore their lived experiences offers women opportunities to engage in meaning-making processes, build resilience, and contest dominant narratives that function to marginalise their personhood.

Although the study involved a small group of women, it highlights the value of women's understandings of their own lived experiences, and it presents opportunities for further research on the usefulness of bridging visual photography (non-textual) and narrative methods to advance understanding in addressing trauma resulting from sexual and gender-based violence.

Trauma healing can be a long, complex, and multidimensional process for many survivors of violence. While this study highlights the usefulness of combining participatory photography and narrative methods, it is not presented as a replacement for professional (or psychological) support. However, as demonstrated herein, bridging the visual imagery (non-textual) of participatory photography with narrative methods can be effective in supporting individuals in engaging with the unspeakable nature of trauma memories and non-linear processes, which may lie outside the bounds of conventional approaches. Lastly, it is important to note that given the complexity of traumatic experience, approaches employed to support survivors represent partial perspectives that can empower individuals and enable them to make sense of their world.

- \* This study would not be possible without the thoughtful women who gave of their time generously. I am deeply appreciative of their willingness to participate in this creative endeavour and for sharing their stories with me, and to the kind individuals who supported this research process in the field.

## NOTE

- 1 This study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of George Mason University, USA. The research was led by the author who is a certified practitioner

of Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR Levels I & II), and who has prior experience working with different groups, including marginalised populations, leading research, courses, and workshops on creative strategies and self-reflective practices for conflict transformation.

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# Recognising Territories of Life as Protected Zones

## Safeguarding Indigenous Lands from Armed Conflict

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### ABSTRACT

The ecological importance of Indigenous territories is undeniable, as is their vulnerability to socionatural disruption from armed conflict. While Indigenous land management encompasses 28% of the planet's land cover, according to Beattie et al, 79% of their lands (i.e., Territories of Life) occur within biodiversity hotspots that have experienced armed conflict, emphasising the significant overlap between armed conflict and Indigenous territories (Beattie et al, 2023: 3). This study provides further insights into the overlap between armed conflict, key biodiversity areas (KBAs) and Indigenous territories, to highlight priority lands for protected zone status. The article argues for the establishment of demilitarised no-go Indigenous protected zones under International Law Commission (ILC) principles on the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflict (PERAC principles), which would also give effect Indigenous rights enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 (ILO 169). The article looks at examples of socionatural disruption from armed conflict on Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala, The Khyber Pass, Micronesia and Colombia and some of the reparative processes that followed to better understand the challenges and opportunities for protecting Indigenous Peoples and their territories. This article proposes that in safeguarding Indigenous protected zones and thereby, practices of Indigenous conservation and environmental peacebuilding, Territories of Life could offer alternatives for restorative environmental justice and more-than-human post-conflict reconciliation that can benefit both biodiversity and positive peace.

### KEYWORDS

Armed Conflict, Indigenous Peoples, Territories of Life, International Humanitarian Law, Protected Zones, Environmental Peacebuilding

## FROM EMPIRE TO ENDURING COLONIALITY: IMPACTS OF ARMED CONFLICT ON INDIGENOUS CONSERVATION

In eastern Africa, there is a traditional proverb: ‘when the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers’. In the environmental security and peacebuilding community, it has been adopted to refer to the environmental harms of violent conflict with the grass physically representing the natural world. Traditionally, it speaks to how innocent bystanders or marginalised people are harmed most when powerful forces clash. Indeed, in the territories of Indigenous Peoples,<sup>1</sup> armed conflict is deeply disruptive of intertwined socionatures (Tauli-Corpuz, 2017; Hsiao, 2022). Armed conflict has a pattern of decimating Indigenous populations and dispossessing their lands, abandoning them to trauma and poverty, and subjecting them to militarisation and capitalist exploitation. In turn, these direct and indirect impacts compromise Indigenous Peoples’ abilities to protect their enveloping natural systems and vice versa (See e.g., Pereira et al, 2021). Socionatures are the ‘inextricably intertwined domains of human action and physical environment’ that environmental security and peacebuilding are premised upon (Siegel, 2018: 338). Environmental security and peacebuilding are socionatural processes that recognise the survival, safety and wellbeing of peoples and their natural environments are interconnected and interdependent. It is a combination of this deep interrelatedness, an ongoing practice of disrupting such relationships through targeted attacks on Indigenous Peoples and territories, and the inviolable rights of Indigenous Peoples, in addition to universal human rights, that make simultaneous protection of both Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life so essential.

Coined by the ICCA Consortium, a member-based civil society organisation made of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and supporting partners, dedicated to appropriate recognition and support for Indigenous and local conservation, Territories of Life are defined as ‘territories and areas governed, managed and conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities’, characterised by that ‘close and deep connection between a territory or area and an Indigenous People or local community’ (Borrini-Feyerabend & Jaeger, 2024: 2). In functioning Territories of Life, Indigenous communities exercise ‘effective local governance’ of the territory to protect ecological and community wellbeing (The ICCA Consortium, 2019). As other scholars have identified significant overlaps between either armed conflict or biodiversity hotspots and Indigenous Peoples, we argue that more attention should be given to their protection. In the first section of this article, we overlay Indigenous territories, armed conflict events (including refugee/IDP sites and UNHCR offices), and Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) to suggest where Territories of Life could be designated as protected zones.

Although the socio-ecological impacts of war sit squarely within the domain

of environmental peacebuilding studies, it has not often addressed the question of what measures are needed to safeguard Indigenous Peoples and their territories from the harmful effects of armed conflict or how to manage the long road to recovery and reconciliation in culturally-appropriate ways (Rodríguez & Liz Inturias, 2018; Tauli-Corpuz, 2017; e.g., Tauli-Corpuz & Cariño, 2004). The second section looks to Guatemala as an early case recognising the link between protecting land and culture in the context of civil war, and provides lessons for discussion, along with the Khyber Pass, Federated States of Micronesia and Colombia, where Indigenous Peoples continue to suffer from the environmental impacts of armed conflict. In these examples, the long-term effects of war and war industries illustrate how socionatural disruption is not easily repaired or compensated through post-conflict restitution. That compels us to consider prevention of harm as an alternative, through the designation of protected zones. This paper proposes that by designating Territories of Life as demilitarised no-go zones, in turn, we might also safeguard Indigenous defenders of those lands.

In the next section, this article examines the concept of protected zones established in PERAC principles 4 and 18 along with principle 5, which speak to territories of Indigenous Peoples. It begins by looking at the incredible value of Indigenous territories as ‘areas of environmental importance [...] including where those areas are of cultural importance’, which the ILC highlights as criteria for recognition as protected zones, to support the argument that principles 4, 5 and 18 should be read in conjunction (United Nations, 2022: 10). This section emphasises that various aspects of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and International Labour Organization’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169) be read in conjunction with PERAC principles 4, 5 and 18 to recognise Indigenous-defined Territories of Life as no-go or demilitarised protected zones in the context of armed conflict and that in these places, Indigenous Peoples must be protected against acts of violence, dispossession and forced removal. It concludes with the argument that self-determined Indigenous environmental protected zones that ensure demilitarisation, resilience in place and cultural preservation are needed to ensure that the planet’s biodiversity is also under protection from the impacts of armed conflict.

It should be noted that Indigenous Peoples defending Territories of Life are relentlessly under threat from other forms of armed conflict, namely violence by extractive industries and racism, and that perpetrators exploit wartime instability and conflict economies (Global Witness, 2019). Therefore, it is important to consider cross-temporal aspects of protected zone status and to ensure that its jurisdiction is cross-sectoral: inclusive of state and non-state armed groups, as well as private sector actors. In order to understand the obligations of non-state actors,

humanitarian organisations and other rights protectors, we can look to UNDRIP and other bodies of Indigenous law and policy such as, ILO No. 169 and the Escazu Agreement, for guidance (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989; United Nations, 2023). Additionally, Indigenous Peoples and their territories are continuously subjected to various indirect forms of violence (structural and cultural) that the PERAC principles do not contemplate, for example, non-recognition or forced assimilation. These remain open to scholarly exploration outside the limits of this article. However, it must be acknowledged that all these threats are simultaneously occurring and entangled with the activities of inter- and intra-state armed conflicts, emphasising the need for conflict-sensitivity, truth and reconciliation, and restorative justice in the establishment and enforcement of Territories of Life as protected zones.

## BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY: THE WEALTH OF INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES UNDER FIRE

The ecological importance of Territories of Life is undeniable, as is their vulnerability to armed conflict. While Indigenous land management encompasses 28% of the planet's land cover, they protect roughly 40% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity, if not more (Garnett et al, 2018). Indigenous Peoples Territories of Life make up approximately 40% of global protected areas (Garnett et al, 2018), 28% of KBAs (Simkins et al, 2024), 36% of intact forest landscapes (Fa et al, 2020), and 86% of biodiversity hotspots (Beattie et al, 2023). It is estimated that 32% of land-based World Heritage Sites overlap directly with Territories of Life, while 80% coincide with at least one Indigenous language, indicating the presence of Indigenous Peoples (The ICCA Consortium, 2019). Many World Heritage Sites have been listed as Sites in Danger due to the consequences of armed conflict. The endangerment of Indigenous languages and linguistic diversity directly correlates with loss of biodiversity, as documented by the co-occurrence of linguistic and biodiversity hotspots (Gorenflo et al, 2012). In other words, the places with the greatest biodiversity on Earth are likely Territories of Life and in these places, threats to culture present a threat to biodiversity. Armed conflict is one of those threats.

Between 1950-2000, 80% of the world's major armed conflicts overlapped with biodiversity hotspots (Hanson et al, 2009), indicating that the coincidence with Territories of Life could be high. In fact, Beattie et al found that 79% of Indigenous Peoples' lands within biodiversity hotspots experienced armed conflict (Beattie et al, 2023: 3). Although these previous studies examined the coincidence of armed conflict, biodiversity hotspots, and their overlap with Indigenous Peoples' Lands, KBAs are more precisely located than biodiversity hotspots, which makes

them more appropriate for considering protected zone designation. Military strategists and decision makers on the ground need site specificity and clear boundaries to determine where no-go zones are located and which places might contain a military objective. Humanitarian laws of armed conflict require military attacks to uphold principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution (See Legality of the Threat of the Use of Nuclear Weapons, 1996). Thus, greater precision and clarity around which places must be no-go for environmental protection, as opposed to large ecoregional exclusions, arguably could facilitate greater compliance for military activities—assuming armed actors are made aware of where these sites are. The same is true for humanitarian assistance in conflict relief and post-conflict recovery, which in a previous study proved to have greater impact on KBAs, in term of siting directly in or within 2 km, than actual armed conflict events (Hsiao et al, 2023).

## ANALYSIS OF ARMED CONFLICT EVENTS IN AND NEAR TERRITORIES OF LIFE

This study utilises five datasets for approximating the coincidence of armed conflicts, Territories of Life and biodiversity. Estimated boundaries of Indigenous territories were acquired from LandMark, a global consortium of organisations aimed at protecting Indigenous land and resource rights. From the data they provide for public download, all polygons labelled as ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Lands and Territories’ were included in the study, while ‘Local Community Lands’ were excluded (LandMark, 2024). Unfortunately, this leaves Africa, Asia, and the Middle East absent from the the study, despite being critical regions for armed conflict and Indigenous conservation. For this reason, we also included the data layers for ‘Indicative areas of Indigenous and community land rights’ and ‘Indigenous and community resource rights’, even though these include local community lands that are not Indigenous territories. However, adding these layers allowed us to include African countries in the analysis. Utilising these LandMark data layers, 55 countries of interest were identified as containing Indigenous lands and resources (i.e., Territories of Life).<sup>2</sup>

The UCDP defines an armed conflict as ‘[a]n incident where armed force was used by an organized actor against another organized actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least one direct death at a specific location and a specific date’ with the data covering 1989 to 2023 (Högbladh, 2024). Building on Hsiao et al’s previous study of ‘Protected Zones in Context’, conflict events and points of indirect conflict impact (i.e., locations of UNHCR camps and field sites) were identified from three data sets:

- 1 Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) Georeferenced Event Dataset



- (GED) Global version 24.1 on armed conflict events, selecting only points that provided an exact location
- 2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) People of Concern Data Set, selecting ‘refugee’ and ‘IDP’ for locations of refugee and internally displaced people (IDP) camps
  - 3 UNHCR Presence Data Set, selecting ‘field office’ and ‘field unit’

In that study, the locations of UNHCR refugee/IDP and field offices were more frequently located inside or within 2 km of KBAs than armed conflict events were (Hsiao et al, 2023: 1425-426). While the environmental harms of displacement camps are not directly mentioned in the context of protected zones by the ILC, the purpose of the PERAC principles is to provide environmental protections from the impacts of armed conflict at all stages. Hence, in this article, when referring to the location of armed conflict sites, refugee/IDP and field sites are also included.<sup>3</sup> While each of the datasets covers varying years, all available data was included in order to approximate the spatial relationship between armed conflicts and Indigenous territories, rather than distinguishing temporal relationships. In the 55 countries of interest, the final dataset contained approximately 2.86 billion hectares of Indigenous lands, 56,330 conflicts, 2,962 UNHCR refugee/IDP camps, and 224 UNHCR field office/unit locations.

### PRESENCE OF ARMED CONFLICT EVENTS IN INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES BY COUNTRY

Of the armed conflicts in the study area, 5,692 of them or approximately 10% were directly inside Indigenous territories. These occur in 37 of the 55 countries (over 67%), as listed in Table I below. The Democratic Republic of the Congo contained the most conflicts inside Indigenous territories with 974 armed conflict events. Africa and Latin America feature as highly impacted regions, with the top 17 countries in Africa, followed by Mexico, Colombia and Peru.

Table I. A list of the 37 countries with incidences of armed conflict, refugee/IDP camps and/or UNHCR field offices/units directly inside Indigenous territories with country name and total number of conflicts during the study period.

Country	Number of armed conflict events in Indigenous Territories	Number of refugee/IDP camps in Indigenous Territories	Number of UNHCR field offices/units in Indigenous Territories
DR Congo (Zaire)	974	19	3
South Africa	884	0	0
Sudan	756	160	0



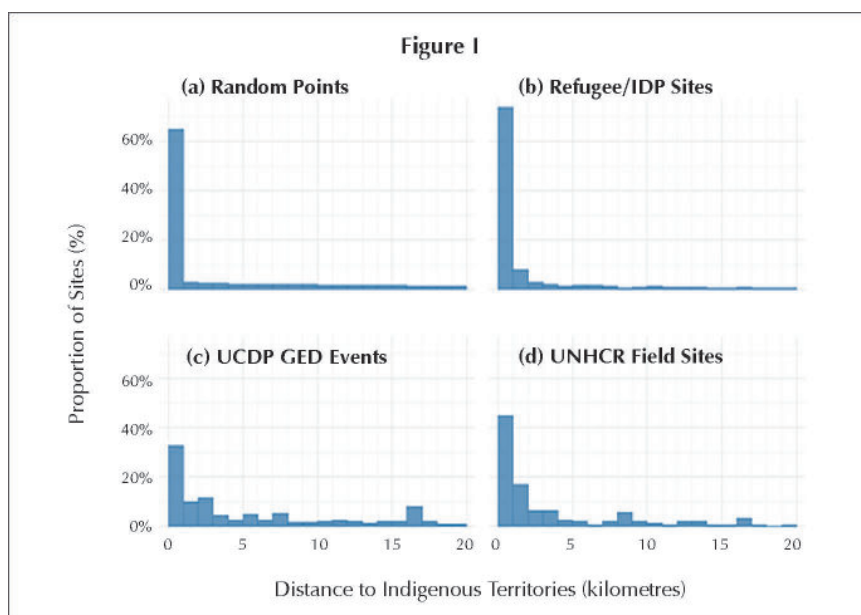
Somalia	571	23	2
Burkina Faso	398	59	0
Ethiopia	357	14	1
Mali	330	9	0
Libya	229	1	0
Algeria	205	3	0
South Sudan	161	168	2
Central African Republic	112	5	2
Niger	106	226	0
Chad	81	156	1
Egypt	81	5	0
Mozambique	79	11	1
Kenya	56	10	1
Congo	52	90	2
Mexico	45	0	0
Colombia	44	0	0
Peru	37	0	0
Tanzania	29	6	3
Burundi	14	0	0
Zimbabwe	14	6	0
Djibouti	13	2	0
Nigeria	10	0	0
Mauritania	8	0	0
Zambia	8	4	2
Eritrea	7	0	0
Venezuela	7	0	1
Namibia	6	0	0
Morocco	5	0	0
Brazil	4	1	0
Cameroon	3	36	0
Ecuador	2	0	0
Israel	2	0	0
Bolivia	1	0	0
Tunisia	1	0	0
Botswana	0	1	2
Senegal	0	1	0
Total	5,692	1,016	23

