THERE IS NO GOOD NEWS ABOUT ETHNIC CONFLICT AND CIVIL WAR...OR IS THERE?

Stefan Wolff

Today I want to talk to you about ethnic conflict and civil war. These are generally not the most cheerful of topics, nor are they normally associated with good news. Yet, not only is there at least some good news to be told about fewer such conflicts now than two decades ago but there is also good news in the sense that we have come to a better understanding of what can be done to further reduce the number of ethnic conflicts and civil wars and the human suffering they inflict.

Three things stand out: leadership, diplomacy, and institutional design. What I will focus on in my talk is why they matter, how they matter, and what we can do to make sure that they continue to matter in the right ways—that is, how all of us can contribute to developing and honing the skills of local and global leaders to make peace and to make it last.

But let's the start at the beginning. Civil wars have made news headlines for many decades, and ethnic conflicts in particular have been a near-constant presence as a major international security threat since the end of the Cold War. For nearly two decades, the news has been bad and the images have been haunting.

In Georgia, after years of stalemate we saw a full-scale resurgence of violence in August 2008 that quickly escalated into a five-day war between Georgia and Russia, leaving Georgia more deeply divided than ever. In Kenya, contested presidential elections in December 2007 quickly led to high levels of inter-ethnic violence and the killing and displacement of thousands of people. In Sri Lanka, a decades-long civil war between the Tamil minority and Sinhala majority reached a bloody climax in 2009, after possibly as many as 100,000 people had been killed since 1983. In Kyrgyzstan, over the last few weeks unprecedented levels of violence occurred between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks. Hundreds have been killed and over 100,000 displaced, including ethnic Uzbeks fleeing to neighbouring Uzbekistan. In the Middle East, conflict between Israelis and Palestinians continues unabated and has hardened positions on both sides so that it becomes ever more difficult to see how a sustainable solution could be achieved. Darfur may have slipped from the news headlines, but the killing and displacement there goes on as well and the sheer human misery it creates is hard to fathom. And in Iraq, finally, tensions are on the rise again and the country has yet to form a government more than four months after parliamentary elections.

But this talk is to be about good news—so are these now pictures of the past?

Notwithstanding these gloomy images from the Middle East, Darfur, Iraq and elsewhere, there is a longer-term trend that does represent some good news. Over the past two decades since the end of the Cold War, there has been an overall decline in the number of civil wars. Compared to the high in the early 1990s with just over 50 civil wars, we have 30% fewer such violent conflicts today.

The number of people killed in civil wars is also lower today than it was a decade or two ago. But this trend is less unambiguous. The highest level of deaths on the battlefield was recorded between 1998 and 2001 with around 80,000 soldiers, policemen and rebels killed every year. The lowest number of combatant casualties occurred in 2003, with just over 20,000 killed in all civil wars ongoing in that

year. Despite the up and down since then, the overall trend clearly points downward for the past two decades.

The news about civilian casualties is also less bad than it used to be. From over 12,000 civilians deliberately killed in 1997 and 1998, a decade later the figures stand at 4,000—a decrease by more than two-thirds. This decline would be even more obvious if we factored in the genocide in Rwanda. But then, the slaughter of about 800,000 civilians in just a few months is an "accomplishment" that is hard to surpass.

These figures however only tell part of the story. They exclude people that died as a consequence of civil war—from hunger or disease, for example. They also do not properly account for civilian suffering more generally. Torture, rape, and ethnic cleansing all have become highly effective, if often non-lethal weapons in ethnic conflicts. To put it differently, for the civilians who suffer the consequences of such violence, there is no good war and no bad peace. Thus, even though every civilian killed, maimed, raped or tortured is clearly one too many, the fact that the number of civilian casualties is clearly lower today than it was in the 1990s is a piece of good news.

So —we have fewer conflicts today in which fewer people get killed, and the big question, of course, is why?

In some cases, there is a military victory of one side. This is a solution of sorts, but rarely one without human costs and humanitarian consequences. The defeat of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka is perhaps the most recent example of this, but we have seen similar military solutions in the Balkans, the South Caucasus, and across most of Africa. At times, these so-called solutions are complemented by negotiated settlements or at least ceasefire agreements and the deployment of peacekeepers, but hardly ever do they present a resounding success: Bosnia and Herzegovina perhaps more so than Georgia, but for many parts of Africa, a colleague of mine once put it this way: the ceasefire on Tuesday night was reached just in time for the genocide to start on Wednesday morning.

But let's look at the good news again. If there is no solution on the battlefield, three factors can account for the prevention of ethnic conflict and civil war or for sustainable peace afterwards: leadership, diplomacy, and institutional design.

Take the example of Northern Ireland. Despite centuries of animosity, decades of violence, and thousands of people killed, 1998 saw the conclusion of a historic agreement, variously known as the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. Its initial version was skilfully mediated by Senator George Mitchell. Crucially for the long-term success of the peace process in Northern Ireland, he imposed clear conditions for participation in the negotiations, central among them a commitment to exclusively peaceful means. Subsequent revisions of the Agreement were facilitated by the British and Irish governments who never wavered in their determination to bring peace and stability to the region. The core institutions put in place in 1998 and their modification in 2006 and 2008 were highly innovative and allowed all conflict parties to see their core demands and concerns addressed. The Agreement combines a power-sharing arrangement in Northern Ireland with cross-border relations that link Belfast and Dublin and thus recognise the so-called Irish dimension of the conflict. Importantly, there is also a clear focus on both the rights of communities and the rights of individuals. The provisions in the Agreement are clearly complex, but so is the underlying conflict. Perhaps most importantly, local leaders repeatedly rose to the challenge of compromise—not

always fast and enthusiastically, but rise in the end they did. Whoever could have imagined Ian Paisley and Martin McGuiness jointly governing Northern Ireland as First and Deputy First Minister?

