

Governance in the Age of Faith-Driven Warfare: Challenges for International Peacebuilding

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Introduction:

In the 21st century, violent conflicts are increasingly driven not solely by disputes over territory, resources, or ideology, but by religious motivations that shape both the identity of combatants and the legitimacy of governance. The rise of faith-driven warfare has transformed the nature of contemporary conflict, introducing challenges that traditional peacebuilding mechanisms struggle to address. Unlike conventional wars, which may be resolved through political negotiation and institutional rebuilding, religiously motivated conflicts often invoke sacred mandates, absolute truths, and theological justifications that resist compromise². This religious absolutism complicates international efforts to mediate disputes, enforce legal norms, and promote inclusive governance. Faith-based actors often establish parallel legal systems based on religious doctrine, rejecting international human rights frameworks and secular rule of law as illegitimate or even heretical³. These dynamics erode secular state institutions, marginalize minority groups, and restrict political participation, especially for women and non-believers⁴. Religious narratives also can legitimize

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² Toft, M. D., Philpott, D., & Shah, T. S. (2011). *God's century: Resurgent religion and global politics*. W.W. Norton & Company.

³ Haynes, Jeffery. *Religion and Politics in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*. Routledge, 2010.
<https://www.routledge.com/Religion-and-Politics-in-Europe-the-Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Haynes/p/book/9780415850292>.

⁴ Künkler, Mirjam, and Julia Leininger. "The Multi-Faceted Role of Religious Actors in Democratization Processes: Empirical Evidence from Five Young Democracies." *Democratization* 16 (December 20, 2009).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340903271746>.

authoritarian control or militant violence, reducing the effectiveness of transitional justice and external diplomacy. As a result, peacebuilding becomes a multidimensional challenge, requiring not only political negotiation but also theological engagement and cultural sensitivity.

Understanding the intersection of religion, governance, and violence is crucial for building sustainable peace in faith-driven conflict zones. International actors have to adapt their strategies by incorporating religious literacy, engaging with local faith leaders, and ensuring that peace efforts respect cultural identities while upholding universal legal and moral standards.

Faith as a Driver of Political Legitimacy:

In many modern conflict zones, religion plays a central role not only as a motivator for violence but also as a source of political legitimacy. Faith-based actors often invoke divine authority to justify governance structures and laws, positioning themselves as rightful rulers in the eyes of their followers. This type of religious legitimacy is especially powerful in societies where formal state institutions are weak or discredited⁵. For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan have consistently based their authority on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, rejecting secular governance models introduced by international actors⁶. Their legitimacy is derived not through democratic processes but through the claim of religious duty and divine sanction.

⁵ Toft, Monica Duffy. "Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War." *International Security* 31, no. 4 (April 1, 2007): 97–131. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.4.97>.

⁶ Giustozzi, Antonio. "Empires of Mud | Hurst Publishers." *HURST* (blog). Accessed July 13, 2025. <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/empires-of-mud/>.



Fig 1: Islamic State militants parade in Tel Abyad, near Syria's border with Turkey (Source: Reuters)

Similarly, the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria declared a caliphate in 2014, framing its governance project as a religious obligation for all Muslims and using that justification to enforce brutal legal systems and bureaucratic control⁷. Such regimes often reject internationally supported peace agreements or transitional mechanisms because they conflict with their religious worldview. This poses a major challenge for diplomacy, as traditional peacebuilding relies on negotiation, compromise, and secular institutional frameworks, all of which may be seen as illegitimate or blasphemous by faith-driven actors⁸. As a result, international peace efforts in such regions frequently fail to gain traction without engaging with the religious dimension of legitimacy.

Polarization and Erosion of Secular Institutions:

Faith-driven warfare often accelerates societal polarization by positioning religious identity as the primary basis of political legitimacy and community belonging. This dynamic undermines neutral, secular institutions that are essential for inclusive governance and national unity. When religious ideologies dominate the political sphere, secular frameworks, such as independent courts, civil administrations, and educational systems, are often dismantled or repurposed to reflect religious

⁷ Hooker, David. "The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction." *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 178–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2015.1089645>.

