Jerusalem

CinC
CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE

CONFLICT AND RELIGION

Briefing Paper 5
Conflict and Religion:
How sacred and secular intersect in contested cities

Religious issues often ignite passionate disputes in contested cities. They inform ethno-national conflict in ways that can be subtle and complex, and we ignore them at our peril. Holy places are often made the focus of such disputes; they can be used to legitimise claims to key locations or, alternatively, become the focus of resistance for minority and oppressed groups. However, findings from Conflict in Cities (CinC) suggest that overt conflict does not always happen in the holy places themselves but, instead, may be transposed to nearby spaces that may be less controlled. Here, religion in various forms interacts with civic and cultural practices, and secular populations can draw into disputes.

It is not helpful to assume that religion is intrinsically violent. CinC has found that religious unrest involves a combination of factors, and it is important to have a good understanding of how religion is intertwined with various civic institutions and practices. In contested cities, religious groups rarely function in a vacuum. They may form or be connected to international organisations, and can be active in the city on a variety of levels: creating and preserving religious sites, organising religious tourism, or providing social services. Such organisations often become integrated into civic life in ways that can either reinforce patterns of conflict or help to lessen ethno-national division and segregation between communities.

Domination and resistance at holy sites

Selective accounts of history – used to legitimise land grabs and urban violence – can be enhanced by the presence of sacred sites and religious structures. In Jerusalem, the Holy Places have international significance and are central to much of the conflict. Whilst the major Muslim sites in the Old City have survived relatively well, many of the Jewish sites are only archaeological fragments; thus, modes of articulation or even reinvention accompany their use as holy places. But all sites – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – are used to serve political agendas and justify historical narratives.

Religious sites can be heavily manipulated in urban conflicts. In the former Yugoslavia, expressions of ethnic

Key findings for policy

- **People will often use religious means to express political dissent, especially when political expression is suppressed.**

- **Rather than viewing religion as opposed to secular life, policy makers must understand how religion interacts with various civic and cultural practices.**

- **Religious disputes are often enacted in non-religious spaces, and can affect the whole city. Policy makers and peace negotiators must look beyond holy places when seeking to address conflict.**

- **Religious organisations can play a major role in cities by providing social services at various levels. This may be in place of government provision, alongside it, or in contradiction to it.**

identity were suppressed. Religious buildings were the only structures in which different identities could be expressed. In Vukovar, Croat churches were targeted for destruction by Serb forces; following the return of the Croats to the city, no Orthodox (Serbian) structures were stored for over a decade. Reconstruction in Beirut's downtown area of the Mohammad al-Amin mosque on Martyrs' Square, and Prime Minister Hariri's burial on an adjacent site, has enabled the appropriation of this part of the city by Sunni Muslims. In Hebron, settler activity in and around the al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Cave of the Patriarchs – considered holy by the three monotheistic faiths – has acted as a catalyst for greater Israeli military involvement. This, in turn, has supported settlers in obtaining greater access to, and control over, the site. It is a vicious circle which threatens to replicate itself in Jerusalem.

In Belfast the city's churches continue to symbolise an enduring communal segregation, amid fears by some that Belfast is losing its identification as a 'Protestant city'. The city's population is now almost equally balanced between the two religious communities, and residential segregation has sharpened in working class areas. Whilst Catholic churches and their clergy are more firmly

An interdenominational march in Belfast between the Falls and Shankill Road.

located in their immediate neighbourhoods, declining membership in many Protestant churches is only partially compensated for by suburbanites returning to their old congregations for Sunday services.

Participation in religious practices and the use of sacred space can also be seen as resistance and an assertion of political identity. Because the Israeli security authorities regularly restrict young Palestinian males from attending Friday prayers in al-Aqsa Mosque, those who can take part make a point of doing so; even the buying of religious goods from the nearby Old City markets has religio-political connotations. Under the leadership of Sheikh Raed Salah, the Islamic Movement (based in Israel) claims to restore the sanctity of the mosque and its importance as a teaching and communal locus, and to revive the Old City as a Palestinian commercial hub. It provides subsidised transportation for Muslims from Israel to visit Jerusalem. Many of those who embark on these trips see their involvement in the Islamic Movement in the context of the Israeli system that has offered them few opportunities to assert their identity in other ways. For Salah, the rehabilitation scheme has greatly enhanced both his political capital as a Palestinian leader and his position as a global Islamic figure.

