

# Educating Conflict Management and Practicing Peacebuilding: The Case of Lebanon

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In July 2017, Richard Caplan, Professor of International Relations at Oxford University, wrote that we should further explore the relationship between studying armed conflict academically and the practice of peacebuilding. If there is a positive correlation between how well we understand armed conflict and our ability to manage and contain conflicts, it is definitely a topic that deserves further attention. Caplan, however, also identifies a range of problems in furthering this research agenda in support of peacebuilding. Firstly, he states that policymakers 'often find academic scholarship less than helpful for their particular purposes' (Caplan, 2017). A second problem suggested by Caplan is that the academic research agenda has too strong a focus on conflict causes in the field of peacebuilding, discounting the dynamic nature of conflicts. Instead, he proposes, there should be a stronger focus on transformative measures that have been applied to achieve sustainable peace. Thirdly, Caplan points to the need to validate 'causal pathways', i.e. the importance of better understanding the way in which 'critical factors' lead to conflict, something on which academic opinions differ.

This paper attempts to tackle the obstacles put forward by Caplan for scholarly research to improve peacebuilding in practice. It does so by focussing specifically on the role of higher education and its impact on peacebuilding and international conflict management. Academics and practitioners concerned with post-conflict reconstruction have largely overlooked the importance of higher education (Milton and Barakat, 2016), and indeed it remains absent in Caplan's contribution as well. Instead, we argue that education is a way of practicing peacebuilding, which both enables and informs our

study of the subject. In this contribution, we will do so by suggesting concrete solutions for the problems put forward by Caplan, and subsequently apply those to the case study of international conflict management education in post-conflict Lebanon.

## **A Framework Solution**

Concerning Caplan's point that policymakers often struggle to make use of academic research, the suggestion put forward here is to shift the attention away from a focus on how research findings can feed into policymaking, to a (potentially) more direct and immediate focus on the education of political or security officials in conflict-affected environments. Educating high-level official stakeholders in such environments, specifically on conflict-related issues, has the advantage that practitioners do not have to come and find useful research outputs, but the research comes to them (Macphee & Fitz-Gerald, 2014). It is a way of bringing research directly into the world of practitioners by offering a hands-on, practical experience, while also allowing participants to learn from each other. This so-called peer learning takes place when participants explain ideas to each other, collectively plan learning activities, and evaluate their own and each others' learning (Boud, 2001). Moreover, direct exposure, as a taster of academic approaches to conflict, could mean a starting point for further academic engagement by overcoming the perceived distance between academic scholarship and 'real world' policy (Byman & Kroenig, 2016).

Caplan's second problem states that the academic focus on conflict causes in peacebuilding does not give enough attention to the causes of peace and how sustainable peace is built. In order to address this issue, the recommended approach would include elements of both negative and positive peace. While the former focuses on putting an end to violent conflict (for example by enforcing a ceasefire), the latter addresses its underlying root causes to allow post-conflict societies to move towards long-term solutions. The suggestion here is to offer an international conflict management course with elements of conflict analysis and tools for negative peace included, but with a strong focus on building positive peace through efforts such as negotiation and mediation, political and security sector reform, and bottom-up approaches such as reconciliation, transitional justice, and societal grassroots approaches to building sustainable peace.

Such a course will not only emphasize the transitional and transformative nature of conflict environments and the need for positive peace (Roberts, 2008), but also allows addressing the reality of war beyond merely its causes (Woodward, 2007). In this sense, an appropriately designed international conflict management course will study war and peace concurrently, as encouraged by Caplan.

Thirdly, Caplan mentions the problem of case studies. He states that scholars disagree on the causal explanations behind sustainable peacebuilding because every conflict is different and immensely complex in itself. Caplan sees the necessity of combining studies that are based on the construction of quantitative knowledge through big data sets, with more qualitative studies, such as those rooted in ethnographic and context-

specific analysis. We suggest an international conflict management course that combines the insights from both approaches to study conflict resolution. In an educational context, in-depth analysis of actual case studies (demonstrating varied levels of success) in international conflict management can be complemented with an analysis of fictitious conflict situations. While the former allows us to conduct context-specific analysis, the latter allows participants to explore to what extent we can generalize causes and phases of conflict, as well as appropriate responses. Although simulations are increasingly used as a teaching tool in IR (Simpson Kaussler, 2009; Wheeler, 2006), in this context the specific advantage of fictional cases is that case writers are not constrained by the facts, and participants are able to distance themselves from known conflict-affected regions closer to home. Using fictitious case studies through simulation games allows the participants to experience both the challenges and complexities of undertaking international conflict management; while also avoiding the need for 'inappropriate levels of disclosure from participants' during the learning process (Boud & Walker, 1998). Thus, applied experiential learning through simulation and existing as well as fictitious case studies exposes both the diversity and complexity in peacebuilding processes. In this context, the aim is not to produce a unifying theory of conflict, which reduces the specificities to a generalised model, but instead the aim is to account and reflect on the plurality of the experiences of conflict resolution as a value rather than a hindrance to its possible resolution.

