

The Making of the Contemporary World



Conflict and
Reconciliation
in the Contemporary World

DAVID J. WHITTAKER



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Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World

The world in the twentieth century has witnessed many major political, ethnic and ideological conflicts. *Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World* examines the interdependent processes of conflict origins, resolutions and reconciliation, in the light of eight case studies, from four continents, including Yugoslavia, Israel, Northern Ireland and South Africa.

The examples of conflict include discussion on:

- threatened regional peace and security
- cycles of internal discord, population displacement and violence
- controversy over causes, progress and resolution
- the value of external mediation, enforcement or intervention such as sanctions or 'punishments'
- means, timing and permanence of reconciliation.

Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World gives a concise, original and multi-faceted introduction to the study of modern conflict situations.

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The Making of the Contemporary World

Edited by Eric Evans and Ruth Henig

University of Lancaster

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Map 1 The conflict case studies

1 Conflict, resolution and reconciliation

A great deal has been written about conflict and conflict resolution (the latter is a science in itself). Less has been written about the cycle of conflict, resolution, reconciliation. This book covers new ground in treating the three phases together. Eight examples of conflict have been selected as case studies in Chapters 2 to 9 in the hope of encouraging understanding and discussion of the origins and development of conflict. In each of these case studies the account of the conflict looks at likely causes, outlines developments and the resolution process, and considers the possibilities and the prospects of long-term healing, the reconciliation stage. Here, reconciliation goes beyond resolution to refer not just to the *political* arrangements to resolve differences and hostile action but to the *psychological* process whereby understanding and tolerance lead to readiness to live together in a new framework of peace and well-being.

The eight conflicts were selected with the following criteria in mind:

- Originating mostly as civil wars, they present threats to regional peace and security, often with wider reverberations giving them an international dimension.
- They present cycles of internal discord, violence, infringement of basic human rights and human displacement.
- They often arouse appeals to external mediation, enforcement, sanctions and intervention.
- They pose questions as to causes, progress of conflict and methods of resolving it.
- They raise the issue of how far after conflict resolution the survivors are able to take up harmonious living in a reconciled community.
- The presentation is designed to be factual without being too detailed. Overall, the treatment of these conflicts is set in non-judgemental mode.

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

All the conflicts presented in this book move beyond tension and disagreement, distrust and suspicion, which perhaps all international relations have as possible outcomes, to incompatible positions and their reinforcement in conspiracies, growing hostile behaviour and postures that represent challenge, violation of basic human rights, scapegoating and discriminatory policies, possible eviction and displacement of people, and resort to military action. Some of these conflicts then deteriorate into crises which pose a danger to international peace and security, frequently because one of the disputing parties resorts to sudden surprise action. Others perceive this behaviour as a major threat, and feel an urgency to respond appropriately in the belief that inaction will entail disastrous consequences. Judgement becomes clouded, often ambivalent.

It is difficult to categorise the eight conflicts selected but they have all led to some degree of human rights violation. Most of them—El Salvador, Cambodia, Cyprus, Afghanistan, Israel and the Palestinians, Northern Ireland, Bosnia—have led to military action. Population displacement often leading to a refugee problem has been characteristic of the troubles in South Africa, Cambodia, Cyprus, Bosnia and Israel. Quarrels between people observing ethnic allegiance have been a feature of the unrest in South Africa, Bosnia, Cyprus and Israel. Economic problems have sharpened conflict in El Salvador, South Africa, Israel and to some extent in Northern Ireland. Divergence on ideological grounds among Salvadorans and Afghans and religious differences in Israel and Northern Ireland have set whole communities at loggerheads. In three of the conflicts—in El Salvador, South Africa and Israel—the forcefulness of self-styled guerrilla ‘liberators’ has introduced a dynamic which makes the conflict one of irreducible high intensity.

Very plainly these are multi-factor conflicts. Most of them have two factors in common: that of escalating tension and that of the importance to disputants of symbolism. Neither of these factors is likely to make settlement straightforward. Given the strength of feeling over actual or imagined differences it is not surprising that much effort and ingenuity goes into the highlighting of issues that are then presented as principles and core-values which must be upheld and defended whatever the cost. It is seen as necessary in Cyprus and Northern Ireland to defend the distinctiveness and identity of separated communities. Tensions are wound up, and misinterpretations of attitudes and behaviour are manipulated by an artifice which sets the clash of feelings in terms of attack and siege. Rival leaders in Bosnia, in the Middle East and in

Cyprus lose little time in demonising their opponents, and in orchestrating claims that could be considered more rationally and with less clamour. The establishment of 'last-ditch' positions and 'bottom-line' demands is given symbolic, almost ritualistic importance in most of these conflict scenarios. Compromise is then announced as unacceptable because withdrawing from assertiveness is the way of sacrificing principles, and of surrender.