⁸ Haynes, Jeffery. *Religion and Politics in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*. Routledge, 2010. <https://www.routledge.com/Religion-and-Politics-in-Europe-the-Middle-East-and-North-Africa/Haynes/p/book/9780415850292>.

orthodoxy⁹. As a result, the space for minority voices, dissenting opinions, and gender equity contracts has significantly narrowed. In many cases, women and religious minorities become politically and socially marginalized, as their rights are subordinated to religious doctrine¹⁰

The erosion of these inclusive institutions directly undermines the goals of democratic peacebuilding. Structural inequalities that predate conflict may be reinforced or deepened by religious regimes, which often prioritize ideological conformity over civic participation. This ideological exclusivity erodes public trust in state institutions and fosters long-term instability. For example, in post-2003 Iraq, sectarian politics and the influence of religious militias weakened national institutions, fueling cycles of violence and public disillusionment¹¹. In such environments, efforts at reconciliation and institutional rebuilding struggle to take root because the state is no longer seen as a neutral actor. Ultimately, peacebuilding requires not only the cessation of violence but the restoration of inclusive and impartial governance structures. In faith-driven conflict zones, this becomes especially difficult when secularism itself is portrayed as hostile to religious identity, making it harder to reestablish a common civic framework.

Complexities in Negotiation and Mediation:

Conflicts driven by absolutist religious ideologies present significant obstacles to international negotiation and mediation efforts. Unlike traditional political conflicts, where compromise and mutual interest may guide diplomacy, faith-based actors often perceive their struggle as sacred and non-negotiable. This theological rigidity limits the effectiveness of conventional diplomatic tools such as sanctions, ceasefire agreements, or power-sharing frameworks¹². When combatants view

⁹ Gause, F. Gregory. "Sectarianism and the Politics of the New Middle East." *Brookings Institution* (blog), 2013. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sectarianism-and-the-politics-of-the-new-middle-east/>.

¹⁰ Künkler, Mirjam, and Julia Leininger. "The Multi-Faceted Role of Religious Actors in Democratization Processes: Empirical Evidence from Five Young Democracies." *Democratization* 16 (December 20, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2012.690990>.

¹¹ Dodge, Toby. "Iraq's Road Back to Dictatorship." *Survival* 54, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 147–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2012.690990>.

¹² Philpott, Daniel. "Religion, Reconciliation, and Transitional Justice: The State of the Field." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1417034>.

their objectives as divinely mandated, any concession can be interpreted as a betrayal of religious duty, making a peaceful resolution elusive.

International mediators frequently struggle to gain the trust of religiously motivated actors, especially when they are perceived as secular, Western, or biased toward opposing factions. This credibility deficit can derail even well-structured negotiations¹³. Additionally, many mediators lack the theological literacy or cultural competence needed to engage with deeply rooted religious narratives. Effective peace processes in such contexts require more than technical solutions; they must integrate religious leaders, values, and frameworks that resonate with the conflicting parties. However, most international peacebuilding models still lack institutionalized mechanisms for religious engagement¹⁴. This absence often results in peace initiatives that are out of touch with the lived realities of the communities involved, ultimately limiting their success and sustainability.

Cross-Border Radicalization and External Interference:

Faith-based conflicts increasingly transcend national borders, fueled by global networks of radicalization, digital propaganda, diaspora support, and foreign sponsorship. These transnational dynamics transform localized religious conflicts into regional or global security threats. For instance, the proliferation of extremist ideologies through online platforms has enabled groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda to recruit and radicalize individuals from across continents, bypassing traditional national boundaries¹⁵. This digital radicalization not only expands the reach of militant movements but also creates a constant influx of foreign fighters and ideological supporters into conflict zones.

¹³ Lund, Aron. "'Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front' by Aron Lund." *Syria Comment* (blog), March 19, 2013. <https://joshualandis.com/blog/syrias-salafi-insurgents-the-rise-of-the-syrian-islamic-front-by-aron-lund/>.

¹⁴ Appleby, Scott R. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.

¹⁵ Weimann, Gabriel. *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Columbia University Press, 2015. <https://archive-yaleglobal.yale.edu/terrorism-cyberspace-next-generation>.



