

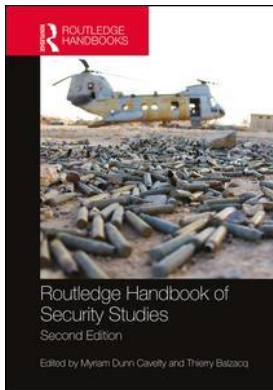
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Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Thierry Balzacq

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Delphine Alles

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ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Delphine Alles

The current period seems to be characterized by a growing number of ethnic and/or religious tensions, in parallel with the mobilization of collective identity narratives during violent conflicts – whether these narratives legitimate, motivate, or denounce the resort to violence. Most domestic conflicts do have an ethnic or religious dimension which tends to become increasingly salient as the conflict persists, notwithstanding the variety of root-causes that may be involved in these processes. Yet, the terms of the interrelationship between ethnicity and religion on the one hand, and ethnicity, religion, and violence on the other, are far from settled.

The lack of consensus on this interrelationship largely results from the burgeoning yet relatively recent scholarly interest for this subject, due to a combination of academic and contextual factors. Social sciences have long been dominated by the modernization-as-secularization thesis, which considered religion as an irrelevant factor in modern politics. More broadly, identity-based mobilizations were perceived as the remnants of a world that was bound to disappear. Violence supported by ethnic and religious narratives was hence seen as a distinctive feature of archaic societies living in failed states, in contrast with a ‘modern’ world of stable nation-states – at the risk of failing to make sense of significant exceptions such as the violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

In the post-Cold War context, the increasing salience of ‘new wars’, characterized by (among other features) the violent contestation of state legitimacy and political control by non-state actors wielding identity labels (Kaldor 2007[1999]), and the parallel globalization of informal violence justified on religious grounds (Keohane 2002), exemplified by the 9/11 attacks, has called for new frameworks of analysis. Ethnicity and religion may be invoked in the context of structural or indirect violence as much as in direct physical or personal violence. The notion of ‘cultural violence’, which encompasses elements deriving from ethnicity and religion as it refers to ‘any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form’ (Galtung 1990: 291), is appealing, for it unites the different expressions of violence under a single concept. Yet, the very comprehensiveness of the notion tends to impede its analytic and normative clarity. The scope of this chapter is hence reduced to physical violence, although it acknowledges that structural violence shapes the broader contexts within which acts of violence are perpetrated (Galtung 1969).

This chapter first clarifies the notions of ethnic and religious violence and the debates surrounding the agency of identity labels in conflict settings. It then analyses the contextual and

systemic factors most frequently invoked to explain the occurrence of such violence. The subsequent developments explore the consequences of the mobilization of ethnic or religious narratives on patterns of violence, and the specific difficulties they introduce for conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies.

The changing boundaries of ethnic and religious narratives

Definition issues could be sidestepped by arguing that episodes of violence involving actors who explicitly found their behaviour on ethnic or religious narratives can be characterized as such. Completing this approach, Jonathan Fox has developed a useful taxonomy, relying on combinable criteria which determine whether a conflict can be considered religious (a reasoning that could be expanded to ethnic dimensions): the fact that actors are motivated by religious beliefs and ideologies; the involvement of religious institutions (to mobilize violence, or to support conflict resolution); whether the use of religious language or symbols has an influence on the conflict's outcome; and the role played by religious identity (Fox 2002). Yet, while ethnic and religious narratives both refer to individual and group identities, it is essential to distinguish their respective characteristics, which rest on two specific conceptions of group membership and otherness. A reflection on the place of these narratives as a dependent or independent variable is also necessary, as this option directly orientates the analysis of their relationship with violence, hence shaping different conflict resolution strategies.

Two overlapping yet distinct concepts

At the analytical level, ethnic and religious violence tend to be reified in the context of violent confrontations involving people belonging to different groups. They are also often seen as overlapping concepts, because they are mutually reinforcing as collective identity markers (Marty and Appleby 1997) and often mobilized in situations of inter-communal violence. It is hence common to talk about ethno-religious violence without necessarily distinguishing the political and strategic implications of these two notions, which are characterized by contingent contours and contested definitions.