Historically, most of the selected conflicts are deep-rooted. For many years South Africa's whites and blacks have wrestled for power in the shade of an oppressive and discriminating apartheid regime. The retreat of imperial hegemony has left Cambodia and Cyprus unstable, riven by competing parties seeking self-determination. Israelis and Palestinians have eyed the same tract of territory as an exclusive Promised Land for many centuries. Again, there is the void left by the relinquishing of colonial power. Contention in El Salvador and Northern Ireland has its origins in economic and legislative disadvantage, compounded in the last named by religious schisms. Moreover, some aspects of these conflicts can be traced back to the glacial days of the Cold War between 1945 and 1989 when any macro-conflict between the Superpowers was on hold. One can argue that this tense period of frozen great-power relationships helped to contain some conflicts, while it added fuel to others, for example in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia, Israel's West Bank and El Salvador. Micro-conflicts broke out from time to time as parties in 'client-states' committed to the ideological tenets of the Superpowers came to blows in Central America, the Middle East and the Far East. Ironically, the post-Cold War harmony and collaboration between former political adversaries has not ensured a global form of 'peace dividend'. The small conflict, diverse in nature, varying in intensity, often dramatic in its savagery, has been a common feature of the last two decades. In the contemporary world there are now more political entities than before—small states and sub-states—and an unremitting inclination by an array of national groups to assert their individuality and press for independence. Media sources, with resolute imagination, transmit contrary perceptions, magnify them, frequently distort them. The modern world offers would-be contestants a bewildering yet attractive arsenal of sophisticated and highly lethal weaponry which is never too difficult to obtain.

RESOLUTION AS A PROBLEM

The conflicts that follow this introductory chapter demonstrate the intrinsic problem of resolution as a fixed and final settlement. Three

scenarios remain unresolved—Cyprus, the struggles in former Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan. Cyprus represents a conflict tranquillised positively by the presence of an interpositionary force sent there in 1964 by the UN, and negatively by three decades of stalemate in negotiation where the end is nowhere yet in sight. Yugoslavian fighting is seen as brought to a stage-managed conclusion when the United States airlifted to Dayton, Ohio, the leaders of the warring factions and holed them up until they agreed to a contractual settlement. Yet, the Dayton Agreement, while it has stopped much of the military feuding, has failed to secure political stability and the safe repatriation and resettlement of at least 1 million refugees. In the case of Afghanistan, with the withdrawal of the Soviet invader, a multi-national peace conference proposed far-reaching and unanimously agreed arrangements for containment and comprehensive reform. Unexpectedly, and at least in the broader international community, resolution there is twisted out of line and aborted because of Afghan internecine turmoil. International hopes have been blighted over Cambodia to the extent that a resolution scheme carefully supervised on the ground by a large UN peacekeeping force has not been implemented anything as completely as envisaged because of power-gaming between Cambodian political factions. Elsewhere there are, however, some resolution successes, qualified as they must be by speculation about the lasting effect of such contrived and fragile acts of settlement. Resolution has been determined on paper and then by strenuous work on the ground in El Salvador, South Africa and Northern Ireland. Peaceful finality is less certain in Israel where, despite a carefully crafted settlement, the ‘peace process’ is bedevilled by the mutual certainty of each of the disputants that both of them are ‘right’ and that justice is very firmly on their side.

Three particular approaches to conflict resolution are demonstrated by the conflicts discussed in later chapters. They are negotiation, mediation by a third party and authorised intervention. In each case a recourse to *negotiation* has proved to be an arduous and uncertain blazing of a trail between those whose disagreements are prone to lack of objectivity and undue haste to conclude on terms they prefer. The classic moves begin by ascertaining the essential basic demands of other parties with a view to exploring areas where concessions might be possible. This way of working demands appreciable rationality and patience from participants who, in frustration, are subsequently tempted to apply what they consider to be a judicious mix of bluff, threat and promise. This tactic usually

tends to close down options for compromise, making mutual accommodation more difficult. A measure of realism, even good sense, may bring about an eventual peace agreement after hard bargaining. Negotiators, at this stage, may reluctantly stand away from previously untenable positions and 'reperceive' possible alternatives and tangible benefits. In the chapters that follow it is instructive to see the ebb and flow of reason and stubbornness. Particularly interesting is the increasing possibility of a successful outcome to talks or 'talks about talks', when participants try more objectively to tease out mutual interests rather than retreat to standpoints which they doggedly defend.

Not one of the eight conflicts surveyed shows those who disagree coming to a fair and realistic settlement through their own efforts. Against a background of intense media interest 'open diplomacy' soon becomes 'frozen diplomacy'. Third parties exercise useful functions in exploring foundations for peace agreements in several of the conflicts examined, often in places other than the actual locus of conflict. They frequently devise proposals which would be unacceptable in eye-to-eye dealings between adversaries or between political leaders ploughing a particular furrow. Third parties have more room for manoeuvre and less to 'lose' if their suggestions are rejected or radically modified. They work quietly with a wide range of options out of the public spotlight.

Mediation of some sort by an outside body is another step towards resolution, especially when violence tends to spill over into neighbouring areas. In six of the conflicts, and in various ways, the help of the UN has been sought. The Charter of the UN has a whole chapter, Chapter VI, dealing with the pacific settlement of disputes. This encourages any of the 185 member states who have a dispute likely to endanger peace, first of all, to 'seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice' (Article 33). In practice, this voluntary solution-seeking has needed a fair amount of heavy pressure from the UN Security Council. Most states are reluctant to accept any arbitration and judicial settlement by anyone else, however impartially it may be presented. On the other hand, their preparedness to go further in negotiation may be influenced by domestic events, say a surge of opposition by a dissident group or ministerial changes, or by a stream of international disapproval. Conciliation, for example, via the UN's supplying a Good Offices mediator is only likely to be effective, as Cyprus and Cambodia show,