



SDA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT

CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL RELATIONS



March 2, 2010
Bibliothèque Solvay, Brussels

A ***Security & Defence Agenda*** Report

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**CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION:
THE ROLE OF CULTURAL RELATIONS**
International Conference – Tuesday, March 2, 2010
Bibliothèque Solvay, 09:30-14:30

Session 1: Why culture matters
09.30 - 10.00

Introductory Remarks by **Giles Merritt**, Director, Security & Defence Agenda

Clashes of culture, related to religious beliefs, ethnicity or different values often lie at the root of security problems. Can a better understanding of these fundamental issues hold the key to conflict prevention, as well as peacemaking and peacekeeping? How best can Western forces and political leaders develop more sensitive cultural antennae in security hotspots?

Speakers:

Martin Davidson, Chief Executive, British Council

Martin Howard, Assistant Secretary General for Operations, NATO

Moderator:

Shada Islam, Journalist and Senior Programme Executive, European Policy Centre

Cultural relations in conflict - case studies
10.00 - 11.30

Successful uses of cultural relations in conflict zones over the last 10 years have not received much media attention. This testimonial and lessons-learned session features actors in the field and tries to identify best practice in inter-cultural dialogue and understanding in conflict areas. Case studies/testimonials will be delivered from recent and current conflict areas, including Afghanistan, The Balkans and Africa.

Speakers:

Brigadier Hamza Visca, Joint Staff Post-conflict Reconstruction, Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Hewod Aziz Jan, Afghan student, Isleworth and Syon School in Hounslow

George Gachara, co-Founder, Picha Mtaani, Kenya and British Council Global Changemaker

Oliver Urquhart Irvine, Cultural Property Manager, British Library

Afifa Azim, Executive Director, Afghan Women's Network (via video link)

Professor John Sugden, Director, International 'Football4Peace' programme

Bjorn Maes, Artistic Coordinator Southern Africa, Africalia

Moderator:

Anand Naidoo, Al-Jazeera English

Coffee break
11.30 - 12.00

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Session III: Civ-mil cooperation: designing a cultural approach
12.00- 13.00

Now that NATO has a more comprehensive approach to the planning and conduct of its operations, and is reviewing its Strategic Concept, what concrete steps need to be taken to ensure military training includes greater cultural awareness? Can improved civilian-military dialogue and a better understanding of the role of cultural relations improve security policy? What new approaches should be developed to help both civilian and military personnel in the field to bring a greater cultural dimension to their missions?

Speakers:

Ilana Bet-EI, Political Analyst

Stephan Roman, Regional Director for West Europe and North America, British Council

Colonel Per Mikkelsen, Deputy Branch Chief Joint Operations, NATO

Marietje Schaake, Member of the European Parliament

Moderator:

Anand Naidoo, Al-Jazeera English

Closing Remarks by **Giles Merritt**, Director, Security & Defence Agenda

Networking Lunch
13.00 - 14.00

Conflict Prevention and Resolution: the Role of Cultural Relations International Conference



SUMMARY

This event, organised by the SDA, the British Council, and NATO, on the role of cultural relations in conflict prevention and resolution drew a large and expectant crowd. The conference demonstrated how “cultural” projects on the ground were improving dialogue, and hence playing a part in both preventing conflict and healing post-conflict wounds. Initiatives in the spotlight were those attempting to re-establish forgotten traditions and preserve cultural heritage, while others focused on the arts as a way of bringing cultures together. Perhaps British Council Chief Executive **Martin Davidson** best summed up the British Council’s position when he said that the aim of improving cultural relations was to build trust and engagement through the exchange of ideas.

Much of the debate, however, dealt with cultural relations in the field of conflict resolution, which put the spotlight directly on Afghanistan. At a previous SDA event, a NATO representative had stressed that the Alliance’s comprehensive approach meant all international bodies working together. Now, 18 months on, NATO’s Deputy Branch Chief Joint Operations Colonel **Per Mikkelsen** admitted that the Alliance was on a learning curve. NATO’s Assistant Secretary General for Operations **Martin Howard** agreed that pre-deployment training in this area was probably not enough and that civil-military operations in Afghanistan needed cultural issues and relations to be embedded in the overall planning.

An exit poll of the conference indicated that over 90% of participants strongly agreed that there was indeed a role for cultural relations in conflict prevention and resolution. Most would agree that while military force alone could never be sufficient in future conflicts, any comprehensive approach had to ensure maximum awareness of the cultural norms and mores “on the ground”. They would also have felt, however, that the discussions had introduced a patchwork of projects and that much work remained to be done.

