



HEALING THE WOUNDS OF HISTORY: ADDRESSING THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

This conference is proposed jointly by the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS) at the University of Oxford and the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP), in partnership with Lebanese American University (LAU). It will be hosted by the LAU at its Byblos campus on 11-13 November 2011. The main aim is to explore the socio-psychological and deeper roots of violence in present-day Lebanon, and to identify new modalities in reconciliation and dialogue, between both individuals and groups.

1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Lebanon is in a state that is neither war nor post-conflict. There is an overhanging threat of future violence combined with an uneasy relationship to the violence of the past. The strong sectarian and social identities that had made the wars psychologically possible are still active and transmuting, thereby further reducing trust and heightening fears.

For several generations, the lack of closure with regard to the civil wars and foreign invasions has had profound psychological and social effects. 'Turning over a new page' does not necessarily mean that grievances and memories have been fully acknowledged and addressed. The cycles of blame and revenge threaten to reignite violence, as competing victims do not take responsibility, but act from denial or blame, sharpened by fear.

As a result, there is no consensus or shared aspiration amongst stakeholders with regard to how Society can move forward. This un-clarified situation presents an extra dimension of difficulty for those who would attempt to implement regular post-conflict peacebuilding strategies. Therefore, it is evidently necessary to design processes that address and heal the deeper roots of conflict. We believe that this is a key element in seeking to re-build relationships in a society that has long suffered from division and lack of trust between individuals and their communities. We suggest that:

- A. The causes for violence are rooted in recent but also older and even ancient historical grievances, memories and traumas. These psychological roots draw on perceived injustices, and become the sources of violence, especially in acute times of crisis, fear and threat. These driving forces usually remain unexamined. By unfolding and deconstructing them, individuals can begin to understand where these prejudices and impulses for violence against the other are rooted.
- B. Memories of the past can keep conflict alive, consciously and unconsciously, which invoke the formation of certain sectarian and social identities. Individuals may feel that it is a betrayal of their 'identities' if they move away from these elements. It is through unearthing these deeply rooted identities that we can begin to reframe/rethink the "self", humanise the other and to improve relationships.
- C. It is necessary to propose an onward route. The process requires that approaches to healing, reconciliation and forgiveness are formulated so that they are relevant to all parties concerned. Feasible proposals for developing grassroots skills and capacities are crucial for how this can be achieved. Developing capacities at the individual level would help in collective action and peace building efforts at the group level. These should be placed alongside political, social, economic, juridical and civil society endeavours.

2. AIMS AND PROCESSES

This conference aims to explore the need for alternative approaches to conflict transformation and peace-building from a psycho-social perspective. It will enable participants to explore the complexities of personal and collective identity. We hope to do this by offering people an opportunity to experience the deeper personal, cultural and historical dynamics that affect the way we regard the other. In this manner, the participants may identify narratives that dehumanise the other and perpetuate the cycles of violence. On this basis, individuals can embark on transformative social processes that work towards the building of peaceful human relationships through compassion and forgiveness.

Therefore, we aim to gather persons and organisations from diverse groups in order to:

- (1) Explore the role of addressing present and old grievances in conflict transformation, and share international and Lebanese experiences of the above.
- (2) Understand and explore the roots that shape our identities and our changing boundaries; and reflect on our relationship to the “Other”;
- (3) Catalyse a process to provide a platform for developing skills, strategies and actions necessary for peace-building in Lebanon.

The conference will do this by engaging in the following:

- a. Dialogue and forum where presenters and participants discuss the contribution that the psycho-social approach might have on the process of peacebuilding in Lebanon; and where both local and international practitioners map out some of the effective approaches to addressing grievances and its effects on the individual and the group;
- b. Experiential workshops where participants share narratives to reveal key elements of individual and collective identities; including memories of trauma and violence, concepts of power and victimhood, as well as the sense of territorial and sectarian belonging. These workshops are intended to enable the participants to reflect on the inner causes of their individual and groups’ grievances and fears. These workshops will be professionally facilitated.
- c. Focused discussions which draw on the understanding and insights emerging from the previous processes and identify key skills and capacities required in order to promote the psycho-social approach in addressing individual and collective grievances and exploring various means of healing them.

3. SPEAKERS

The keynote speaker for this conference is Professor Vamik D. Volkan, Emeritus professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia and a past president of the International Society of Political Psychology. Professor Volkan, a Turkish-Cypriot, has developed a widely respected body of work and writing in the field of large-group behaviour in times of peace and war.

Other speakers include both international and Lebanese scholars and practitioners who have extended experience in addressing deeper roots of violence and building human relationships in post-war communities.

4. PARTICIPANTS

We envisage 80 participants at the conference, including: international and local experts in the field; Lebanese NGO representatives; representatives from different social sectors, and change agents; and students or young people from diverse backgrounds.

5. OUTLINE OF PROGRAMME

The duration of the conference to be **three days**, structured as follows:

Mornings:

Plenary – inspirational speaker(s) and setting the scene for the day

Roundtable presentations and focused discussions

Panel and Roundtable Presentations will be offered by Lebanese and international scholars, experts and practitioners. The discussions will be led by experienced chair-persons who can invoke and sustain vigorous and open dialogue within a constructive atmosphere.

Focused Discussions will be where the participants work in groups of 15-20. Members of the discussion group are ideally from similar sectors in the Lebanese society so that they can identify strategy and instrumentality for capacity-building within institutions and communities.

Afternoons:

Experiential workshops and discussion groups

Plenary – sharing the insights emerged from the day

Experiential Workshops will be led by professional facilitators under a set of agreed guidelines for group interaction. The facilitator would help create an open space for deeper personal experiences. The numbers of people for each group would be around 10-15, carefully chosen to ensure a good mix in terms of age, ethnicity, religion, gender and other social backgrounds.

The **broad focus for each day** and the progression of the programme are as follows:

Day 1: The need for psycho-social approaches to addressing the wounds of the past and an overview of different effective approaches - both local and international

Day 2: Exploring our multiple identities and moving towards trust and solidarity

Day 3: Taking responsibility and developing our capacity for peace

We envisage a follow-up project with nation-wide programmes in order to carry forward and to share the insights, expertise and methodology developed from this conference to communities in Lebanon for healing and constructive relationship building across sectors.

Please send further comments on this draft proposal, and ideas for collaboration to

Alexandra Asseily
Governor
Centre for Lebanese Studies
email: alexandra@asseily.org

Dr Scherto Gill
Executive Secretary/Research Fellow
Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace
email: scherto.gill@ghfp.org