While religion is one of the traits that may define ethnicity, not all ethnic identities have a religious component, and most religions do not have an ethnic dimension – the Jewish or Armenian cases, where nation and religion nearly coincide, constitute exceptions. Ethnicity refers to a category that singles out a group of individuals under a specific name (for instance Tutsi, Javanese, or Croat). Ethnic boundaries may be constructed by the group itself or ascribed to its members from the outside, by other groups or by administrative norms, based on varying criteria which include a common history, kinship, social practices, a common language, and a reference to a territory presented as their homeland (Smith 2001). The weight of this combination of factors on actors' self-perceptions and behaviours towards 'Others' may vary among individuals and groups, but ethnicity tends to be reified as primordial by individuals because it is entrenched within their ordinary experiences (Geertz 1973).

By contrast, the definition of religion – whether it should be based on its function or its contents, and the extent to which it shapes group identities and patterns of behaviours – is heavily contested. While Durkheim addresses religion as a source of social integration (Durkheim 1912), Geertz defines it as '(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' (Geertz 1973: 90). Juergensmeyer (1993) and Fox (2002)

assimilate religion to a type of ideology which, among other characteristics, provides 'a meaningful framework for understanding the world' although it has the specificity of being derived from an external framework (Fox 2002: 14). For Juergensmeyer, who theorizes the continuity between symbolic and real acts of religious violence, religious worldviews may hence justify the resort to violence by providing a symbolic core to the idea of a world divided into warring camps (Juergensmeyer 2003).

A key to dynamically analysing the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and violence is to address these concepts as socially and/or politically constructed rather than given. The definitions of ethnic and religious identities indeed evolve across time. Membership criteria vary, groups can be subjected to sub-divisions or assimilation in larger wholes, and overlapping religious or ethnic identities may be mobilized in different ways at different times. These changing boundaries have been considered as a characteristic of ethnicity (Gurr 1993; Horowitz 2000) and a similar observation can be made for religion. Religious groups appropriate and redefine what they consider as the 'truth', although the transformations of religious narratives – for theological or political purposes – are more likely to produce scissions (the Christian schisms, or the division between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims), especially when the definition of the doctrine is monopolized by formal institutions. These evolutions complicate the analysis of violence involving ethnic and religious narratives.

Beyond their commonalities, ethnicity and religion can be distinguished by the nature of the political demands they found and by their membership (Fox 2002), which generate two conceptions of 'otherness'. While both are exclusive identities, the definition of ethnic boundaries sets the demographic limits of group membership and is ascribed as a label, unrelated to the notion of personal adhesion or consent. Ethnic identities are, however, subject to transformation and hybridization, for instance through intermarriage or migration. Religion, by contrast, sets strict membership criteria and requires an exclusive adhesion, but does not prevent the group membership from expanding, since individuals may join a religious group by conversion. This difference opens two conceptions of the relationship with territoriality and political authority.

While ethnic identities are constructed in relation with a territory, most religions are not geographically confined, since they are conceived as true and given, regardless of time and place. One of the repercussions of this feature, in the context of a conflict, is that the involvement of external supporters may be triggered by the mobilization of a religious narrative. Religious and ethnic narratives may also challenge the state's monopoly over the definition of legitimacy and the use of physical violence, by justifying the use of violence against actors or authorities presented as threats to the core of the group's identity. These two identity narratives nevertheless hold different relationships with political institutions. While ethnic narratives are attached to a territorial reference, religious discourses are founded on an external source of legitimacy. When religions are perceived as a primordial source of identity, they are therefore more difficult to combine with an overarching political framework. This facilitates their mobilization by violence entrepreneurs and makes them more difficult to appease through negotiated peace settlements.

The agency of ethnic and religious identities

The study of the relationship between violence and ethnic or religious narratives has long suffered from the reductionism of two opposing categories of analytical frameworks – primordialism and culturalism on the one hand, functionalism and instrumentalism on the other.