Where the sacred meets the secular: theatres of contest

Religious activity is not exclusive to sacred sites, and can be found in the physical environment and the practices of everyday life in contested cities. In some cases, this disturbs and shocks secular groups. A combination of political allegiance and religious identity is evident in many aspects of street culture in parts of Jerusalem, Beirut and Belfast, including graffiti and murals, signage, goods for sale, and religious markings on buildings.

In Jerusalem, areas bordering sacred sites are theatres of contest for religious and national identity. In many cases, religious activities form the basis of nationalist expression and agitation, and the political temperature of the city can often be discerned from the activity on the street. In the Muslim Quarter, the area of al-Wad Street has become an intense arena, with both Palestinian activists and Israeli settlers using it to further claims to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The area is not subject to the controls of the holy sites, yet its proximity makes it central to the strategies of both camps. Israeli settler

Jerusalem's 'Holy Basin' is generally understood to be the geographical zone which centres on the Old City and includes the surrounding monument-studded green slopes and wadis. The term itself is a modern invention, used to denote a romantic vision of a biblical landscape. Today, development there is highly manipulated to control Palestinian growth and sustainability, yet the picture it presents to many is one of ancient religious authenticity.

organisations attempt to Judaise present day Jerusalem through strategic archaeological excavations and tourist sites. Synagogues and yeshivas, abandoned due to violence decades ago, have been restored, but no comparable reclamation has been permitted for Palestinian property in Jewish areas. The Palestinian residents in the area are regularly caught up in the resulting turmoil.

In Belfast, religious rituals are bound up with competing nationalisms, with claims on public space connected to Orange Order parades, commemorations, murals, Orange Halls, churches and cemeteries; they are also present in personal practices such as pinning medals on prams or the wearing of football shirts. Thus, religion in Belfast can be said to be involved in everyday claims on public space, although often less dramatically than in cities such as Jerusalem.

Services integrate faith into civic life, for good and ill

Religious organisations may provide major social services for their own people in contested cities. Funding usually comes from diaspora communities or sympathetic governments, ratcheting up the stakes of what appears to be simple neighbourhood support to international levels. Such provision has diverse potentials: whilst it can enable

powerful politico-religious agendas, it can also help to heal local inequalities and address poverty.

In Beirut, in the aftermath of Israel's devastating bombardment of the Shi'a neighborhood of al-Dahiyya in July 2006, and using funding from Iran, Hezbollah established a private development agency to reconstruct many residential neighbourhoods. In doing so, it has oriented south Beirut to Shi'a practices, creating not only religious centres but also public and commercial facilities that comply with religious protocols. Consequently, Hezbollah has bolstered local support, strengthened its political control, and expanded the scope of Islamic resistance internationally. In Jerusalem, religiously-motivated settlers, funded largely by American Jews, enjoy considerable autonomy and have mirrored state organisations in providing security, housing and education.

In Belfast religious organisations are involved in both the reproduction and healing of divisions. Parades often start from churches, but may become contentious when their routes take them past the church of the 'other', as was the

The fusion of religious and political imagery: some of Beirut's war-ravaged buildings have become symbolic backdrops celebrating martyrs, demarcating boundaries, and recalling specific sectarian narratives. An Amal flag is painted alongside images of this political group's charismatic Shi'a founder, Musa al-Sadr, and its inspiration, the Iranian Cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeni.

case with Orange Order parades in the summer of 2012. However, churches are also involved in a number of initiatives and projects that seek to create shared public space and promote greater cohesion. Both Catholic and Protestant clergy were actively involved in facilitating dialogue with paramilitaries and promoting the peace process. 'Skainos', a redevelopment project in East Belfast led by the Methodist Church, includes space for Methodist worship but also supports mixed and shared housing and commercial activities. There are also plans for the creation of a non-denominational church on a boat offshore in the regenerated Titanic Quarter. Other cross-community activities and conflict management initiatives come from the grassroots, and are often facilitated by personal relationships between clergy, faith-based groups and a range of civil society organisations.

In all of these examples faith groups address and influence urban conflict directly, underscoring the need for policy makers to engage with religious organisations.

Further reading

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