UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICTS:
Why it Matters for International Crisis Management

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ABSTRACT
The analysis of protracted conflicts often fails to properly identify the root causes that lead to violence and broken societies. This paper tries to shed light on the way causal analysis and holistic approaches to examining conflicts can enhance crisis management and conflict resolution methods. The author embraces the human needs theory that considers conflicts as the result of a process driven by unfulfilled needs and collective fears. Understanding the root causes of conflict and its psychological dimension is crucial for sustainable peace building. In this paper, the author identifies some lessons that can be learned from the recent crisis in Côte d’Ivoire as well as from the latest events in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and puts emphasis on the significance of human needs approach for conflict resolution in such cases. By analyzing the deep-rooted causes of protracted and violent conflicts, the author argues that crisis management can be successful only when basic human needs are met and collective fears are addressed.
**INTRODUCTION**

In the aftermath of the Cold War, many scholars analyzed the reshaping of international affairs and the emergence of a new form of conflict. The bipolar world and its proxy wars ended, opening the way to internal conflicts often characterized by extreme violence. Researchers sought to understand these new dynamics, prompting a debate that continues to divide academia and deeply impacts policy-makers. Among the most preeminent scholars who have studied the causes of post-Cold War conflicts is Mary Kaldor, who theorizes the qualitative transformation between the “*New and Old Wars.*”¹ She explains that the past decades’ conflicts were characterized more by irrational and predatory violence while prior rebellions were mainly rationally-motivated and progressive. Others look at civil wars through an economic lens, like Paul Collier, who developed an econometric model that stresses the statistically significant relationship between strains on natural resources and the outbreak of wars.² In particular, this model determines the risk of falling into civil war by looking at variables such as the abundance of natural resources, poor economic performance, lack of democracy, and rent-seeking behaviors. This theorization of conflicts relies on the key distinction between greed (rebellions) and grievances (protest movements), claiming that modern wars are mainly led by greed, joining Mary Kaldor who argues that “the new wars can be contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their goals, their methods, and how they are financed.”³

These models have been crucial in understanding how the globalized era has impacted conflicts and gained a special resonance in the political sphere. Many policy-makers have been inspired by this analytical framework, which is reflected in several conflict resolution approaches. Although valuable, these models fail to provide a comprehensive explanation of the genuine causes of conflicts. Retrospective views show that the “resource wars” argument only provides a partial analysis of a much more complex set of factors that led countries such as Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo into war. Abundant resources and their mismanagement are not the root causes of conflicts but a combination of secondary causes and means for belligerents to prolong the war. Considering resources the main cause of wars seems to be part of a broader tendency to consider the symptoms rather than the causes of conflicts, and to determine causation where there is only a statistical correlation. This argument is made by Dennis Sandole, who analyzes in the extract below the United States’ counterterrorism approach:
“To a very large extent, the US-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq (especially the latter) seem to be addressing only the symptoms of the conflicts that have torn these Muslim countries apart; furthermore, those interventions may actually be exacerbating the causes of 9/11-type terrorism. Such counter productivity is the price that policy-makers might continue to pay for rejecting or otherwise avoiding conceptual tools that transcend symptoms and capture the complexity of complex conflicts.”

This statement stresses two key elements. First, it shows that despite an attempt to understand and address the potential causes of terrorism, it does not dig deep enough to grasp the heart of terrorism dynamics. Second, Sandole argues that a failure to properly understand these dynamics may terribly undermine the success of the expected outcome and may even worsen the situation. This analysis can be applied to the understanding of protracted conflicts and to the challenges of building effective peace. Therefore, policy-makers should shape comprehensive and holistic methods, seeking to address not only the manifestation of conflicts (extreme violence) but also the root causes that drive it. Similarly, it is critical to assess collective psychology in conflicts and integrate the qualitative findings in peacebuilding.

This paper seeks to explain why an interdisciplinary and multi-causal approach to understanding conflicts is crucial for international crisis management. First, it analyses the idea that conflicts should be analyzed as a “process driven by collective needs and fears,” according to Herbert Kelman, Professor of Social Ethics, Emeritus, at Harvard University. Then, it discusses the relevance and implications of such an approach for contemporary conflict resolution.