INTRODUCTION

In examining the role of cultural relations in conflict situations, the conference aimed to examine the extent to which a better understanding of culture clashes held the key to conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacekeeping. According to the *Joint Operational Environment, the World Through 2030* by US Joint Forces Command, “future conflicts are likely to be dominated by religious and cultural factors”. This implies that training should always include an element of cultural awareness so that all parties involved in a conflict zone – both civil and military – should have an understanding of local cultures and beliefs. As the conflict zone in the media spotlight at the time of the conference, Afghanistan featured heavily in the debate.

As well as exploring the role of cultural relations in conflict resolution, the conference examined case studies where inter-cultural dialogue and cultural activities had been used to prevent conflict and to bring harmony in post-conflict situations. These examples came from the Balkans, Kenya, Israel and Palestine, South and East Africa; topics ranged from the use of photographic exhibitions (to remind people of the impact of war) to the recreation of a lost culture via the use of recordings of tribal songs.

Conflict Prevention and Resolution: the Role of Cultural Relations International Conference



SETTING THE SCENE

Political Analyst **Ilana Bet-El** laid out the distinction between “*cultural identity*” (i.e. the need for all parties to be more culturally aware) and “*a cultural event*” (that could help to bring different cultures together and improve dialogue): both were part of a definition of cultural relations, but the former was of more interest to the majority of conference participants.

Remarking that military operations had not worked effectively for 20 years – since the end of the Cold War – Bet-El argued that the military were not sufficiently aware of cultural identities. She added that any “incoming force” had to understand the prevalent culture. Bet-El also made a distinction between “industrial wars” of the past and today’s conflicts, which were not being conducted for territorial purposes. Today’s wars were going to be fought “among the people” and that made it essential to gain their support.

THE BRITISH COUNCIL’S POSITION

British Council Chief Executive **Martin Davidson** looked at the whole spectrum of conflict resolution – from aid to military action. Arguing that there were many more options than “giving or fighting”, he focused on the importance of cultural relations which, if successfully pursued, created an opportunity for dialogue. This could reduce the fear of the outsider (e.g. the fear of NATO troops in Afghanistan) and the concern that a way of life might be eroded. Cultural relations will not provide a quick fix in an existing conflict, rather they have a role in preventing conflict and, especially in the reconstruction effort after a conflict. They are relations built between people rather than governments, deeply rooted and slow burning, and

“It has to be accepted that the end result (of dialogue) may be one that we do not like very much”
Martin Davidson

the basis for sustainable peace and development.

Commenting on NATO’s comprehensive approach, Davidson argued that the need to understand and appreciate other people’s cultures was simply the first step in a complex and complicated agenda. The cultural relations aspect of this approach had to make dialogue more attractive than fighting and it had to make the conditions for peace more favourable for individuals in different cultures. He also insisted that such an approach had to be “intensely practical”; Davidson admitted that putting on a nice art show might be irrelevant in a “shattered country” but that there would be great merit in looking at, for example, building a new higher education system in Iraq – where practitioners had been virtually cut off from the academic world for 30 years.

The British Council’s Regional Director for West Europe and North America, **Stephan Roman**, built on Bet-El’s comments by outlining three key areas of cultural relations:

Cultural dialogue: the importance of listening and learning; language was seen to be important and this could be supplemented by universal “languages” such as art, sports, or music.

Culture on the ground: once dialogue had been achieved, Roman argued, emphasis should be placed on “practical steps”.

Valuing culture: Roman also emphasised the importance of cultural memory. As examples, he described the destruction of the National Library of Bosnia during the Balkan wars (an attempt to destroy cultural heritage) and the successful attempts by the British Library to restore an oral culture by re-introducing the songs of the Batwa people of the African Great Lakes to the present generation.

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Cultural Relations in action – Picha Mtaani – Kenya

Picha Mtaani is a youth-led national reconciliation initiative supported by the UNDP. It seeks to engage Kenyan youth in finding lasting solutions to attaining peace and reconciliation.

Picha Mtaani uses photography/DVDs to tell horrific stories and show that conflicts kill. Over 400 dialogue sessions have been held to find out what young people want.

www.pichamtaani.com

Overall, an intention to improve cultural relations in conflict situations was not seen as a matter of establishing something for today; **George Gachara**, British Council Global Change-maker and co-Founder of Picha Mtaani, Kenya, described his organisation's activities, which aims to raise an army of 2 million young people as agents of reconciliation, to help future generations build a sustainable cycle of peace.

grain". On the point of dialogue, he argued that with, for example, 44 countries being involved in ISAF in Afghanistan, it was difficult to appreciate all of the cultural implications of a campaign. He argued, therefore, that the Afghans had to be involved so that they could do "the heavy lifting".