For primordialists, belonging to an ethnic group is seen as a natural characteristic of human life, reinforced through socialization mechanisms that derive from common cultural practices (Smith 1981; Horowitz 2000). In this view, violence and conflicts are seen as a consequence of

the irreconcilable demands resulting from the intrinsic characteristics and interests of ethnic or religious groups. Conflicts are thereby analysed as a function of difference, and any group may potentially, at some point, seek independence and encounter the opposition of the others. The culturalist approach addresses the substance of ethnic or religious identities. It considers social behaviours to be prescribed by values proceeding from identities and, hence, from cultures, some of which are inherently inclined to resort to violence.

These approaches seem to respond to the common-sense observation that most contemporary conflicts mobilize ethnic or religious narratives. However, they fail to critically address this linkage and to take into account the changing boundaries of ethnic or religious narratives, as well as the possibility of their strategic mobilization. An important body of literature, resting on both qualitative and quantitative research, demonstrates that ethnic and religious diversity are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for violence to occur. As diversity is present everywhere as a rule, the same groups may be opposed in certain times and places while they cohabit in others, and violence remains exceptional by comparison to peaceful coexistence (Bates and Yackolev 2002; Fearon and Laitin 1996, 2000; Habyarimana et al. 2008).

The opposite claim, that ethnicity or religion are never relevant as independent variables or as the root cause of violence, derives from the constructivist school which considers these identities as socially constructed and 'imagined' (Anderson 1991[1983]). This approach, focusing on the changing boundaries of identities and their mobilization by groups or political elites, has given way to two distinct yet compatible perspectives. Functionalists, on the one hand, consider violence to proceed from more determining social, economic, or political conditions, which may provide the backdrop of a mobilization of identity narratives legitimizing the use of violence. Violence and its justifications are nevertheless considered as a function of this more general context. Instrumentalist perspectives rather focus on the role of manipulative elites seeking material or political gains. They perceive identity narratives as instruments to mobilize masses, rather than inherent sources of violent behaviours.

A possible compromise would be to follow Geertz's approach in considering that, despite the constructed and contingent nature of ethnic or religious identities, the fact that they are in practice reified as primordial by certain individuals provides them with the ability to shape worldviews and behaviours. Although violence is never essentially religious or ethnic, identity narratives intervene in shaping conflict settings, legitimizing or framing the resort to violence, and influencing behaviours. This perspective calls for multilevel and multi-causal analyses, which can form the basis of inclusive conflict-resolution frameworks.

Contextual and systemic factors

Beyond the previously mentioned cleavage, the eruption of ethnic or religious narratives legitimizing violence, as well as the forms and success of their mobilization, can be tied to contextual or systemic evolutions.

Contextual dimensions and politico-institutional triggers

Ethnic or religious violence is favoured in politico-institutional contexts which shape and reify identity-based categories and differences, particularly through ethno-nationalist discourses, laws, institutions, or policies that ascribe individuals to these groups. Such contexts provide a basis for the construction and perception of collective identities, thus determining their political mobilization. It is particularly the case when ethnic or religious categorization accounts for discriminatory policies, granting certain groups control of political or material resources which

materialize in horizontal inequalities (Stewart 2008). The deriving sense of collective exclusion and relative deprivation opens the path to contestation and potentially violent mobilization (Gurr 1970), especially when minorities cannot expect ever to achieve political representation and influence. Colonial systems based on a 'divide and rule' logic, and the political institutions which have retained these characteristics (Rwanda or, to a lesser extent, Malaysia), are particularly predisposed to this tendency.

As ethnic or religious narratives supporting violence challenge the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and contradict the obligations derived from national allegiance and citizenship, their mobilization by identity entrepreneurs is more prone to meet grassroots support where the state is weak or contested. This is clearly the case in contexts where the nation-state model has been imported after the Second World War, without enabling the emergence of a social contract based on the integration of different identities in a national model and the constitution of an autonomous political space (Badie 1992). In the presence of fragile political legitimacy, the mobilization resulting from a collective sense of exclusion is triggered by institutional weaknesses (Easterly 2001), as weak institutions fail to provide the basis of cross-group relations and references. They hence reinforce the individuals' tendency to rely on communal solidarities, favouring the perception of a security dilemma by groups who feel that they cannot count on an overarching authority to provide security guarantees (Kauffman 1996).