“CONFLICTS AS A PROCESS DRIVEN BY COLLECTIVE NEEDS AND FEARS”
According to Kelman, conflicts should be considered as a process driven by collective needs and fears rather than motivated by rational calculation and national interest.
Unfulfilled Needs and Violence

All human beings have basic needs. Part of these needs are physical, like the need for food, water or shelter, but essential needs go beyond these few elements because they cover the psychological sphere. “Needs” theorists, like conflict scholar John Burton, defined four needs in particular that are universal and nonnegotiable and, therefore, should be primarily addressed as a basis for negotiating peace settlements. These needs are not hierarchical, but rather sought all together: security or safety, meaning both stability and freedom from fear; identity, defined by needs theorists as a sense of self in relation to the outside world; recognition, including the recognition of one’s identity and recognition from the others; family and community; and personal development, which includes a dimension of personal fulfillment, or in other words “the need to reach one’s potential in all areas of life.” Commonly, these needs are naturally fulfilled through the community, or through the policies, public goods, and services provided by the state.

However, if these needs are unfulfilled because the state fails to properly address them, or if a group feels that these needs are unmet, or perceives a threat to these needs, violence can emerge. The perception, rational or not, of any injustice regarding the distributive system can quickly lead to an identity-based struggle. This extends far beyond dialectic greed versus grievances. Because it is a matter of universal needs, it is similarly a matter of survival, so “people will go to great lengths to satisfy them,” according to Celia Cook-Huffman, professor of peace studies and researcher on the impact of social identity on conflict. The term survival can be understood literally, for instance, in cases of genocide, to mean where extreme violence aims to destroy in whole or in part a specific group; survival can also be understood in its symbolic meaning, as when elders feel their culture or language is disappearing or can no longer be transmitted from generation to generation.

Having raised the question of needs fulfillment, it is relevant to underscore the psychological dimension of conflicts, particularly analyzing the weight of fear in escalating violence. Fear, in its literal definition, is “an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain, or harm.” Fear is a natural and common feeling that allows people to identify a potential danger. However, “healthy fear (or fear that has a protective function) can evolve into unhealthy or pathological fear, which can lead to exaggerated and violent behavior.”
Therefore, collective fears, which are fueled by the denial of basic needs, can lead to violent reactions, as an ultimate attempt of a people to secure the necessities of life and rectify the perceived injustice. In addition, violent actions are reinforced by massive mobilization: the larger the group that takes up arms, the more legitimate the violence appears to be to the rest of the population. This can create a rapid domino effect and provoke large-scale struggles; de-escalating violence then becomes even more challenging.

**The Identity/Security Nexus**

Identity is one of the most crucial needs identified by the basic needs theory because it is an extremely strong catalyst for social mobilization. Many scholars stress identity salience as a key factor in conflict–concept, understood as the likeliness identity has to be invoked when handling political and societal challenges. According to Daniel Rothbart and Rose Cherubin, identity relies on a common set of narratives, symbols, and a shared sense of group differences. For these authors, “causes of identity-based violence often include the shared normative commitments of the protagonists’ groups, commitments that center on notions of in-group purity and out-group vice.” This distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ represents a potential societal fracture. In that sense, causal analysis views conflict as the product of a strong competition among different players.

It would be misleading, however, to consider identity salience *per se* as a mere cause of civil conflict. Identity, considered as a social construct and a dynamic process, is in reality a fluctuant ingredient subject to alliances, mobilizations and manipulations. On one hand, identity is a catalyst, a vector of mobilization through which people can express their deepest concerns and strongest collective fears. On the other hand, identity is also an ideal credo for leaders or warlords to reach their political objectives and to legitimize their means of action. Mobilizing a population using identity is much quicker and more efficient than mobilizing through political convictions. In ideological conflicts, such as the Spanish civil war, people do have the choice to take sides which leads to divisions even within families. On the contrary, when conflicts rely on the mobilization of identities, people simply cannot remain outside of the game, either because they have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group, or because they are seen as – and therefore targeted as – *de facto* members of the enemy’s group. In other words, when identity is at stake in a conflict there cannot be free riders. Society is then deeply polarized and fractured, which has strong consequences for later reconciliation.
Political leaders often manipulate identity and ethnicity for electoral purposes or to support a conflict. This is part of the broader concept of ethnocentrism that Sandole defined as “the power used by the privileged to maintain themselves and their groups at the expense of others.”\textsuperscript{13} Yet, the manipulation of identity by leaders does not imply that people mobilized by this are not expressing legitimate and genuine concerns. Mobilized groups find a special resonance in identity discourse because they are able to identify themselves with narratives which emphasize shared values and collective fears. This is why identity is one of the most important basic needs to be considered when analyzing conflicts, because of its ability to be mobilized and its strong interaction with violence and security. In their conceptualization of protracted social conflicts, Edward Azar and Chung In Moon\textsuperscript{14} focus on identity as the human need whose denial can dramatically increase the probability that a conflict will become prolonged and violent.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