Is Northern Ireland a unique example? Or is this explanation perhaps confined to democratic, developed countries more generally? By no means. The ending of Liberia's long-lasting violence in 2003 illustrates the importance of leadership, diplomacy, and institutional design as much as the successful prevention of full-scale civil war in Macedonia in 2001 and the settlement of the conflict in Aceh in Indonesia in 2005. In all three cases, local leaders were willing and able to make peace, the international community stood ready to help them negotiate and implement agreements, and institutions have lived up to the promise that they held on the day they were agreed.

Focusing on leadership, diplomacy, and institutional design also helps explain failures to achieve peace or to make it last. The hopes that were vested in the Oslo Accords did not lead to an end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Not all issues that needed to be resolved were actually covered in the Accords, but for some of them the parties simply promised to revisit them at a later stage. Yet neither did local leaders grasp this opportunity nor did international diplomacy sustain its engagement. Rather, local and international leaders soon disengaged and became distracted by the second intifada, the events of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Sudan, signed in 2005, turned out to be less comprehensive than envisaged and its provisions may yet bear the seeds of renewed full-scale war between North and South. In addition to institutional failures, changes and shortcomings of leadership and more-off--than-on diplomatic engagement account for this. Unresolved boundary issues, squabbles over oil revenues, the ongoing conflict in Darfur and escalating tribal violence in the South, as well as generally weak state capacity across Sudan all complete a rather depressing picture of the state of affairs in Africa's largest country.

A final example: Kosovo. The failure to achieve a negotiated solution for Kosovo and the violence, tension, and de-facto partition that resulted from this have their reasons in a lack of imagination when it came to designing institutions that could have addressed the concerns of Serbs and Albanians alike. Yet here too, the intransigence of local leaders to settle for nothing less than their maximum demands played a role in a less than stable outcome. And an international diplomatic effort that was from the beginning hampered by western support for Kosovo's independence was clearly less than conducive to achieving a self-sustaining peace. By the same token, the very fact that there is a high-level, well-resourced international presence in Kosovo, as well as elsewhere in the region, explains why things have not been worse over the past two years. Equally important, local leaders on both sides have displayed relative restraint. So even in situations where outcomes are less than optimal, local and international leaders have a choice and can make a difference for the better: a cold peace is still better than a hot war.

Good news is also about learning the right lessons. So what then distinguishes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from that in Northern Ireland? Or the civil war in Sudan from that in Liberia? Both successes and failures teach us several critically important things we need to bear in mind if we want the good news to continue.

First, leadership. In the same way in which ethnic conflict and civil war are not natural, but man-made disasters, their prevention and settlement does not simply happen automatically either. Leadership needs to be capable, determined, and visionary in its commitment to peace. Leaders need to connect to each other and to their followers and bring them along on what is an often long and arduous journey into a peaceful future.

Second, diplomacy. Diplomacy needs to be well-resourced, sustained, and apply the right mix of incentives and pressures on leaders and their followers. It needs to help them reach an equitable compromise and it needs to ensure that a broad coalition of local, regional and global supporters helps in implementing and sustaining a negotiated peace.

Third, institutional design. Institutional design requires a keen focus on issues, innovative thinking, and flexible and well-funded implementation. Conflict parties need to move away from maximum demands and towards a compromise that recognises each other's concerns. And they need to think more about the substance of their agreement than the labels they want to attach to it. And conflict parties also need to be prepared to return to the negotiation table if implementation of their agreement stalls, rather than take up arms again.

For me personally, the most critical lesson is this. Local commitment to peace is all-important but it is often not enough to prevent or end large-scale violence. Yet, no amount of diplomacy or institutional design can make up for local shortcomings and the failures they lead to. Therefore, we must invest in developing leaders that have the skills, vision, and determination to achieve peace. Leaders, in other words, that people will trust and that they will want to follow into a peaceful future even if it means making hard choices.

A final thought: ending civil wars is a process fraught with dangers, setbacks and frustrations. It often takes a generation to accomplish, but it also requires us, today's generation, to take responsibility and to learn the right lessons about leadership, diplomacy and institutional design so that the child soldiers of today can become the children of the future.

About the Author

Stefan Wolff is Professor of International Security at the University of Birmingham, England, UK. He specialises in the management of contemporary security challenges and has extensively written on international intervention and ethnic conflict resolution. Among his 14 books to date are *Ethnic Conflict: Causes—Consequences—Responses* (Polity 2009, with Karl Cordell), *Ethnic Conflict: A Global Perspective* (Oxford University Press 2006, 2nd ed. 2007), *Autonomy, Self-governance and Conflict Resolution* (Routledge 2006, with Marc Weller), *Managing and Settling Ethnic Conflicts* (Palgrave 2005, with Ulrich Schneckener), and *Disputed Territories* (Berghahn 2003). Wolff is also the founding editor of the journal *Ethnopolitics* and an associate editor of the journal *Civil Wars*. He is frequently advising governments and international organisations on conflict resolution issues, especially on questions of negotiation strategy and constitutional design, and currently contributes to ongoing settlement efforts in relation to Transnistria. He completed his first degree at the University of Leipzig, Germany, and holds an M.Phil. in Political Theory from the University of Cambridge and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the London School of Economics.

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