While the resort to violence is never automatic, it is also favoured when minorities' expectations are repressed and their survival appears threatened. Policies directly affecting them as a group – discrimination or the use of violence by political rulers to consolidate their power (Collier et al. 2008) – constitute additional factors. Violent mobilizations are particularly likely to meet grassroots support when the minority elites answer these frustrations with an ideology that echoes the people's grievances (Gurr 1993).

Contemporary developments and systemic factors

The forms taken by the expression of narratives legitimizing violence are, to a large extent, shaped by the contemporary evolutions of the international system. Globalization has multiplied individuals' potential referents and allegiances, along with the destabilization of the territorial nation-state as the primary source of legitimacy and object of loyalty. It has thus transformed the patterns of violence as well as the narratives that legitimize it. This phenomenon has increased identity-related uncertainties and fears of standardization or dissolution through transnational contacts and processes (Appadurai 1998, 2006).

Addressing religious-based violence, Juergensmeyer pursues his argument on the systemic factors of religious resurgence. He analyses the rise of religious violence in a context where the Enlightenment project and secular nationalism have lost some of their appeal, while global insecurity rises. The resulting emergence of religious nationalist movements, which combine traditional communitarian values with the state reference, is seen as particularly prone to induce violence (Juergensmeyer 2008). David C. Rapoport also attributes a decisive importance to the political and global context in his approach to terrorism justified on religious grounds, which he analyses as the fourth wave of terrorism (Rapoport 2004).

Consequences on violence patterns

Beyond the controversies over the sources of ethnic or religious violence, or the very relevance of these notions, scholars on the subject focus on the impact of ethnic and religious narratives on patterns of contemporary violence.

On the extent of the conflict

The academic production reflects a divergence over the impact of religious and ethnic dimensions on the intensity of conflicts. While several quantitative and qualitative studies have observed that the involvement of religious narratives impacts the level of violence (Basedau et al. 2011; De Soysa and Nordas 2007; Henne 2012; Fox 2002, 2003, 2004; Toft 2007), others have drawn opposite conclusions (Collier and Hoeffler 2002; Lacina 2006; Pearce 2005).

Studies belonging to the first category refer to the fact that ethnic and religious narratives involve primordial references that are tied to the core of actors' identities and hence to their existential survival. When these identities are threatened (in real or perceived terms), the feeling that the constructed Other's very existence is a constituent of this threat may trigger mass violence, which aims at destructing the perceived threat rather than simply changing the terms of a balance of power.

On the other hand, several works contest the existence of a statistically significant impact of ethnicity and religion on the degree of violence. They highlight the presence of a counter-intuitive correlation between a high lethality and ethnically homogeneous contexts (Lacina 2006) – which does not debunk the possibility of a temptation to annihilate the potential threats to group homogeneity. Taking into account the relevance of religious narratives, Collier and Hoeffler (2002) have also relativized the significance of the apparent statistical correlation between religious issues and violence, by showing that the latter does not seem to depend on the former in practice.

The transnational spillover of violence based on identity narratives

The transnational implantation of several ethnic groups contributes to the internationalization of their causes, which may even transform the balance of power in their favour (Gurses 2014). The issue is, however, particularly salient with religion, whose transnational nature facilitates the 'contagion' of conflicts that are interpreted along religious lines (Fox 2004). Religious narratives are particularly prone to provoke a transnational spillover effect when they are constructed as the prominent explicative variable of a conflict. Religion indeed exerts a form of soft-power (Haynes 2012), which calls on individuals' exclusive allegiances by answering their demands for identity and integration with an all-inclusive narrative that provides them with a feeling of belonging and a source of engagement.

The spillover effect results from the attraction of resources and militants who primarily identify with the religious dimensions of a cause, to conflict terrains where violence was initially a function of multiple factors. As internal conflicts prolong in time and draw external support on the basis of this dimension, religious interpretations tend to trump other aspects of the conflict. This effect can be sought by local actors in search of international support (Afghanistan Mujahidin during the 1980s) but it may also result from the self-involvement of external actors who analyse a conflict along religious lines, sometimes against the intentions of its initial protagonists (the Free Aceh Movement from 1976 to 2005). Such developments impede conflict resolution by reifying the religious dimensions of a conflict, obliterating rational arguments in favour of its interpretation as a struggle for non-negotiable moral values or a 'cosmic war' (Juergensmeyer 2003).