## PROXIMITY OF ARMED CONFLICTS AND THEIR IMPACTS TO INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES OF LIFE

The distances of sites at 1 km intervals from the boundaries of the nearest Indigenous territory reveal that a significantly large portion of conflicts occur within 2 km of Indigenous territories. While 10.10% were directly inside Indigenous territories (0 km), another 11.73% were in close proximity or less

than 2 km away. Across the full conflict dataset in the study area, 50.66% of armed conflicts (28,951) are inside or within 20 km of Indigenous territories. Based on the distribution of 56,000 randomly generated points across the land surface within the study area, over 60% of conflicts would be expected to occur inside or less than 1km away from Indigenous territories purely by chance. In comparison to the random probability expected, a substantially lower number of armed conflict sites took place within Territories of Life due to the extensive areas of Indigenous territories, such as Greenland, which have not experienced armed conflict in the time period considered. Greater than 1km from Indigenous territories, however, the expected distribution would be consistently below 3%. In terms of proximity to Indigenous territories, 9.8% of UCDP GED conflicts were 1-2 km away and 11.8% of conflicts were 2-3 kilometres away, over three times the expected rate. This is depicted in Figure I below. 16.98% of UNHCR field sites were 1- 2km away, and another 6.29% were 2-3 km away. Lastly, 7.89% of UNHCR refugee/IDP camps were 1-2 km away, and another 3.06% were 2-3 km away. Notably, 73.47% of the camps were 0-1km away from Indigenous territories, substantially exceeding the already elevated rate predicted by the random distribution and indicating a significantly higher than expected presence near these Territories of Life.

Figure I shows proportion or percentage of sites in proximity to Indigenous territories, based on location of (a) random points, (b) UNHCR refugee and



IDP camps, (c) UCDP GED conflict events, and (d) UNHCR field offices and units, and their distance from identified Indigenous territories (in kilometres).

#### OVERLAPPING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' TERRITORIES, ARMED CONFLICTS AND KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS (KBAs)

Of about 821 million hectares of KBAs within the study area, approximately 23.8% of KBAs or 195 million hectares overlap with Indigenous territories. Within that, 44.8 million hectares or 22.97% of the overlapping KBAs and Indigenous territories are within 2 km of armed conflict and/or UNHCR sites. While only 5.45% of all KBAs in the study area represent Indigenous territories that are directly in or within close proximity (<2km) to armed conflict events and UNHCR sites, this still covers an area the size of Uzbekistan. Given the importance of KBAs to biodiversity conservation, this territorial coverage should not be dismissed.

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While a geospatial understanding of the overlap of armed conflict, KBAs and Territories of Life is valuable, it is critical to try and understand how widespread, severe and long-term conflict activities can be on Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life. It is also necessary to keep in mind that these effects all have direct and indirect consequences for biodiversity protection before, during and after conflict events. We must protect systems of life that represent Indigenous Peoples and territories through prevention, mitigation, and repair, as explored further in the case studies synthesised in the next section.

#### DISRUPTED LANDS, ENDURING PEOPLES: STRUGGLES FOR RESTORATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

This section examines specific case studies where Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life have been directly and negatively affected by armed conflict. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) case, *Río Negro Massacres v Guatemala*, represents a case of direct conflict between the Maya-Achí of Río Chixoy (a.k.a. Río Negro) and the Guatemalan Army

and paramilitary Civil Self-Defence Patrols. The Pashtun Tribes of the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan represent civilian populations targeted by the US military for ‘harbouring terrorists’. Micronesians and the Indigenous Peoples of Colombia were severely impacted by larger armed conflicts (WWII and the Colombian civil war, respectively). These are merely a small few of the many cases of Indigenous Peoples and Territories of Life affected by armed conflicts, but in each case, important connections between Indigenous rights in terms of culture and land were recognised, offering a tiny glimpse into the socionatural disruption that occurred and the reparative efforts that followed. Further research could offer a much more systematic review of the effects of armed conflict on Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life to offer a more complete evidence basis. This study centres instead on the lack of full restitution in all of these cases, suggesting that Indigenous Peoples and lands could benefit greatly from a more preemptive and preventative approach, such as the designation of Territories of Life as protected zones.

Rather than recount wartime atrocities on these Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life, this section focuses on a handful of key and/or common socionatural disruptions that occurred and then looks to some of the post-conflict efforts intended to repair those harms. In the Río Negro case, war crimes, such as massacres and forced displacement, and crimes against humanity, including torture, rape and enslavement, formed key elements of a ‘scorched earth’ attempt to destroy the Mayan community for resisting development of the Río Chixoy dam (*Case of the Río Negro Massacres v Guatemala: Judgment of 4 September 2012 [Preliminary objection, merits, reparations and costs]*, 2012). In the Khyber Pass, Tribal sovereignty has long been undermined by the Durand Line, a highly protested and in some places undemarcated, 19th century colonial border dividing Pashtuns between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Akhtar, 2021; citing Giunchi, 2013). However, the USSR invasion of Afghanistan and US’ war on terror were particularly destructive, in terms of civilian casualties, mass displacement, abductions, and lack of recognition for Pashtunwali customary laws and governance in conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding (Khan et al, 2019). In the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), colonisation, military occupation and conflict infrastructure led to widespread human displacement and long-term toxic remnants of war (The Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2016). In Colombia, Indigenous Peoples experienced targeted murders, widespread displacement and abduction into armed forces, in order to facilitate land grabs and unsustainable natural resource exploitation of their territories (UNHCR, 2010; United Nations High Commissioner for Human

Rights, 2012). In highlighting these direct and indirect impacts on Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life, the rest of this section identifies some of the principal interventions or remedies that followed post-conflict.

### RIO NEGRO MASSACRES v GUATEMALA: TRUTH, RECONCILIATION AND CULTURAL REPAIR

The Río Negro Massacres occurred in a broader atmosphere of state terrorism against Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala, but what is significant about this particular set of ‘scorched earth operations’ is the IACHR’s determination that the close relationship between Indigenous Peoples and their lands is foundational to their physical, cultural and spiritual survival—rights enshrined in UNDRIP. The IACHR also reports in this case that the killing of elders and disrupted transfer of Indigenous knowledge, as well as forced displacement and severed ‘relationship that [the Maya Achí culture] had with nature’, led to irreparable cultural harms (*Case of the Río Negro Massacres v Guatemala: Judgment of 4 September 2012 [Preliminary objection, merits, reparations and costs]*, 2012, paras 61, 87). In its judgment, the court directed that reparations should seek full restitution (*restitutio in integrum*) whenever possible, but since that is often impossible with human rights violations, they should at least repair the consequences and provide measures to guarantee the rights violated (i.e., non-repetition) (*Case of the Río Negro Massacres v Guatemala: Judgment of 4 September 2012 [Preliminary objection, merits, reparations and costs]*, 2012, para. 248). In addition to the orders directing the state of Guatemala’s justice processes to end impunity for the violations committed, the court called for, *inter alia*:

- ♦ Truth and reconciliation measures (i.e., investigations and public apology),
- ♦ Development of settlement living conditions and cultural rescue programmes,
- ♦ Culturally appropriate psychosocial and medical services, and
- ♦ Training of judges, prosecutors and members of the armed forces to avoid future repetition.