The causal analysis of collective needs and fears enhances the understanding of the deep causes that drive protracted and violent conflicts. In light of these observations, lessons should be learned from current conflict resolution processes and a new thinking should be promoted to better address contemporaneous crises.

**Limits of Current Conflict Resolutions Processes**

The challenges faced by the current practice of crisis management and conflict resolution often highlight the lack of a comprehensive and holistic approach. A peace process certainly cannot be successful if it does not meet the basic needs that have not been fulfilled. The latest events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict show that no solution can be found, no peace agreement can be sustainable, if the deepest fears of both populations are not addressed. Palestinians’ claim for statehood is gaining greater legitimacy within the international sphere, as shown by UNESCO’s recent vote to grant Palestine full membership. However, even a formal recognition of Palestinian statehood by the UN would not be enough to pacify and reconcile the issues dividing Israel and Palestine. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute mainly relies on grievances that deal with identity as a fundamental need. Particularly, Israel argues that the failure of peace negotiations is due to Palestine’s refusal to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. The underlying fear of this claim for identity recognition is the
possibility of Israel becoming an Arab-majority state through demographic shifts caused by a return of Palestinian refugees to Israeli-claimed lands.\textsuperscript{15}

To a broader extent, no sustainable peace can be reached until a comprehensive agreement finally addresses crucial issues such as water, refugees, Israeli settlements, or Jerusalem. Because each of these issues has a direct impact on Palestinian and Israeli lives, needs, and deepest fears, failing to deal with these problems continues to hinder a broader resolution. Similarly, human needs analysis can challenge the sole role of political agreements in crisis resolution processes. Are power-sharing initiatives and electoral processes only aimed at finding political solutions to make belligerents stop fighting, or do they also address the population’s needs and fears? Such questions should systematically be asked to prevent peace process failures. One could also discuss the role of outside powers in crisis management; because the fulfillment of basic human needs is by definition a prerogative of the state, international groups or other actors are not likely to address them, even by establishing post-crisis development programs.

One of the main difficulties to be considered for the management of protracted conflicts is the nonnegotiable characteristic of basic human needs. The different parties involved in a conflict can be reluctant to go to the negotiating table precisely because their needs cannot be negotiated: they must simply be met. Fears of a zero-sum game can prevent parties from seeking a consensual agreement. A belligerent group can feel that negotiating with the enemy will lead its population to exchange one need for another, like losing identity for security. However, if the conflict resolution process is properly led, it ends up with a win-win situation and breaks the security dilemma faced by both groups. If one group feels safer, it is likely that violence will de-escalate, and both groups would be improving collective security by pursuing the fulfillment of their personal needs.

Among contemporary conflicts, the recent Côte d’Ivoire electoral crisis is a particularly relevant case study because it shows that a mere political response to an unresolved civil war is not enough to reconcile the issues fundamentally dividing society. By considering the electoral crisis as only a political issue, external actors neglected the psychological dimension of the conflict. The civil war that started in 2002 between the North and the South of Côte d’Ivoire, largely on grounds of identity tensions, deeply fractured Ivoirian society. The dispute, centered on the concept of ivoirité,
was crucial since it raised the question of who is a legitimate citizen of Côte d’Ivoire and who is not. The ceasefire in 2004 did not solve the problem, and the country remained split between the two sides of the ceasefire line known as the zone of confidence.