### **The Case of Lebanon**

The educational approach outlined above has been put into practice during the delivery of an international conflict management course in Beirut, Lebanon. While acknowledging that one case is hardly enough to draw conclusions, it will nevertheless shed a light on the value of teaching *about* conflict in a post-conflict environment. In the subsequent discussion, we elaborate on the outcomes of delivering an international conflict management course to military officers in Lebanon. The practical experience in Lebanon will allow us to extrapolate lessons learned and draw conclusions for future engagement.

In early October 2017, two Senior Lecturers from the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst (RMAS), UK, delivered a weeklong International Conflict Management (ICM) course in Beirut. In the context of 'Defence Engagement' with military leaders overseas, RMAS offers a variety of courses of which the ICM course is one, delivered by lecturers from the Department of Defence and International Affairs. The participants of the course were a group of sixteen mid-to-high level officers from the Lebanese military.

The ICM course covers a wide range of topics. It addresses the fundamental themes in international conflict management: from understanding and defining the strategic and legal context, to discussing the political, institutional, and societal implications of peacebuilding. The course first addresses the changing nature of the international security landscape, determining risks and threats to write national security strategies, and the importance of conflict analysis. It then considers the top-down approaches

towards achieving negative peace, before progressively looking at bottom-up, long-term conflict management efforts to build positive peace. Topics covered include peace enforcement, non-military intervention, conflict mediation, political and security sector reform, and grassroots approaches to allow a society to deal with grievances and build positive peace.

The course applies an interactive approach to learning about international conflict management. RMAS academics facilitate course participants to reach informed decisions on security trends, conflict analysis, responses to crises, conflict and confrontation, and consider appropriate ways to achieve sustainable, positive peace. The methods used are open-ended as well as problem-solving-oriented discussions, interactive lectures, group work, and simulation games. The course also incorporates several short exercises based on existing as well as fictitious conflict environments during the week and culminates in participants applying the techniques developed over the week in a final exercise. The course, therefore, endeavours to offer participants a toolkit for international conflict management, while also aiding them in the development of their inter-personal, analytical, problem solving, teamwork, and leadership skills, which will be directly applicable to their day-to-day roles.

### **Impact and Lessons Learned**

The experience in Lebanon teaches us a range of valuable lessons worth reflecting on when seeking to improve peacebuilding through scholarly means.

Firstly, providing education through a short-term course was a suitable tool on this occasion. Not only did it bring the research and expertise to the military practitioners in an accessible format, but it also allowed collective learning, networking and peer learning across a group of mid-to-high level military officers. It was clear that participants were able to reflect collectively and learn from exchanging ideas with each other, as indicated in other Higher Education contexts (Waite & Davies, 2006). The short duration of the course meant that practitioners could remain embedded and focussed, without having to be away from their jobs for too long. For a country like Lebanon, the latter is absolutely vital, not least due to security concerns regarding neighbouring countries.

Secondly, the course offered multi-agency scenarios to military actors, which allowed a wide appreciation of the complexities and range of stakeholders present in conflict environments. In addition, the gradual shift throughout the course from strategic issues and peace enforcement towards building positive peace facilitated reflection on non-military solutions to peacebuilding. Particularly valuable in this respect was the exchange with course participants regarding the Lebanese post-conflict peace-building experience where power sharing has been central. The concepts used throughout the week seemed to provide a framework for inquiry and understanding that helped participants to critically reflect on their own country's history and reality.

Thirdly, although reflecting on security issues close to home can be an extremely powerful and valuable learning experience, it also comes with a potentially muddled vision of options for conflict management due to the personal proximity to the issues under discussion (Boud & Walker 1998; Nasie et al., 2014). For this reason, it was especially useful to combine debates on domestic security challenges with both other real case studies (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Colombia, etc.), as well as fictitious ones. The participants highlighted the use of a fictitious case study as a particularly effective learning tool: It allowed them to engage in the mediation simulation game without bringing it too close to home while still achieving the learning outcomes.

To conclude, we argue that higher education is a way through which practice and theory of peacebuilding and conflict resolution can be connected. This allows us to move away from the exclusive focus on research as the sole academic tool that can have a positive impact on peacebuilding. Delivering the ICM course to Officers in the Lebanese Military helped them reflect on the past, but also look to the future, armed with a toolbox to build positive peace. Perhaps more importantly, it would be fair to say that the lecturers learned as much from the Lebanese experience as the Officers benefited from the course. Indeed, together with the teaching experience comes the possibility of a mutual exchange between lecturers and practitioners, which is largely absent in the unidirectional process of solely reading published research findings.

These are valuable lessons and experiences to bring back to the UK and to enhance our understanding not only of the complexities of armed conflict, but also of the different aspects of successful peacebuilding. Taking a course on conflict to a post-conflict environment certainly gave a previously designed ICM course a complete makeover. The officers attending brought the course to life, and both participants and lecturers were able to learn beyond pre-set learning outcomes. While further discussions should reflect more the interaction between lecturers and practitioners, long term versus short term outcomes of the course delivery, and limited resources allocated to such endeavours, there is no doubt that there is value in enhancing peacebuilding through scholarly means.

**NB:** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the UK Ministry of Defence or HMG.

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