Colonel **Per Mikkelsen** added that NATO troops were "guests" and they had to have the respect and understanding of local people. He reasoned that NATO did have the right tools for today's

challenges but the Alliance had to learn to make better use of them. Mikkelsen felt that it was necessary to change the troops' mindsets (to improve their cultural awareness) – from commanding officers down to individual soldiers on the ground. His conclusion was that NATO's doctrines and procedures had to reflect this emphasis on the need to be culturally aware at all levels and he referred to the existence of NATO's Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (the JALLC). Going further, Mikkelsen hoped there would be a chapter about the *comprehensive approach* and cultural relations in the forthcoming revamped strategic concept document. He wanted the two existing centres of excellence to be involved in encouraging improvements in the understanding of local cultures.

Cultural Relations in action – Football 4 peace – International

This is an activity-based community relations and reconciliation initiative. Sports coaches, community leaders and volunteers, work to bring differing communities together through football and aspects of outdoor education.

The project aims to connect with civil society with the political community through culture (sports). It started modestly in 2000, coaching camp in the Arab town of Ibbilin and works on "football luring people in to a human rights framework". It is a project looking for a ripple effect, hoping it will "wash over those in the corridors of power"

www.football4peace.eu

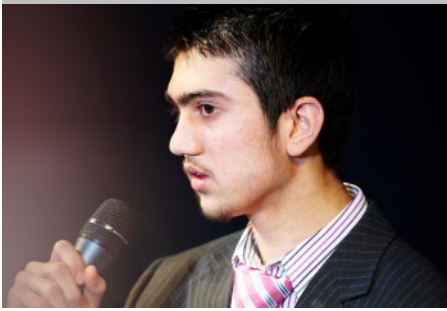
NATO'S POSITION

At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Allied leaders endorsed an Action Plan for the development and implementation of NATO's contribution to a *comprehensive approach*. NATO has stated that "Meeting today's security challenges requires a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments. This calls for regular coordination, consultation and interaction among all involved actors. NATO has developed a set of pragmatic proposals aimed at promoting such a comprehensive approach to crisis management by the International Community."

At the conference, NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Operations **Martin Howard** stated that this comprehensive approach must ensure that campaigns were both civil and military in nature and that when troops were engaged in a country, they "did not cut across cultural norms". Preferring to avoid the term cultural relations, Howard said the aim was to "go with the Afghan

"Cultural values are the new territories of war"
Marietje Schaake

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CONFLICT ZONE - AFGHANISTAN

It was no surprise that a conference about conflict prevention and resolution should focus attention on Afghanistan. Howard stressed that NATO was not involved in order to impose a particular cultural approach, but rather to create conditions where Afghans would be able to look after themselves. Davidson was in agreement, adding that it was essential to listen to what people wanted – as this was the only way to develop an effective dialogue.

Many participants will have remembered the words of 16 year-old Afghan student **Hewod Aziz Jan** who gave a unique perspective (as a young Afghan student who has been living in the UK for eight years) on the conflict. Referring to the classic English novel *Silas Marner* and the villagers' suspicions of strangers, he said he understood

"All forces in Afghanistan are seen as Americans"
Hewod Aziz Jan

that NATO forces were fighting for the security of people in the west, but there should be greater emphasis placed on the protection of people in Afghanistan. Aziz Jan had initially stated that all NATO's forces were seen as American and that local people had no detailed knowledge about the Alliance. In that respect, the Taliban were winning the communications war in that they, at least, had the advantage of speaking the local language. He added that Afghans were suspicious as to why NATO was operating in Afghanistan and not, for example, in Pakistan or Yemen. Taking up the message of several speakers, Aziz Jan said it was essential to listen to local people and he favoured the imams as the appropriate conduit. He ended by – perhaps unknowingly – echoing the message of another English classic novel "Howard's End" – with his call to (only) connect: although people were different, they had the same hopes and ambitions, and they needed to be united.

Differences of opinion abound in Afghanistan of course and, from the floor, **Ahmad Popal Siroos** of the Afghani-

stan President's Office insisted that people had been dependent on the imams for 30 years. Popal Siroos preferred any dialogue to be directly with the people, fearing that the imams would have too much influence on, for example, the way that people would vote.

Speaking via video, **Afifa Azim**, Executive Director of the Afghan Women's Network, stressed the critical role that women had to play as they "had never been involved in the fighting". While acknowledging that NATO had the aim of rebuilding Afghanistan, she bemoaned that fact that there had hardly been any contact with women until 2007 – this contact "had to grow stronger and faster". Summing up, Azim argued that justice had been in the hands of male-dominated structures for too long; women had to be involved in negotiations with the Taliban.

