

# THE PRACTICE OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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**MISSION:** To stimulate, by means of relationship building with enemy parties, an effective process of peacemaking that includes profound cultural gestures which have practical effects on day to day relations and circumstances, and that are sponsored by significant political leadership.

**VISION:** An irreversible direction of reconciliation between and reconstruction of enemy societies that becomes embedded in cultural and religious interactions.

## **METHODS:**

- Quiet relationship building between significant actors from among both adversaries and third parties, across lines of class, religion, and political affiliation, and which leads to A. support for innovative programs that will affect large populations, B. subtle policy shifts, and C. the stimulation of peace process proposals which receive high level sponsorship from significant figures on all sides
- promotion of new ideas and strategies(significant writing, opeds, interviews on radio and television, email lists, advertising) that follow on back channel conversations, thus adding pressure from the public sphere on key leaders.

- Gathering of wisdom that hones and strengthens the first two methods by creating a rapid-response “brain trust” of theoreticians and activists who would be consulted regularly in order to quickly adjust recommended strategies as the conflict changes and evolves.

## **RATIONALE:**

### **WHAT HAS BEEN MISSING AND WHAT IS NEEDED**

Diplomacy is at a crossroads at the present time due to unprecedented challenges. The Western, primarily American, war on terrorism, the war of Arab and Muslim extremist groups against the United States, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continue to threaten the stability and safety of millions of people, many beyond the Middle East as well. For millions more this Middle Eastern set of conflicts has spilled over into conflicts between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There are global networks of Islamic groups, on the fringes of many societies, whose aim is to exacerbate these civilizational struggles and create a full-scale war. Furthermore, there are cultural and religious resurgent groups on every continent that capitalize on human misery and alienation to stimulate cultural warfare.

These developments come paradoxically in the context of very positive evolutions of religious civilizations in the past century, and unprecedented levels of contact and cooperation between cultures and religions. Many international agencies express this growing consensus on universal values. International documents of human rights have their various counterparts in multi-religious documents that embrace and deepen the commitment to human rights. Much of this work lacks strategic depth, however, when it comes to educating and moving whole civilizations towards the practices of tolerance and coexistence. But we cannot, in the midst of our fears of growing violence, lose sight of these positive developments. There is, in reality, a fierce competition at work for the hearts and minds of millions of people. How can we win this competition?

Diplomacy, both in theory and practice, has tended to foist peace and coexistence upon whole populations, expecting that the promises contained in abstract treaty documents will be enough to quell the rage and injury of centuries. There is little attention to how whole communities actually move from unbridled hatred to tolerance and eventually to reconciliation. Diplomacy has thus far demonstrated little understanding of how to actually inculcate the values of coexistence and human rights in the context of many unresolved grievances that run very deep. There is a good understanding of the importance of economic development as a major factor in relieving stresses that contribute to extremist violence. But this ignores the full panoply of human tendencies that contribute to either war or peace, and the tendency of war making to be seductive despite its highly destructive economic consequences in most cases.

There are other mistakes. Political leadership is currently viewed by traditional diplomacy in a rather simplistic fashion that boils down to one fundamental error. Diplomacy acts as if leaders truly lead and followers follow. But the mood of the majority in democracies, and even in many authoritarian regimes, heavily determines the choices of leaders. The mood of the majority, or even very significant minorities, will determine whether leaders truly devise workable compromises in negotiations, take major political and military risks, or whether they obfuscate and devise ways to blame the other side for the impasses.

## DIPLOMACY THAT COMPETES FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

Diplomacy must continue to evolve in such a way that its strategies of achieving social ends, and especially peace treaties, becomes inextricably coupled with methods of social change that reach the hearts as well as the minds of target populations. These methods must affect behavior at the highest levels of interaction between leaders as well as interactions on the street, and particularly the behavior of security forces, or more accurately, those who have the guns and the power of life and death over others. It is in understanding the central importance of these matters that we can begin to devise new and bold strategies of diplomacy.