Globalization has also facilitated the spread of problem-perception frameworks and behaviour patterns, by violence entrepreneurs who publicize them on international media or via spectacular actions (religious-based terrorism). This phenomenon complicates the analysis of violence legitimized by identity-based narratives, as it contributes to its propagation on terrains where

the major politico-institutional factors of violence are seemingly irrelevant. Such a transposition results from the adhesion of individuals who endorse what they perceive as the cause of a group with whom they identify. It leads to the reification of religious violence through these actors' discourses, as well as the importation of violent behaviours legitimized by these narratives (the transposition of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by French citizens of Jewish and Arab descent (Hecker 2012), or the endorsement of Daech's rhetoric and actions by European residents).

Dealing with ethnic and religious violence

The spread of religious and ethnic narratives legitimizing violence contributes to the entrenchment of these conflicts and to the reification of their identity dimensions by drawing in external actors who are primarily mobilized on this basis. This phenomenon hinders the negotiation of peace settlements, calling for conflict-resolution strategies which take into account the role and specificity of ethnic or religious actors and narratives.

Impacts on peace-reconstruction strategies

A strong presence of identity narratives impacts the nature and the efficiency of conflict-resolution measures. The reification of a conflict as ethnic or religious first complicates its resolution through a negotiated settlement, as negotiations are likely to succeed only if they focus on non-identity issues (Svensson 2007; 2012; Svensson and Harding 2011; Toft 2007). Inflicted or experienced violence also tends to reinforce the feeling of insecurity and the exclusiveness of identity narratives, entrenching them in individual and collective worldviews. This weights on the establishment of peacebuilding strategies, largely restraining the efficiency of international involvement and the use of force as the underlying dimensions of these conflicts cannot be transformed by coercive interventions (Kaufman 1996; Lake and Rotchild 1998).

Peacebuilding strategies depend on the understanding of the sources of violence. Analyses resting on primordialist or culturalist frameworks tend to consider a complete separation or a consociational political system (such as the one instituted by the Lebanese constitution) as the only reliable options. The efficiency of such measures has, however, been contested (Pischedda 2008), especially as they may lean toward 'balkanization' or ethnic purification. Constructivist approaches rather focus on the necessity to understand identity construction and violence-mobilization processes, in order to create the preconditions of a transformation (Isajiw 2000). For functionalists, the goal would be to understand the contingencies of each situation and to transform the socio-economic or political context, in order to foster inter-group cooperation, protect minorities, and/or reduce the incentives to engage in conflict (Collier et al. 2003; Habyarimana et al. 2008). Instrumentalist perspectives on peacebuilding rather require engaging the ethnic or religious elites, through cooptation or support for the moderates, in order to incite them to induce their followers to support peaceful solutions (Alles 2015b; Byman 2002). In sum, the success of peacebuilding strategies depends upon their ability to take into account the specificities of violence legitimized by identity narratives, bringing back the issue of the interpretation of the role played by these identities.

Challenges to conflict resolution and peacebuilding

Taking into account ethnic and religious references, actors, or traditions may be a necessary condition to transform a conflict, notwithstanding its primary causes, once it has been reified as ethnic or religious. To this end, addressing identity narratives as constructed and changeable

opens the possibility of transforming violent interactions into peaceful exchanges. But whether ethnicity and religion are seen as primordial or as socially constructed, it is essential not to undermine the legitimacy of the conflict-transformation attempt. This requires peacemakers to take seriously the involvement of actors who define and legitimate their engagement on ethnic or religious grounds, and to speak a language they will understand.

Relying on ethnic or religious actors, as well as local cultural references, may be an option to increase the audience of a more peaceful and inclusive interpretation of the identity narrative. Seeking to transmute these conceptions, instead of promoting their marginalization, has the advantage of engaging the populations to transform narratives which sustain their identity by promoting its most inclusive aspects. It thus prevents the risk of leaving the parties with the impression that a compromise was imposed on them – which, in the context of exclusive identities, opens the possibility for violence to resurge by creating frustration and resentment. Conflict-resolution strategies relying on the spread of inclusive identity narratives may take different forms, which are not mutually exclusive. They form the basis of a growing research field, which would still deserve more conceptualization as well as case study analyses (Hertog 2010).