Fig 2: *Battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War* (Source: Muftah Magazine)

Diaspora communities, intentionally or not, often become financial backers of faith-driven insurgencies, sending remittances or donations that fund armed operations¹⁶. Meanwhile, certain states provide ideological or material support to proxy religious groups as a means of extending their geopolitical influence. For example, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has intensified sectarian conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq through the support of Sunni and Shia factions, respectively¹⁷. Such external interference complicates peacebuilding by introducing actors who are not primarily interested in reconciliation but in advancing strategic or ideological agendas. This internationalization of religious conflicts makes it difficult for global governance institutions to impose standardized conflict-resolution mechanisms. Faith-based actors are often unbound by national or international norms and may resist interventions perceived as secular or Western¹⁸. As a result, durable peace requires multi-level engagement that addresses not only local grievances but also global networks of ideological and material support.

¹⁶ Bakke, Kristin M. *Decentralization and Intrastate Struggles*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. <https://www.cambridge.org/universitypress/subjects/politics-international-relations/comparative-politics/decentralization-and-intrastate-struggles-chechnya-punjab-and-quebec>.

¹⁷ Gause, F. Gregory. "Sectarianism and the Politics of the New Middle East." *Brookings Institution* (blog), 2013. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sectarianism-and-the-politics-of-the-new-middle-east/>.

¹⁸ Philpott, Daniel. "Religion, Reconciliation, and Transitional Justice: The State of the Field." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1417034>.

Accountability and Rule of Law in Faith-Based Systems:

In faith-driven regimes, religious law frequently replaces or overrides secular legal systems and international legal norms, creating significant challenges for upholding accountability, transitional justice, and universal human rights. These regimes often prioritize divine command over democratic principles or legal pluralism, making it difficult to enforce standards set by international institutions such as the United Nations or the International Criminal Court¹⁹. For example, under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the application of strict Sharia law has led to the dismantling of constitutional rights, the banning of women's education, and the public punishment of dissenters—all in the name of religious purity²⁰.

Such religiously framed legal systems often reject global human rights conventions as un-Islamic or products of Western imperialism. This resistance is not unique to Islam; similar patterns are visible in ultra-Orthodox Jewish or theocratic Christian settings, where divine law is framed as superior to civil or international legal standards²¹. This rejection weakens mechanisms of transitional justice, such as truth commissions, criminal tribunals, and reparations for victims of violence. Without a commitment to impartial, universally accepted legal frameworks, peacebuilding efforts lose credibility and victims of conflict are left without recourse. Moreover, when accountability structures are subject to religious interpretation, they can be manipulated to serve the interests of ruling elites while suppressing opposition. The absence of rule of law and the lack of an independent judiciary in such regimes perpetuate cycles of impunity and inhibit long-term stability. Ensuring peace in these settings requires legal reform that respects religious identity while aligning with international legal standards.

Conclusion

Faith-driven warfare poses significant challenges to international peacebuilding by transforming governance structures along rigid, ideological lines. Such conflicts often weaken or replace secular

¹⁹ Hirschl, Ran. *Constitutional Theocracy*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

²⁰ Barr, Heather. "The Taliban and the Global Backlash Against Women's Rights | Human Rights Watch," February 6, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/06/taliban-and-global-backlash-against-womens-rights>.

²¹ Fox, Jonathan. *A World Survey of Religion and the State*. Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511993039>.

institutions with religiously defined authority, limiting inclusivity and undermining the rule of law. Religious actors may reject universal human rights frameworks, resist compromise, and marginalize minorities and women, creating environments where traditional diplomatic tools are ineffective. These conditions demand a strategic shift in how international actors approach peacebuilding. Rather than relying solely on secular frameworks, it is essential to engage religious leaders, understand theological motivations, and incorporate culturally grounded solutions into peace processes. However, this must be done without compromising core principles such as justice, gender equality, and accountability. Successful peacebuilding in these contexts requires context-sensitive, inclusive approaches that acknowledge the powerful role of faith while promoting universal values. Bridging the divide between religious belief and governance is key to fostering legitimacy, stability, and lasting peace in societies fractured by faith-based conflict.