Put simply, it has been proven both by recent cataclysmic historical events, as well as by new research [\[1\]](#), that culture and religion matter a great deal in the formation of conflict, and, must, therefore, play critical and creative roles in conflict prevention, resolution, reconciliation, and socio-economic reconstruction. Once millions of people are motivated to resist rational compromises in the name of religion, to fight and kill in the name of their culture, there is simply no way for them to be brought into peace processes without engaging those myths and values that matter to them most. These frames of reference and meaning must then be coupled together with negotiations concerning power, security, economics, and the sharing of scarce resources.

New methods of diplomacy must focus on the way in which leaders at the highest levels and the political leaderships of every civilization involved, including the political leadership of religion and culture, can be helped to see the wisdom of broader and deeper methods of building peace. In that way painful and dangerous compromises can be made in the context of communities that are steadily evolving new cultural ways to see each other. The political openings emerge as worldviews start to be reconstructed. In this way pre-negotiations and negotiations are not over

against culture but in sync with it. At a human level, the heart and the mind become engaged simultaneously in conceiving a new paradigm of the future.

We now understand that human beings make complex and fateful decisions in life through a subtle combination of brain functions, not just abstract reasoning, and that, in fact, abstract reasoning is often colored by primal feelings of trust or distrust, fear, hate, forgiveness, friendship, and loyalty. Visions of the past and the future, relationships of loyalty to both the living as well as the dead have a profound influence on how we think through matters of war and peace.

One of the tragedies of the Arab-Israeli Oslo peace process, for example, is that just a few people got the chance to go through the profound changes that come with the re-humanization of enemies. The latter typifies the kind of relationship building that stimulates not only creative rational compromises but also has an impact on the more primal choices between trust and distrust, hatred or friendship, recovery from loss or the inability to do so. Most members of both populations never really got a chance to engage in this process. As much progress as was made between businessmen and security personnel, the deeper relationships and friendships were more rare, or confined to privileged classes. Political leaderships are always flawed, and sometimes they are abysmal. Nevertheless it takes more than bad leadership to create paroxysms of hate or endless cycles of revenge between two groups. It takes an absence of large scale, heavily funded efforts to reverse the emotional damage of the past. This has never been done in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

## PEOPLE TO PEOPLE DIPLOMACY

People to people diplomacy, official peace processes that are accompanied by the consistent effort to build relationships across sectors of society, the steady attention to individual safety, dignity, honor, and economic empowerment in the day to day experience of the promise of peace in the pre-settlement phase, are now seen to be indispensable conditions of peace processes. Of course, one can ram peace agreements down the throats of angry populations, and one can fixate exclusively on violent counter-terrorism as the only way to secure peace treaties. But, in an atmosphere of hopelessness, you are simply recruiting for the terrorists by proving their point. As long as misery and humiliation form the day to day reality, as long as fear for one's life permeates the atmosphere any extremist act will derail diplomacy. But if that diplomacy is accompanied at every stage with hard evidence of social change then the extremist violence will be seen as only that. This is true counter-terrorism and reflects sound security concerns as well as the moral aspirations of peacemaking. No painful compromises, no risks, should be undertaken by either side, other than in an atmosphere in which the evidence grows by the day that a civilizational change, and an economic change, are emerging with every step of complex negotiations.

Diplomacy has other hidden flaws. The history of intervention in these conflicts has called into question the possibility of neutrality in third party work. Which third party has not had some prejudices in conflict, turning a blind eye to infractions on one side or the other? The situation calls for newer forms of third party intervention that de-emphasize neutrality while placing great emphasis on trust building, honest self-examination of third party interests, and relationship building as the core of trust building and diplomacy. There are courageous diplomats who have practiced this on

an individual level, but little effort has been made to extend this third party role into a deep engagement with the populations of the conflict.

Finally, anyone who is not included in a future vision tends to destroy that vision. An exclusively secular, industrial view of the future guarantees a small supporting constituency. Anyone who is not at the negotiating table almost by definition tries to overturn that negotiating table. It becomes imperative to cast a wider net in terms of peacemaking. In so doing, innovative solutions to impasses begin to appear and what were thought to be inveterately obstructionist communities can become part of the solutions. It is time to encourage enemies to engage in inclusive peace processes.