While these may not appear relevant to environmental harms from armed conflict, they are based on the socionatural connection between people, culture and environment. By providing accountability, wellbeing and cultural revitalisation, these measures can rebuild a devastated community’s capacity for biodiversity conservation. This includes transferring ecological knowledge as part of cultural repair and helping environmental protectors liberate themselves from the effects of trauma and poverty traps. The IAHCR and Guatemalan government fell short of returning lands to the impacted communities, but

the IAHR mentioned rights of access to sacred sites and the revitalisation of cultural practices, which would include conservation. This case remains one of the most cited when connecting environmental and cultural harms in the context of armed conflict and Indigenous rights. At the moment of writing, implementation of reparations to Río Negro communities remains only partially fulfilled, signalling the importance of prevention over the improbability of full restitution.

## PASHTUNS IN THE KHYBER PASS: SAFE RETURN AND DECOLONISATION

Pashtun peoples around the Khyber Pass have long-standing systems of self-governance that have been severely disrupted by centuries of colonisation, occupation and militarisation. Targeted for ‘harbouring terrorists’, the US and by extension Pakistan’s War on Terror devastated Pashtun communities through mass abductions and displacement, torture, drone strikes and land mines. In 2009 alone, when a peace agreement between the Pakistani government and Taliban in the Swat valley collapsed, reportedly 3 million people from the Federally and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (FATA and PATA), including Khyber Paktunkhwa, were internally displaced (Akhtar, 2021: 92). Between 2004 and

Arguably, restorative justice processes that revitalise tribal sovereignty and unity can be transformative for post-war recovery of Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life. However, this can also be seen as a threat in highly geopoliticised colonially imposed borderlands.

2013, there were 379 recorded drone attacks in Pakistan alone, resulting in an estimated 3,597 deaths and 1,357 injuries, including women and children (Usmani & Bashir, 2014: 4). According to one study, about 80% of Pakistani peoples were against military operations in Tribal areas, with people in the Tribal areas viewing them as ‘a threat to their ethnicity and identity’ (Khan, 2011: 136). In 2014, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)<sup>4</sup> emerged with sit-ins demanding a truth and reconciliation commission to provide accountability for the many extrajudicial killings and disappearances of Pashtun peoples, as well as removal of land mines in Pashtun territories.

While truth and reconciliation commissions have certain common attributes, such as fact-finding investigations, public disclosure and reparations, their approach and processes are bespoke to the cultures and contexts from which they emerge. In the Khyber Pass region, some scholars advocate for a Loya Jirga (a Tribal assembly that makes

consensus decisions based on the Code of the Pashtunwali) led truth and reconciliation process that would be culturally appropriate, and thereby weld regional legitimacy (Akhtar, 2019, 2021). Arguably, restorative justice processes that revitalise tribal sovereignty and unity can be transformative for post-war recovery of Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life. However, this can also be seen as a threat in highly geopoliticised colonially imposed borderlands (Akhtar, 2021). Decolonisation may be an essential step towards sustainable justice and peace in such regions, as its very mission is to dismantle the harmful effects of coloniality remnant in post-imperial cultures and institutions (Chandra, 2013). It would also support cultural rescue as called for by the IACHR in the Río Negro case discussed previously (Rodríguez & Liz Inturias, 2018; Yousaf & Poncian, 2018). For the Khyber Pass, decolonisation through restorative justice processes led by the Pashtun Jirga may prove transformative and worth supporting.

## MICRONESIANS OF THE FSM AND BEYOND: HEALING TOXIC REMNANTS OF WAR AND MILITARISATION

The government of FSM submitted comments to the ILC explicitly documenting numerous harms to the environment and Indigenous Peoples from colonisation and military occupation to illustrate their ‘keen interest in...the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts’ (The Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2016, para 1). These included the alteration of:

[T]he pristine and diverse natural environment of the FSM, with forests felled, shorelines reshaped, coral reefs uprooted, and sea beds dredged [...]. Wrecks of military ships and aircraft, as well as hulking weaponry and unexploded ordinances, litter the land and sea of the FSM [...]. The wrecks retain large caches of oil that have reportedly begun leaking into the waters [...], resulting in millions of dollars of environmental damage and disrupting the maritime food supply of the inhabitants [...]. The wounds of war continue to fester in the FSM, with the most potent threats directed at FSM’s fragile natural environment and indigenous population... (The Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2016, para 1).

In addition to these environmental harms, Micronesians suffered from nuclear weapons testing, air raids, ‘relentless bombardment by air and sea’, ‘beatings, executions, and displacement’, and unaddressed trauma (Rehuher, 2024: 2). Tragically infamous for the ‘jellyfish babies’ Marshallese survivors birthed, radiation and contamination continue to plague these states and to prevent

'We don't  
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[...] We die  
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any foreseeable return to ancestral homelands that were previously part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administered by the US and now bound by Compacts of Free Association with the US (Keju-Johnson, n.d.). This is relevant for Indigenous Peoples worldwide who continue to exist as nations within states or in other words, internal colonies.

According to the Charter of the United Nations, trust administrators have fiduciary duties. These include, *inter alia*, 'the obligation to promote to the utmost...the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories', which includes respecting their culture, 'just

treatment, and...protection against abuses', and ultimately, to facilitate their independence and decolonisation (Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice, 1945, Article 73). Specifically, in the Trust Territories agreement for the Pacific Islands, the US had a responsibility to 'protect the inhabitants against the loss of their lands and resources', and to protect their rights and health (Trusteeship of Specific Areas, 1947, Article 6). Arguably, this could translate to environmental remediation, demilitarisation of the islands, and refrainment from the use of Micronesians for the purposes of conflict activities. Yet, Micronesian states have frequently relied on non-US foreign assistance to remediate toxic remnants of war, such as oil spills from abandoned warships (e.g., clean-up of the Chuuk Lagoon by the Major Projects Foundation of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme funded by the Australian Government) (SPREP, 2022). Rehuher observes that Micronesians frequently join the US military to escape poverty and quotes from the documentary *Island Soldier*,

'We don't vote, but we can get killed. [...] We die for others, we jump on grenades for others, we protect other people...'

(Quoting Fitch, 2017; in Rehuher, 2024).

Like the Khyber Pass, militarisation in Micronesia pulls people and resources away from the traditional ways of life, including nature conservation, and co-opts them into armed groups and conflict activities.

Some remediation efforts have been attempted in Micronesia, but certain toxic remnants of war will take millennia to resolve. It is said that the Bikini islands will not be inhabitable for at least 30,000 years (Keju-Johnson, n.d.). More than a generation later, women in Micronesia continue to fear pregnancy, uncertain of



what they may birth into the world. This resistance to procreation compromises the continuity of a human population, illustrating the close connection between ecocide and genocide for Indigenous Peoples. In its comments to the ILC, the FSM government emphasises the need for environmental threat assessments and responsibility through damages, compensation and reparations (The Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2016, paras 31-32). Based on their experience, they also stress the importance of prevention of harm. Recognising this hard-learned lesson, this article suggests that demilitarised no-go protected zones may serve as a preventative measure.

## PILLAGE OF COLOMBIA'S TERRITORIES OF LIFE: LAND RESTITUTION AND THE RIGHTS OF NATURE AS VICTIM

In Colombia, the post-conflict peace process has sought to be transformative in many ways, seeking to address root causes of conflict by recalibrating social inequalities and introducing more-than-human cosmovisions that link environmental and sociocultural harm (Hernández, Ramírez & Arias, Leguizamon 2020). In this article we highlight two developments that may be useful in other contexts: (1) land restitution after large-scale displacement and (2) recognition of nature's rights in post-conflict restorative justice. As mentioned, armed conflict in Colombia has disproportionately impacted Indigenous Peoples *because* of external interests in their lands and natural resources. In the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) situation report of Colombia in 2024, a Working Group states that the country's large-scale extraction-based economy is at the root of systemic marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples and continues to endanger them in terms of physical and cultural extermination (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012, paras 6-7). The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights warned that poverty, caused by armed conflict and forced displacement from territories, makes people 'easy targets' for forced recruitment or engagement in illicit economies (Fabián Salvioli, 2024, para 8). Both UN reports continue to raise alarm about increasing instances of violence against Indigenous Peoples, especially those seeking to defend environmental and human rights. In other words, peace remains elusive for Indigenous Peoples in Colombia.