Afghan Women's network

- 3,000 members, 72 organisation in Afghanistan
- Works by lobbying about women's rights and by raising awareness of major issues
- Wants a focus on sustainable peace not on technical training of troops
- A call for deeper cultural relations in negotiations

www.afghanwomensnetwork.org

CULTURAL RELATIONS IN ACTION

"Don't just have a meeting; don't start in the corridors of power - you must connect with the people"
John Sugden

During the conference a number of speakers described successful experiences of cultural relations in pre- and post-conflict zones. These were only a few of the many examples of how cultural events could be used to improve dialogue and how a better understanding of local cultures and mores could lead to healing and the preservation of cultural heritage. Case studies examined at the conference included:

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Post-conflict Sarajevo - Brigadier Hamza Visca: a project to bring together Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs so that there would be a single armed force; the quality of reconstruction was influenced by a cultural dimension

Post-conflict Kenya - George Gachara: a project (Picha Mtanni, see text box) that allows young people to reflect on their own futures (rather than on “butchering each other”); using photographs to open up a dialogue

Post conflict Africa - Oliver Urquhart Irvine: a project to help restore the culture of the Batwa people of the African Great Lakes; traditional songs found in the archives of the British Library and played back to the Batwa people – an act of cultural remembrance

Reconciliation initiative - Professor John Sugden: working on the football4peace initiative (see text box) that aims to connect directly with civil society; using a series of events to encourage dialogue and reduce tensions

Conflict prevention in Africa - Bjorn Maes: series of cultural projects (run by local civil society on music, literature, film and dance) are nurturing more stability and fruitful dialogue in society.

AFRICALIA, a Belgian non-profit organization founded in 2000, is an avid proponent of culture as a motor for sustainable human development, not on the basis of what Europe considers necessary or useful, but what is deemed desirable by people and organisations in Africa.

Africalia cooperates with cultural civil society organisations in sub-Saharan Africa, notably in Burkina Faso, DRC, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe. It supports cultural and artistic richness in view of enabling local people, organizations and artists to prosper and build more stable communities. Africalia also draws public attention to contemporary African art and culture, particularly in Belgium, through the organisation of cultural events. It has supported over 350 cultural projects.

www.africalia.be

Merritt added that EU was currently responsible for 70% of the world’s aid – an area that should overlap with any push to improve cultural relations. It was a concern, therefore, that no one referred to any demonstrable benefits of EU-NATO cooperation. From the floor, the Director of the British Council’s North East of England Office, **Sarah-Jane King** argued that NATO was focusing on respecting local cultural norms rather than actively using culture to create opportunities for dialogue and healing. King wanted an effective *comprehensive approach*, otherwise there would be a cost – both financial and human. She therefore echoed Merritt’s call for details of the next steps.

CONCLUSIONS

Speaking at the end of the conference, SDA Director **Giles Merritt** said there had to be a joined-up strategy and a framework that allowed all kinds of cultural ideas into development aid processes. He saw the need for a well-defined project with estimated costs.

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Lessons learnt in cultural relations in conflict situations

- Military campaigns alone are not sufficient, there must be steady progress on removing the causes of conflict
- Inequalities and tensions in conflict areas must be removed
- The complexity of conflict areas must be recognised
- Shared cultural remembrance is a positive, forward-looking step
- It is not enough to develop “nice documents”, actions must be driven by the people on the ground
- NATO has the tools but it needs to use them better; the Alliance is in a learning process
- NATO troops are guests and they must understand and respect the local people
- Not all soldiers can be touchy-feely, soldiership has to be defined
- There is no quick fix.

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The Security & Defence Agenda (SDA) is the only specialist Brussels-based think-tank where EU institutions, NATO, national governments, industry, specialised and international media, think tanks, academia and NGOs gather to discuss the future of European and transatlantic security and defence policies in Europe and worldwide.

Building on the combined expertise and authority of those involved in our meetings, the SDA gives greater prominence to the complex questions of how EU and NATO policies can complement one another, and how transatlantic challenges such as terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction can be met.

By offering a high-level and neutral platform for debate, the SDA sets out to clarify policy positions, stimulate discussion and ensure a wider understanding of defence and security issues by the press and public opinion.

SDA Activities:

- Monthly Roundtables and Evening debates
- Press Dinners and Lunches
- International Conferences
- Discussion Papers and special events

The Security & Defence Agenda would like to thank its members and partners for their support.



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