The involvement of religious peacemakers tends to facilitate the dialogue with actors whose motivations and perceptions of legitimacy are voiced in spiritual rather than material claims. Appleby (2000) hence considers them as critical to peace construction and the emergence of a context of dialogue, reconciliation, and bridges between groups, while Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009) stress their specific legitimacy and leverage. External religious mediators derive their credibility from their standing and willingness to engage with religious communities, as opposed to traditional states' representatives who are rarely willing to speak the language of spiritual claims and are not at ease with open a dialogue on these issues (Bartoli 2009).

Religious teachings and local practices may also be relied upon as a resource for conflict transformation, by providing the basis of peacebuilding strategies or cooperative mechanisms. The idea of promoting them as tools for peaceful cooperation is increasingly developed, both in theory and as a practice. Along this line, Marc Gopin (2000) develops the constructive role that can be played by religion in building a global community of shared moral commitments. The pacifist engagement of Gandhism and its integration of Hindu teachings is a case in point (Juegensmeyer 2005), but most religious traditions also have a discourse on peace and coexistence which may be relied upon (Galtung 2000; Ter Haar and Busuttill 2004).

Another option may also consist in valorizing the interpretation or concrete practices of a culture or religion that facilitate peaceful cooperation, in order to support a peacebuilding narrative by showing that it is not alien to the identity and references of the seemingly antagonistic actors. It can take the form of promoting local social practices, such as inter-communal pacts, which may have been forgotten prior to or in the context of the episodes of violence, to provide the basis of new inter-group interactions (Alles 2015a).

A difficulty, however, especially in the presence of religious or ethnic groups that are not organized around a central source of authority and legitimacy, is to not discredit the attempt or the proponent of a reinterpretation of religion or tradition. The risk is particularly salient when the initiative comes from external peacebuilders or by contested national authorities, who may open a new cleavage. This observation calls for the involvement of 'change agents' who hold enough legitimacy to provoke the adhesion of a large range of followers. Such a strategy may involve co-opting religious or ethnic elites to encourage them to favour inter-group dialogue or non-violence, or empowering moderate leaders to promote the most peaceful forces in a society (Alles 2015b).

The involvement of religious actors is also one of the aspects of the 'de-radicalization' strategies conducted with the aim of changing the mindsets of terrorism convicts, through inter-religious dialogue or exchanges with clerics or reinserted militants. These programmes, which

have become increasingly established since 2001, are still under scrutiny as data remains too limited to assess their results on a large scale (Horgan and Braddock 2010). They have, however, been criticized both on their principles and on their efficiency.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to underline that, while there are no systematic causalities, it is possible to identify conditions under which ethnic or religious narratives are more likely to support violent mobilizations. These conditions are largely impacted by the transformations resulting from globalization and the evolution of the contemporary international system, which reshape the expressions of violence while complicating their analysis. The transnational diffusion of violence narratives contributes to their reification in terrains where the previously evoked preconditions are not necessarily reunited. This phenomenon has led to a securitization of ethnic and religious issues and identities, which can be the basis of discriminatory behaviours or policies (Fox and Akbaba 2015; Shani 2014) – themselves contributing to reinforcement of the minorities' sense of communal identity, and potentially nourishing further contestation of state legitimacy.

The legitimization of violence by ethnic or religious narratives also impacts the forms of the conflict as well as peacebuilding strategies. Identity-based narratives, especially when they call on transnational references and solidarities, tend to prolong conflicts by facilitating the involvement of external supports and resources. They also complicate conflict resolution, by accentuating the non-negotiable dimensions of a conflict and its perception as a threat to the core of an individual's and/or group's identity. This decreases the chance for a traditional negotiation or mediation to succeed, and requires peacebuilders to speak the language of ethnic or religious mobilizations. The latter observation calls for the development of further research on the interplay between the root causes of violence and its interpretation along ethnic or religious lines, in order to analyse the conditions of this shift. Situations where inter-ethnic or inter-religious regulation or conflict-transformation mechanisms worked well, especially without external intervention, would also deserve to be considered by future research agendas dealing with ethnic and religious violence.

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