Land redistribution is a keystone in Colombia's peace process, yet full restitution remains pending. As a result of forced displacement, the National Centre for Historic Memory estimated that '8.3 million hectares of land (14% of the country's territory) have changed hands illegally' (Citing Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013; in McKay, 2018: 7). The Victims and Land Restitution Act of 2011 and Land

Restitution Unit provide an administrative and judicial process to either restore lands or provide compensation to victims of landgrabs and forced abandonment, but implementation has been fraught with injustice (Amnesty International, 2012). Victims often lack financial resources to engage the process and of those who do, many are rejected at the administrative phase (McKay, 2018). Naturally, even fewer receive favourable rulings from land restitution judges and even in those cases, implementing agencies are failing to comply (Fabián Salvio, 2024, paras 41-42). Amnesty International reported in 2014 that very few cases were providing restorative justice from the serious perpetrators—‘large national or international companies, paramilitaries or others who may have been responsible for the forced displacement and dispossession’ (Amnesty International, 2014: 31). In other words, the land restitution process in Colombia has yet to provide restorative justice, despite the fact that land return is essential for conflict transformation. Furthermore, the restoration of Indigenous governance could help to reduce the threat of non-state armed actors (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012, para 48). As in the Khyber Pass case, unless land redistribution is able to disrupt unjust systems of power (i.e., decolonises), it will fail to be transformative for positive peace in Colombia.

Colombia’s odyssey towards territorial peace is incomplete, but the guidance it is providing for how to protect the natural environment from the harms of armed conflict, not just as a resource or a place where humans occur, but as a potential victim with its own rights encourages us to contemplate what protected zone status for Territories of Life might mean.

Perhaps more innovatively, Colombia has joined a growing number of countries recognising nature’s rights and is doing so in the context of post-conflict recovery and restorative justice. On 11 July 2023, Colombia’s transitional justice court, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), determined for the first time that the Cauca river was a victim of serious damages from armed conflict (*Acreditación del Río Cauca en el Caso 05*, 2023). In particular, the JEP condemned paramilitary use of the river as a mass grave for human bodies and the dumping of mercury and other chemicals from illegal mining and drug production. The concept of environment as victim of armed conflict was codified in Decree Law 4633/2011, the Law of Victims for Indigenous Communities, to recognise more-than-human Indigenous cosmovisions (Decreto Ley 4633 de 2011, 2011, Chapter I). Accordingly,

full reparations require the ‘recognition, protection and restitution of territorial rights’, as mentioned previously, but also the ‘healing’ of Indigenous territories (Decreto Ley 4633 de 2011, 2011, Article 8). It further elaborates that the protection of Indigenous Peoples is inclusive of their Territories of Life and that harms to territory can be direct or indirect, insofar as they undermine the ‘equilibrium, harmony, health and food sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples’ (Decreto Ley 4633 de 2011, 2011, Article 33). The law also stipulates the responsibilities of the military in protecting Indigenous territories during armed conflict;

**The nature of these socionatural impacts and the insufficient remedies offered reinforces the need to establish and enforce the protection of Territories of Life as no-go protected zones to prevent harms which may not be repaired.**

for example, applying principles of protection, distinction, precaution, military necessity and proportionality to minimise any risks to Indigenous Peoples and their territories (Decreto Ley 4633 de 2011, 2011, Article 60). Colombia’s odyssey towards territorial peace is incomplete, but the guidance it is providing for how to protect the natural environment from the harms of armed conflict, not just as a resource or a place where humans occur, but as a potential victim with its own rights encourages us to contemplate what protected zone status for Territories of Life might mean.

In summarising some of the impacts of Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life in these four contexts, it becomes clear that the atrocities are widespread, long-term and severe, yet post-conflict remedies do not align with the needs, rights, and values of Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life. In all cases, return to Indigenous territories, restorative justice, and truth and reconciliation were perceived to be essential for healing and repair, but in their implementation, reparations have fallen short. In these cases, the physical removal of land mines and other toxic remnants of war are an important step for the safe return of millions of forcibly displaced peoples. In some cases, the revitalisation of Indigenous systems of justice may offer transformative conflict resolution. In all of these cases, trauma and poverty were systemic side-effects, which in the Pashtun case increased their vulnerability to insurgent and criminal recruitment and in Micronesia, draw people into the better paid US armed forces. As repeatedly observed, the direct and indirect impacts of armed conflict degrade a people’s ability to sustain their own cultural systems, including environmental protection during and after armed conflicts. The nature

of these socationatural impacts and the insufficient remedies offered reinforces the need to establish and enforce the protection of Territories of Life as no-go protected zones to prevent harms which may not be repaired.

In the next section, we explore the designation of protected zones and their application to Indigenous territories.

## RECOGNISING TERRITORIES OF LIFE AS PROTECTED ZONES

### *Guidance from the ILC PERAC Principles for the Protection of Territories of Life*

International laws protect Indigenous territories from military occupation and attack, recognise Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in such territories, and seek to offer accountability for harms suffered (Tauli-Corpuz, 2017). These include UNDRIP, ILO 169, and most recently, the ILC PERAC principles. Under the preamble to the PERAC Principles, ILC commentary emphasises the interconnectedness between human rights, environmental law and the law of armed conflict, reminding us that these seemingly different laws need to be read together (International Law Commission, 2022b: 99 [commentary 5-6]).

The PERAC principles affirm the importance of protecting natural environments during armed conflict and in times of peace. One way is to recognise ecologically and culturally important areas as protected zones through principles 4 and 18. ILC comments on principles 4 and 18 support designation of protected zone for World Heritage Sites and other internationally agreed areas, including Indigenous territories. Considering the importance and co-occurrence of Territories of Life, biodiversity and armed conflict discussed above, this is a laudable step. Application of principles 4 and 18 to Territories of Life would enforce principle 5 on the ‘Protection of the environment of Indigenous Peoples’. Principle 5 requires States, international organisations and other relevant actors to take appropriate measures to protect Indigenous territories (International Law Commission, 2022c). These measures should include the designation of Indigenous lands as protected zones that are effectively no-go for conflict activities and military presence.

This recommendation was put forward by the governments of El Salvador, Micronesia and Sweden, on behalf of the Nordic states. In its comments to the 68th session of the ILC, the Government of The Federated States of Micronesia, representing over 100,000 Indigenous islanders, ‘strongly stresse[d] the need for the Commission to consider the connections between the protection of the environment and the safeguarding of cultural heritage, particularly that of indigenous peoples’, during all stages of armed conflict (The Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2016, paras 2 & 5). El Salvador agreed in its

comment under Principle 5 that ‘States have an obligation to direct efforts and financial resources towards the promotion of cultural and ecological restoration, understanding the cultural dimension with respect to indigenous peoples to be a central and inseparable element between culture and the environment’ (International Law Commission, 2022: 45). The Nordic countries reinforced the right to consultation (Free, Prior and Informed Consent or FPIC) enjoyed by Indigenous Peoples as not only a post-conflict obligation, but required at all stages (International Law Commission, 2022b: 46). These comments provide a way forward for addressing the (potential) cultural harms described in sections above, namely, through participatory governance or consultation at all stages of conflict and the allocation of resources for both cultural and ecological restoration post-conflict.

The inclusion of Indigenous territories in the establishment of protected zones under Principles 4 and 18 is also apparent in the ILC comments to the PERAC principles. Various comments under Principle 4 note that areas of cultural importance should be protected from the adverse impacts of armed conflict, with comment 9 highlighting as an example, the ‘ancestral lands of indigenous peoples, who depend on the environment for their sustenance and livelihood’ (International Law Commission, 2022b: 107 [paras 7 & 9]). It does this to distinguish the nature-culture linkage of PERAC protection from general protection of cultural property under the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict or the 1954 Hague Convention. Under Principle 4, the ILC observes that protection of Territories of Life is already recognised under international environmental law in Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (International Law Commission, 2022b: 107 [para 10]). Under *in bello* Principle 18 on protected zones, the ILC does not specifically mention Indigenous territories, but it does affirm that protected zones can be designated unilaterally or through agreements with non-state actors (e.g., Indigenous Peoples Organisations or governments) (International Law Commission, 2022b: 144 [para 2]). Under Principle 5, the ILC suggests that states can comply with their UNDRIP obligations to ‘ensure that military activities do not take place in the lands or territories of indigenous peoples’ by ‘designating their territories as protected areas, as set out in draft Principle 4’—in other words, by designating protected zones (International Law Commission, 2022b: 110-11 [para 8]). Collectively, Principles 4 and 17, alongside Principle 5 provide support for the designation of Territories of Life as protected zones.