In 2007 a peace agreement was finally signed, appointing Guillaume Soro as Laurent Gbagbo’s Prime Minister. This power-sharing measure was a valuable initiative, and the conduct of a democratic electoral process was expected to be the height of a successful conflict resolution experience because the election of the next president would be the expression of the people’s sovereignty. However, the elections held in 2010 resulted in a much stronger crisis than the country had experienced over the last few years. Laurent Gbagbo refused to admit electoral defeat and remained in power, supported by the Ivorian Constitutional Council. Alassane Ouattara was soon declared President of Côte d’Ivoire by the Independent Electoral Commission and was broadly recognized as the new legitimate authority of the country by the international community. Both swore themselves in as President in separate ceremonies and formed a government. In November 2010 Gbagbo’s security forces and allied militias launched a campaign of violence against Ouattara’s supporters. Ouattara’s followers retaliated and military forces caused many civilian casualties when they began an offensive to take over the country in April 2011. Both sides committed major crimes and abuses. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 3,000 people were killed and 150 women raped during the conflict period.¹⁶

Clearly, the international community failed in understanding that the Ivorianians were not ready to accept the defeat of one of the two candidates, precisely because they continued to perceive injustices and threats to their security. Former President Laurent Gbagbo’s arrest and President Alassane Ouattara’s investiture have not been enough to stop violence or to establish a climate of trust among Ivorian citizens. Despite Ouattara’s public commitment to justice and reconciliation, exactions committed by militias from both parties will durably prevent trust-building and credibility within Ivorian society.

**Addressing Collective Needs and Redefining Diplomacy**

The state is responsible for addressing collective needs and fears of the different groups of its population in order to enforce peace and security in its territory. Kelman promotes a “creative problem-solving” approach.¹⁷ The ultimate goal is to build a society where respect of others, mutual
acceptance, trust, and shared values are the norm and not the exception. This process must be conducted at the individual level. For instance, policies that encourage people to take into account the other person’s perspective could be successful, says Kelman. The symbolic sphere is almost as important as hard politics because it deals with feelings, perceptions, and irrational fears. Therefore, both symbolic and distributive justice policies should be implemented to rebuild a feeling of trust and confidence. Finally, there is no need to try to “de-ethicize” society, which would inevitably be an unavailing effort. Rather, identities should be mobilized as a tool for social cohesion and security. Assumed and respected identities can prevent competition among the different groups.

The state has the main responsibility to build peace, but civil society also has an important role to play. Organizations or movements that enjoy popularity and legitimacy in a country should also be mobilized to serve the national reconciliation cause. Faith-based organizations often have particular resonance within the society because they are able to carry strong values such as forgiveness and respect of others.

Finally, international diplomacy needs to redefine its role in civil wars and internal crises. For example, diplomacy could serve as interface between government and civil society, promoting a bottom-up approach by working with the population to help individuals define their priorities and by encouraging the state to build a responsive system able to facilitate further progress. Diplomacy, to a larger extent, can contribute to build a culture of problem solving rather than a culture of opposition. Diplomacy, when properly applied, can serve as the best approach to a holistic peace building process. The conflict resolution scholar, Susan Allan Nan, explains that “holistic peace processes implies that building peace is more than taking care of a series of interrelated separate “pieces of peace” that fit together in a coherent manner.”\(^\text{18}\) Rather, a holistic approach means an overall, strong vision for peace, which responds to the need for a multi-causal, problem-solving approach. Reality is complex, and because of its inherent complexity it must be understood as a whole.

**CONCLUSION**

The psychological dimension of conflict is often neglected in academic studies, even if it allows for a better understanding of the root causes that underlie extreme and seemingly irrational violence. Crisis management and conflict resolution processes must better develop holistic under-
standing of conflicts. Because each conflict is unique and happens in a determined context, any model that would generalize conflict resolution methods risks overlooking the populations’ particular needs and fears.

Lessons learned from the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as well as from the Côte d’Ivoire electoral crisis are examples of the importance of basic human needs, like identity or security, in conflict situations. Also, these lessons learned show that the failure of proper peace settlements tends to result, in part, from the lack of comprehensive agreement on all of the aspects of the conflict that affect individual lives at the micro-level.

Although it is not quantitatively measurable and therefore difficult to address, any attempt to address collective fears and to rebuild trust among citizens or among different groups would be highly valuable. In light of the causal analysis of protracted conflicts, diplomacy could ultimately play a role in redefining and developing more creative tools to properly address the root causes of conflicts and not only treat their symptoms.

5 E.g. current US counterinsurgency strategy promotes a civil-military approach, focusing not only on military action but also on socio-economic and political development.


17 Kelman, “A Social-Psychological Approach.”