## **METHODS IN DETAIL:**

- Align as much as possible the work outlined here with the course and direction of diplomatic efforts of the parties at the official and highest levels.
- Innovate and disseminate new approaches that are continually adjusted to the changing circumstances and opportunities.
- Cultivate third-party strategies of intervention at the higher levels that encourage leaderships to engage the more profound levels of social change through demonstrating their strategic value.
- Devise strategies of influence at the higher political and military levels that persuasively make the case for this new form of diplomacy and social change.

## **NECESSARY RELATIONSHIPS**

The kind of successful impact on diplomacy and on the leadership that we seek requires at least three networks of relationships: 1. A network of creative researchers and activists in social change who continually hone and adjust the projected activities, 2. A network of people of influence who can have an impact on the parties involved by virtue of prior relationships or cultivated connections to them. This, in turn, requires face to face contacts in the various capitals in question, as well as in places of retreat. 3. A network of committed supporters motivated to fund and enable this work through their varied resources.

## **THE ROLE OF VALUES--CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL--IN RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

Implicit in the methods described is a series of values and practices that stimulate the kind of relationship building that we argue are indispensable for visionary leadership in conflict situations. This does not imply that those who practice this must be religious or that those people and groups to whom attention is given must be religious. Rather it is a highly subtle, almost private, consciousness and training that informs the nature and quality of standing with enemies and developing relationships on all sides, no matter how bad the circumstances are.

## THE ROLE OF GESTURES AND DEEDS

Gestures and deeds mean far more in violent contexts where there is no trust than any words, no matter how convincing the words may be or however much they have the stamp of official approval. Actions matter, actions that harm as well as actions that heal.

Cycles of violence depend upon very clear, polarized constructs of reality that become self-fulfilling prophecies to the enemies on both sides. A focus on new gestures and deeds is designed to institute a creative ambiguity wherein the violence may go on due to extremist influence, but doubts begin to creep into the psychology of the enemy system, both inside the minds of the leaders as well as the general population. Leaders may continue to give destructive orders. But if they can also be persuaded or pressured by third parties to engage in a new set of positive actions toward the enemy population a new dynamic is set in motion that creates less polarization and more ambiguity. Ambiguity in enemy systems is good. It begins to replace obligatory reciprocal violence with a stimulus toward reciprocal respect or care. More and more people find it harder and harder to embrace killing as the only solution. [\[2\]](#)

There are four challenges here: 1. Convincing enemy leaderships to encourage such gestures on a massive scale. This is crucial in order that people to people relationship building is no longer a piecemeal and woefully under-funded phenomenon that only affects a fraction of the target populations. 2. Convincing the influential third parties that such gestures will make a difference. Here the objective is to convince third parties that leaderships engaged in violent options can and do often simultaneously express a willingness to engage in such gestures precisely because they want to be seen as the righteous party. 3. Choosing and executing gestures that are effective and tailor-made for the situation at hand. 4. Providing enough resources that push things in this direction that will overwhelm and counteract the enormous infusion of funds from outside parties designed to a two-state solution.

The strategy is to encourage leaders, even belligerent ones, into gestures--which they want to be seen to be open to--in order to shift the ground beneath them politically.

For if the gestures attract some positive reaction from their populations this will, in turn, give these leaders the political space to give less belligerent orders, to carry out peace accords to the letter, rather than without serious intentions. This will provide the grease in the wheels of the security efforts underway to control terrorism. This represents an indispensable adjunct to traditional diplomacy and security negotiations and is the only way to reach cease-fires and peace accords in the present climate.

It should be stated that leaders in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, to take an example, stated several times in private to me and to others that they were ready for such gestures but that third parties in the United States at the highest levels failed to encourage them to do this. True or not, it suggests at least the possibility that opportunities may have been missed in the past, but point to a promising opening for a

different future. Perhaps if these leaders are encouraged to engage in such gestures by American authorities through public speeches it will have the desired impact.