In ILC comments under Principle 5, further guidance is offered on how to protect Territories of Life as protected zones, once again stressing the ‘crucial role that [Indigenous] peoples, lands and territories play in the conservation of

biological diversity’, and the need for actors to take ‘appropriate measures to protect the lands and territories of indigenous peoples in the event of an armed conflict’ (International Law Commission, 2022b: 108-09 [para 1]). Comment 7 confirms the temporal application to all stages of conflict and the responsibility of not only states, but also international organisations and other relevant actors, which comment 2 clarifies, can include non-state armed occupants of Territories of Life (International Law Commission, 2022b: 109-10 [paras 2 & 7]). In other comments under Principle 5, the ILC guides against placing military installations in Indigenous Peoples’ territories and advocates effective and culturally appropriate consultation (e.g., FPIC and community protocols) ‘prior to using their lands or territories for military activities’ and when taking remedial measures.

## PROTECTED ZONES AND *PACTA SUNT SERVANDA*

The ILC stresses in its comments on the protection of Indigenous territories that existing laws clarify rights and obligations, such as: UNDRIP and Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Accordingly, Indigenous Peoples

As a summary of Indigenous rights and protections, UNDRIP emphasises in its preamble that ‘the demilitarization of the lands and territories of [I]ndigenous peoples [contributes] to peace, economic and social progress and development, understanding and friendly relations among nations and peoples of the world’.

have a right to ‘conservation and protection of the environment and productive capacity of their lands or territorial resources’ and ‘to preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices [...] embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity’ (International Law Commission, 2022b: 109-10 [para 5]). In doing so, the ILC reinforces the legal principle of *pacta sunt servanda* where the PERAC principles must be read alongside other relevant laws and policies, especially UNDRIP and ILO Convention No. 169 (See Legality of the Threat of the Use of Nuclear Weapons, 1996: 243 [paras 30-33] on the importance of connecting international humanitarian law, international environmental law and international human rights law).

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and peoples of the world' (UNDRIP, 2007 pmb.). In other words, it would be appropriate to consider Indigenous lands and territories as no-go protected zones for the sake of world peace. Article 30 is explicit that 'military activities shall not take place in the lands or territories of [I]ndigenous peoples, unless justified by a significant threat to relevant public interest or otherwise freely agreed with or requested by the indigenous peoples concerned' (UNDRIP, 2007, Article 30). Where necessary, States must 'undertake effective consultations... prior to using their lands or territories for military activities'. Similarly, Article 7(2) of UNDRIP protects the collective right of Indigenous Peoples to 'live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples and shall not be subjected to any act of genocide or any other act of violence', which in theory would include acts of war, such as military occupation, invasion or attack (UNDRIP, 2007, Article 7[2]). These protections for Indigenous Peoples and their lands need to also consider general safeguards prohibiting dispossession of lands, as well as natural resources (UNDRIP, 2007, Articles 8, 10 & 26). Furthermore, as illustrated in the case studies, protection of the natural world for Indigenous Peoples is directly connected to their rights concerning health and wellbeing (Article 24), 'their distinctive spiritual relationship' with nature, and 'responsibilities to future generations' (Article 25) (UNDRIP, 2007, Articles 24 & 25). These individual and collective rights shape what PERAC principles 4 and 18 protected zone status for Indigenous territories require in terms of implementation and enforcement.

As UNDRIP represents a minimum standard for the protection of Indigenous rights, it is imperative that at the very least PERAC meet the obligations of UNDRIP (UNDRIP, 2007, Article 43). It would additionally serve to better wed this compilation of humanitarian law with the often-siloed jurisdictions of Indigenous law, human rights law and environmental law fulfilling an important general principle of international law (*pacta sunt servanda*) seeking to strengthen cooperation between different multilateral agreements and policies.

## CONCLUSION

The potential for greater protection in the law of armed conflict for Indigenous Peoples and their Territories of Life as reflected in the PERAC principles needs to be celebrated, but it also needs to be thought through with attentive nuance. As this article and others before it indicate, there is a significant overlap between armed conflict, biodiversity and the presence of Indigenous Peoples. This gives rise to a need to better understand how to simultaneously protect Indigenous Peoples, their rights and territories. International laws require meaningful and effective consultation through FPIC, but is that enough? As the case studies in this article indicate, the direct and indirect impacts on Indigenous Peoples and



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their natural environments are widespread, long-lasting and severe. The massive scale of forced displacement, trauma and poverty that armed conflicts in Indigenous territories engender is disruptive to socio-natures that protect biodiversity. Post-conflict efforts at truth and reconciliation, restitution and repair often fall short of restorative justice for Indigenous Peoples and their territories.

Designation of Territories of Life as protected zones could serve as a preventative measure, ensuring that Territories of Life are demilitarised no-go zones for military activities. Indigenous protected zones should be established by or through the governing systems of Indigenous Peoples in order to align with Indigenous rights and FPIC. While we have estimated the overlap of Indigenous territories, KBAs and armed conflict here as an indicator of where Indigenous protected zones could be considered, future research could take a more systematic approach to identifying Territories of Life that are appropriate for protected zone designation. A two-eyed seeing approach that centres Indigenous knowledge could be instrumental

in this process, as well as in the co-development of protocols of engagement for Indigenous protected zones (Almack et al, 2023). These practices could transform the designation and enforcement of Indigenous protected zones into post-colonial healing processes and restorative justice for Indigenous Peoples, cultures and Territories of Life. By safeguarding Indigenous protected zones, we can protect Indigenous environmental defenders and practices of Indigenous conservation, thereby also preserving Indigenous forms of environmental peacebuilding. In this way, Territories of Life could offer new forms of restorative environmental justice and more-than-human post-conflict reconciliation that can benefit both biodiversity and positive peace.

## NOTES

- 1 In this paper, the internationally recognised general term 'Indigenous Peoples' will be used,



but the authors would like to acknowledge that the terms 'First Peoples' and 'Original Peoples' are preferred by some in light of the fact that terms, such as 'indigenous', 'aboriginal' and 'native', are externally imposed identifications, while Indigenous Peoples self-identify by their own names (often translating to the people of a place).

- 2 It should be noted that a more comprehensive data layer of Indigenous Peoples Lands (IPL) has been compiled by Garnett et al, but at the moment of writing, we were in the initial stages of requesting access to this dataset and were not able to include it (Garnett et al, 2018). Analysis of the datasets mentioned here with Garnett et al's IPL layer could fill data gaps in critical regions, such as Africa, Asia and the Middle East, where Indigenous Peoples and armed conflicts co-occur in many countries. In the meantime, this initial analysis based on LandMark data, which is more recently updated, allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions for the purpose of understanding the importance of protecting Territories of Life through the PERAC principles.
- 3 The UNHCR People of Concern Dataset mapping refugee and IDP camps in the study area covers 1966 to 2025 and the UNHCR present data of field offices/units covers 1993 to 2025. The KBA dataset contains biodiversity areas updated from 1994 to 2024.
- 4 In 2014, eight students created the Mahsud Tahafuz Movement, which they renamed to Pashtun Tahafuz Movement in 2018.

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## Book Review

*"Whatever it is, I'm Against it": Resistance to Change in Higher Education*



By BRIAN ROSENBERG

pp.224, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press,  
2023, PB

\$30.00

Reviewed by  
JEREMY A RINKER

The world of college presidents and high-level administrators, though rife with social and organisational conflict, is a world in which many readers of the *JTPP* may be only dimly aware. Still, the many challenges facing contemporary higher education in the United States are increasingly in the news headlines. From threats and lawsuits over defunding Harvard University's federal research grants to more local attempts to unseat disloyal public university leaders (see recent developments in the state of Virginia as an example), coordinated attacks on higher education have accelerated, underscoring the challenges to the point that many are calling the Trump administration's attacks on this critical economic sector of the US economy an 'extinction level'<sup>1</sup> event. In such a context, Brian Rosenberg's book *"Whatever it is, I'm Against it": Resistance to Change in Higher Education* (2023) could not be a timelier read. Despite the book's overly rhetorical title and blinkered focus on faculty intransigence to 'transformational change' (p.5), Rosenberg's personal experience-infused examples of resistance to change by conservative and incentive-less constituencies in institutions of higher education deserves a close read and an honest discussion (despite my own initial scepticism borne of the fact that I was gifted the book by a well-meaning university administrator). The real pressures facing higher education are not new, but they are increasingly complicated, politically-charged, and, most importantly, of growing import for the American public to better understand. Challenges to the higher education sector are not going to magically disappear (as Rosenberg reminds us of some university faculty seem to think).

