Chapter 1

Resolving Intractable Conflicts: The Importance of Interfaith Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Are all conflicts the same? Can mediation manage all types of conflicts effectively? Or are some conflicts more resistant to conflict management than others? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions, in the first part of it, by looking at the impact of mediation on the resolution of intractable conflicts. While a number of studies have sought to address the duration of long-standing conflicts, it is clear that intractable conflicts require deeper study concerning the reasons for their emergence and how to terminate them. This chapter, therefore, will articulate at the beginning the components of a conceptual framework of intractable conflicts and examine the effects of mediation in attempting to resolve them. Then it will proceed to advocate for an approach that promotes interfaith dialogue as a means to bridge trust gaps in intractable conflicts. Finally, it will apply the approach in one such conflict – the Israel-Palestine dispute.

INTRODUCTION

Are all conflicts the same? Can mediation manage all types of conflicts effectively? Or are some conflicts more resistant to conflict management than others? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions, in the first part of it, by looking at the impact of mediation on the resolution of intractable conflicts, and identify factors that may influence the success of mediation in these cases.
While a number of studies have sought to address the duration of long-standing conflicts (Collier et al, 2004; DeRouen and Sobek, 2004; and Fearon, 2004) it is clear that intractable conflicts require deeper study concerning the reasons for their emergence, and how to terminate them. This chapter, therefore, will articulate at the beginning the components of a conceptual framework of intractable conflicts and examine the effects of mediation in attempting to resolve them. Then it will proceed to advocate for an approach that promotes interfaith dialogue as a means to bridge trust gaps in intractable conflicts. Finally it will apply the approach in one such conflict – the Israel-Palestine dispute.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS

An intractable conflict is a process of competitive relationships that extend over a period of time, and involves hostile perceptions and occasional military actions (Coleman, 2006). The term itself acts as an integrating concept connoting a competitive social process where states become enmeshed in a web of negative interactions and hostile orientations. This pattern is repeated, indeed worsened, every so often, when the actors involved are unable to curb, or manage, the escalation of their relationships (Coleman, 2003).

One of the first scholars to draw attention to the special features of these long-standing conflicts was Edward Azar (Azar, 1986). Azar refers to them as “protracted conflicts” and was the first to point out that one of the defining characteristics of these conflicts was the difficulty of managing them peacefully. The concept of intractable conflict has also received considerable attention in more recent studies (Bar Tal, 2000; Coleman et al, 2007; Tomlinson and Lewicki, 2006; Ozawa, 2006; and Crocker et al, 2005). Gochman and Maoz (1984) demonstrated empirically how a relatively small number of states have been involved in a disproportionately large number of militarized disputes. Furthermore, they showed that this was a pattern that was likely to repeat itself. Gochman and Maoz define these long-standing disputes between states as “enduring rivalries,” and their conflict as an “enduring conflict” (ibid).

So what are some of the important characteristics of intractable conflicts? Perhaps the most significant feature of intractable conflict is that it is a long and drawn-out process, rather than a series of discrete events (Thies, 2001). Intractable conflicts generally do not start their life cycle as intractable, but become increasingly intractable as the nature of the conflict changes due its duration and entrenchment (Coleman et all, 2007). An intractable conflict usually lasts for many years. The temporal dimension of intractable conflicts is quite significant, for intractable conflicts convey the notion of a long-term phenomenon (usually a minimum of 15
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