## POSSIBLE DEEDS AND GESTURES

Appropriate deeds and gestures are best devised by local populations in consultation with culturally and religiously knowledgeable members. They would be the ones to negotiate shared gestures with each other, with third party facilitation, because they have the best knowledge of the subtleties of their communities and traditions.

The following list is meant merely to stimulate new possibilities and support activities already underway:

- joint ceremonies and practices of apologies agreed upon through negotiation, publicly aired through the mass media, and conducted by leading cultural and political representatives
- direct communication between as many of the adversary groups as possible, particularly through the use of communication technologies
- agreed upon unilateral gestures of apology and acknowledgment of past wrongs to be reciprocated at regular intervals
- shared mourning practices by general populations and by leaders in acknowledgement of lost lives, lost children, lost land and lost homes
- shared mourning between the actual families of the dead
- practices of joint aid to the poor, carefully devised for acceptance by the general populations

- joint economic recovery programs with a focus on day to day activities in which and through which general populations can meet and participate on a massive scale, such as house construction, community renovation, or micro-loan systems
- joint environmental work that is accompanied and overlaid by supportive cultural and religious symbols of love of the land, valuation of the water, or sacralization of the earth
- shared practices of recovery for the wounded, such as training in prosthetics
- training in the art of civil interaction based on values emanating out of all traditions concerned, for all civil servants at the highest level as well as the bureaucratic level, and especially for those who bear arms
- shared study of sacred traditions with a direct bearing on civil behavior
- joint research of religious approaches to honor, respect, compassion, and justice
- mutual restoration of damaged or dishonored sacred places, capped by public ceremonies
- shared study on the parallels between sacred obligations and doctrines of human rights and democracy
- joint study in basic religious and cultural knowledge, but with special attention to practices of personal communal change
- the encouragement of specific ceremonies of personal and collective transformation or restorative justice by numerous actors in specific regions

- negotiated covenants or social contracts of coexistence, especially between specific sectors of the populations on both sides, such as professionals, family caretakers, businessmen, teenagers, judges, and religious teachers (some of these contracts will bear a deeper cultural or religious stamp while others may be quite secular, and perhaps there will be parallel secular and religious documents for each sector)
- joint training in conflict resolution practices for military and police personnel with special attention to cultural approaches to conflict prevention and reconciliation
- official welcome of each population by the other population to its ancient homes, even across the agreed upon boundaries of separation
- agreed upon codes of honor strictly adhered to at points of contact between the general population and the police
- a steady stream of media generated communications that document all of the above events for the general populations who fail to participate, which will require very substantial funds. This could include recorded messages of acknowledgement of suffering and commitment to a new future by major religious and cultural leaders.
- recorded messages from political, religious and cultural leaders that directly address the enemy population through television and radio, utilizing all the gestures described above
- the empowerment of women as caretakers, as agents of social change, as healers, and as spokespeople for the basic human needs and desires of each community
- the empowerment of healers, traditional and modern, as agents of moral authority

- pilgrimages of listening and inclusion by social leaders from both communities to the refugee and expatriate communities
- funding for all of the above by all governments concerned so that, in principle, the majority in each society are positively affected by at least some of the above programs and institutions, including refugees and expatriates. [\[3\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution*; idem *Culture and Conflict* ; Marc Ross, *The Culture of Conflict*; idem *The Management of Conflict*; Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*; idem, *Bloodlines*; Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*; idem, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking*.

[\[2\]](#) I want to express my indebtedness to Andrea Bartoli for the strategic frames expressed in this paragraph.

[\[3\]](#) A fuller exposition of these practices is outlined in Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Part II. It is important to note that these practices must be constantly attuned to what suggestions emerge from the populations themselves. It is also important to understand that, as idealistic as these suggestions sound, several of these suggestions were greeted positively by several leaders at high levels, even without any funding sources or third party pressure. The reason is simple: these practices do not threaten basic negotiation positions or postures, at least on the surface. Their aim, however, is quite subversive, to open up new vistas psychologically and politically for compromise and negotiated settlements at the highest levels.