Rosenberg's analysis of the case for change (Chapter 1 of this short seven-chapter book) provides a sound grounding for this needed discussion in the halls of higher education. Costs continue to rise, the demography of college age students is shrinking, and failure to assess long-held assumptions about research

and pedagogy have resulted in a lack of institutional innovation. Still, in lamenting higher education's penchant for only marginal change, Rosenberg argues his book aims to do more than 'describe a condition and not a cause' (p.30) of this lack of innovative and transformational change. Stating that his goal in the chapters that follow is 'to understand the cause and to explore what, if anything, can be done about it' (p.30), Rosenberg, at times, gets too stuck on the limits of his liberal arts college administrator experience and appears less open to creative visioning than I had hoped upon first opening the book. Chapter 2: 'Reputation' is a case in point. While he outlines well the interest-based constituencies circling around higher education (e.g. parents, students, faculty, staff, administrators, politicians, and the wider public), his focus on criticising the *US News and World Report* college and university rankings seems more of a retrenchment of old grievances than a useful support to his book's central claims. While he argues that 'brand strength' (p.39) is important for market capitalisation, are comparisons to the largest companies in the US [of which incidentally he rightly argues 'five of the seven did not exist in 1983' (p.39), the year the *US News and World Report* rankings began] a useful comparison? Looking at budgets all day can make one see the work of higher education as primarily a business, but as non-profit entities the university mission of educating will always be more than a business, whose chief aim is profitability. I must note my own 16+ years' experience of working in the higher education world here. Starting off as a contingent faculty in liberal arts institutions, and now in a tenured position at my regional state university, I have personally witnessed the subtle shifts in the use of language and evaluation metrics within higher education. No more do we talk of students, but rather consumers; pedagogical innovation has morphed into curricular efficiencies, and the slow work of research and critical thinking has become a discussion of quantifiable workload and buy-outs from teaching or directed professional service. These shifts to envisioning higher education in terms consistent with corporate objectives is not only dangerous, but, indeed, driven by entrenched conservative beliefs that the modern university is the enemy of free market values, a bastion of liberal elitism, and antithetical to America's perceived meritocracy.

Rosenberg raises important questions and supports his argument with experiential data, but his frame in free market neoliberal economics is, in fact, the cause one needs to better interrogate to innovate major changes in higher education. Chapter 3: 'Incentives' belies this underlying neoliberal corporatist framing when it focuses on 'ownership' (p.52), 'competing priorities' (p.53), and 'risk' (p.54) of innovation instead of the broadest mission of higher education as educating for global citizenship as an intrinsic public good. While Rosenberg is clear-eyed about 'the disruption and control of the less selective portion of the higher education market by for-profit entities for whom incentives are unambiguous



and for whom contribution to the public good is a secondary concern' (p.67), he seems less attentive to how his arguments undermine the means from which to resist such disruption and control. Citing 'how rapidly' (p.67) the US healthcare sector has been overtaken by corporate and private equity firms, Rosenberg is simultaneously a canary in the coalmine and a harbinger of this subtle shift in corporatist framing. While I disagree with Rosenberg's claim that the problem is 'serious but simple' (p.69) as just about incentives and means, I do value the way in which his economic and corporatist analysis lays bare this insidious and subtle framing of contemporary higher education discourse. Such framing calls us to re-assess our messaging and think about how we can work together as an industry with shared fate. Even tenured faculty, whom Rosenberg argues have the least incentive to change, seem completely unawares how this subtle change in discourse has allowed free-market conservatives to seize the current narrative and engineer faux resentment of higher education.

Chapter 4, 5, and 6, which focus on traditional disciplines, shared governance, and tenure respectively, start to get at the roots of higher education's institutionally conservative resistance to transformational change. In these chapters Rosenberg acknowledges the 'fragmented culture' (p.85) of institutionalised higher education and highlights the fact that specialisation has hindered innovation, to which I would add, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Pointing to shared governance as increasingly 'an empty of floating signifier' (p.96) with the 'second-highest voltage' (after tenure) as higher education's 'third rails' (p.95), Rosenberg still seems to be unawares of the primarily administrators' lens he dons. Despite time as a tenure track English professor, he, like many administrators I have encountered, appear to have developed a battle-hardened belief that economic precarity must be the primary driver of change, and faculty stand in the way of such attempts at change. In search of a more 'ambidextrous organization' (p.111)—again notice the obfuscating language—Rosenberg seems to discount the value-base of, especially tenured, university faculty that are deeply invested in the health and success of the university and see their work as more mission-driven than self-serving or economic in focus.

Rosenberg's second-to-last chapter on tenure (Chapter 6) he starts by admitting: 'This is not a chapter that I have been especially anxious to write' (p.115). His own career as a formerly tenured faculty and member of many tenure review committees, form the backdrop to his reticence to admit that it is 'impossible to talk about impediments to change in higher education without talking about the impacts of tenure' (p.116). Arguing that the institution of tenure does little to strengthen the university, even as it might strengthen departmental/disciplinary boundaries, Rosenberg contends that arguments that link tenure to academic freedom 'seem to provide little to no protection in our current legal and political



environment' (p.124). Reading this I found myself asking: then what accounts for the US university system being among the world's best for so long? While norms, such as tenure, may in fact have limited legal standing, especially in right to work states, they do hold symbolic significance and alleviate the existential precarity that often limits research innovation in other regions of the world. While at large universities tenure may indeed 'constrain the academic freedom of tenure-track faculty members early in their careers' (p.128), it also opens opportunities for late career creativity and critical analysis that may be missing in a system that allows for punitive response to disagreement or politically unpopular ideas. This is particularly true in a discipline like mine, Peace and Conflict Studies, in which object and creative approaches to protracted social conflict can often hold the powerful to account. Admittedly, Rosenberg takes an objective and nuanced view in this chapter, as he is clear that this is fraught territory. While I can agree the institution of tenure is 'far better suited to preventing than inventing' (p.133), my experience does not necessarily square with his argument that tenure conflicts with good teaching and student outcomes. Contrary to the neoliberal belief that faculty are dispensable, tenure provides, albeit a minimum, modicum of safety to say and teach hard facts out of favour with those in power (such as diversity, equity, and inclusion are, despite political rhetoric, proven economic strengths). Defence of tenure is not simple a defence of the status quo. I know many tenured faculty willing to creatively adopt change, it is just not change driven from the position of power, but one that involves true shared fate and collaboration.

Despite Rosenberg's deft humour and humility throughout "*Whatever it is I'm Against it*" [e.g. remarks like: 'Call it the Immutable Law of Strategic Planning: the number of people involved in creating the plan is inversely proportional to the amount of actual strategy it contains' (p.103)], his arguments smack of the frustrations of a disgruntled administrator saddled by institutional checks and balances. Leadership in my definition is the ability to work collaboratively with others rather than use leadership power, or ego, to impose solutions. Rather than managing conflict, a good leader transforms the collective perception of conflict in order to build collaborative consensus that new programmes and policies will be worthy of testing in the real world. This is the visionary failure of our current US president; he has no desire to build collaborative governance, but only to tear down those he sees as transactionally weak and disloyal. No positive transformative change comes from simple destruction and retribution; leadership requires risk, consensus-building, and humility.

Thankfully, this belief in constructive initiatives seems to be an underlying message of Rosenberg's final Chapter 7. His example of the African Leadership University's (ALU's) pivot to 'self-directed' (p.145), problem-based, and scalable learning articulates a positive programme for change in new start-up institutions.

Still there remains clear challenges to change in more established university norms and bureaucracies, a point which Rosenberg's book brings home nicely with the examples of Sterling College and Middlebury College (pp.155-65) near the end of the book. Providing such positive examples of change may be the most powerful contribution of Rosenberg's book.

"*Whatever it is I'm Against It*" is an important read for those who find themselves perplexed with the current forestalled state of higher education. Not everything one reads should be agreeable, but it should challenge one to think. Rosenberg's book certainly does this, and, therefore, I would highly recommend the book to anyone inside or outside the American University system. It will remind you what makes US higher education unique and hopefully better inform the complex debates about how democratic society should best organise the education sector for inevitable process of change.

What better book to review in the pages of the *JTPP*, a journal dedicated to thoughtful approaches to change that empower human flourishing! Universities are important institutions in the work of peacebuilding; they demand our critical attention.

## NOTE

- 1 See for example, Taylor & Schrimmer, 'The Republican Plot to Un-educate America', *The New Republic*, 23 June 2025, retrieved from

<https://newrepublic.com/article/197017/budget-bill-kill-higher-education>  
on 3 August 2025

# Kaleidoscope

## *Global Peace Index 2025 shows decline in global peacefulness*

The Global Peace Index 2025, released on 19 June 2025, indicates a continued decline in global peacefulness, with more countries experiencing conflict and instability than experiencing improvement. While 74 countries saw positive changes, 87 experienced a deterioration in peacefulness. The ongoing conflicts, particularly in regions like Ukraine and Israel, are major factors contributing to this trend.

There are now more active state-based conflicts than at any time since World War II, with 59 active conflicts recorded.

Iceland declared as 'most' peaceful country with Russia being rated as 'least'.

Read more at:

<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Global-Peace-Index-2025-web.pdf>

## *Hungary passes constitutional amendment to ban LGBTQ+ public events*

In April 2025, Hungary's parliament passed an amendment to the constitution that allows the government to ban public events by LGBTQ+ communities; the amendment, which required a two-thirds vote, passed along party lines with 140 votes for and 21 against.

Legal scholars and critics, however, call this amendment being another step towards authoritarianism by the populist government.

Read more at:

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/hungary-passes-constitutional-amendment-to-ban-lgbtq-public-events>

## *6 ways Trump's executive orders are targeting transgender people*

US President Donald Trump has targeted transgender and nonbinary people with a series of executive orders since he returned to office.

Trump has done it with strong language. In one executive order, he asserted 'medical professionals are maiming and sterilizing a growing number of

impressionable children under the radical and false claim that adults can change a child's sex'.

That's a dramatic reversal of the policies of former US President Joe Biden's administration—and of major medical organisations—that supported gender-affirming care.

Read more at:

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/6-ways-trumps-executive-orders-are-targeting-transgender-people>

### *Nobel Laureate Narges Mohammadi gets 'physical elimination' threats*

Iranian activist Narges Mohammadi, who won the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize for her fight for women's and human rights in Iran, has received death threats from Tehran, the Nobel Committee said on 18 July 2025.

Mohammadi, who has spent much of the past decade behind bars, was released from Tehran's Evin prison in December 2024 for a limited period on medical leave, with her legal team repeatedly warning that she could be re-arrested at any time.

Norwegian Nobel Committee chair Jorgen Watne Frydnes said in a statement that he had received an 'urgent phone call' from Mohammadi, 53, who said her life was now in danger.

'The clear message, in her own words, is that "I have been directly and indirectly threatened with physical elimination by agents of the regime",' Frydnes said.

'The threats conveyed to Ms. Mohammadi make it clear that her security is at stake, unless she commits to end all public engagement within Iran, as well as any international advocacy or media appearances in support of democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression', the statement added.

Read more at:

<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/nobel-laureate-mohammadi-says-iran-issuing-death-threats-8860663>

### *Evidence of torture found as detention centre and mass grave discovered outside Khartoum*

More than 500 people may have been tortured or starved to death and then buried in a secret mass grave north of Khartoum, according to evidence seen by *The Guardian*.

A visit to a base belonging to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) shortly after it was retaken by the Sudanese military found a previously unknown detention centre, with manacles hanging from doors, apparent punishment chambers and bloodstains on the floor. Accounts from people held at the detention centre describe being repeatedly tortured by their captors.

Nearby was a large burial site with at least 550 unmarked graves, many of them freshly dug and a number apparently containing multiple bodies.

The site is the biggest makeshift burial ground found in Sudan during its civil war and, if confirmed, would make this one of the worst war crimes of Sudan's brutal conflict.

People rescued from the detention centre at the base's southern perimeter, about 40 miles (70 km) north of the capital, Khartoum, said that many had died inside and were believed to be buried nearby.

Examination of survivors by doctors found myriad signs of torture and concluded they were being starved.

Read more at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/mar/07/evidence-of-torture-found-as-detention-centre-and-mass-grave-discovered-outside-khartoum-sudan-rsf>

### *Nairobi seeks to integrate 843,000 displaced people into national economy by 2035*

Kenya has launched a plan to convert its refugee camps into formal municipalities, abandoning decades of humanitarian policy that kept displaced populations in temporary settlements dependent on international aid.

The Kenya Shirika Plan, announced in March 2025, targets 843,165 refugees and asylum seekers in the Dadaab and Kakuma camps alongside host communities. The government expects the policy to integrate more than 900,000 people into Kenya's national systems by 2035.

The shift comes as donor fatigue increases and traditional refugee funding models face strain. Kenya has hosted refugees for over three decades, with camps that cost hundreds of millions annually in international support. The policy builds on Kenya's 2021 Refugee Act, which grants displaced people work rights, freedom of movement, and access to financial services.

Over 70,000 refugees have enrolled in Kenya's universal health coverage since the law took effect. Refugee businesses in Kakuma and Dadaab generate significant economic activity under current restrictions, suggesting substantial potential from full integration.

Increased financial inclusion through partnerships with Kenya Commercial Bank and expanded mobile money services could deepen capital markets. The policy also attracts development finance, with institutions like the IFC viewing refugee integration as commercially viable.

Read more at:

<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/kenya-converts-refugee-camps-into-municipalities-in-policy-shift/>

### *Where not walking your dog can land you in the doghouse*

In India, you can face criminal charges for tethering an animal on the street, flying a kite in a manner that causes alarm, skipping a school attendance order or handing a feeding bottle to a mother who can't breastfeed.

Of the 882 federal laws on the books, 370 contain criminal provisions—together criminalising 7,305 acts and omissions. These range from the absurd to the serious: failing to give a month's notice before quitting your job or not walking your dog enough, to offences like illegal arms possession, murder and sexual assault.

Delhi-based think-tank Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy calls it 'India's crisis of over-criminalisation'.

In a new report, 'The State of the System: Understanding the Scale of Crime and Punishment in India', the think-tank has produced the country's first comprehensive database of crimes, mapping the extent of criminalisation across 370 federal laws.

The report flags India's habit of reaching for criminal law to solve just about everything—even the mundane. It notes that many laws criminalise 'routine, everyday actions'.

Read more at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj0z7lde14eo>

### *Beyond Bullets—General Musa's blueprint for sustainable peace in Nigeria*

Nigeria's battle against insurgency, terrorism and banditry requires more than military might—it requires a fundamental transformation in how the nation approaches peacebuilding. General Christopher Gwabin Musa, Chief of Defence Staff of Nigeria (Head of the Nigerian Armed Forces), presents this vision in his

recent book, *Taking a Stand against Insurgency, Terrorism and Banditry: Admonition to Nigerian Youths*, which offers a strategic roadmap that extends far beyond conventional security thinking.

Drawing from his extensive experience as Chief of Defence Staff and former Theatre Commander of Operation HADIN KAI, General Musa understands that sustainable security cannot be achieved through force alone. His 17-chapter book serves as both a call to Nigerian youth, and a sophisticated analysis of what building genuine peace requires.

The book's central premise is clear: effective counterinsurgency demands winning hearts and minds, not just eliminating threats. As General Musa emphasises, insurgents thrive on discontent and grievances, and addressing these underlying issues is essential to preventing recruitment, and building lasting stability.

Read more at:

<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/beyond-bullets-general-musas-blueprint-for-sustainable-peace-in-nigeria/>

Curated by Abhijit Mazumder







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