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For the members of the UN Security Council, post-conflict reconciliation cannot remain an afterthought. It is a key component in the prevention of endless cycles of bloody conflict.



Members of the UN Security Council, 2012. Demotix/VIEW Press. All rights reserved.

In January of last year, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman drew the UN Security Council's attention to the fact that, while it had recognized Iraq's progress in various resolutions, the country's communities had sharply differing historical and political narratives. This inhibited their ability to achieve common goals, including the fight against terrorism. In light of the spectacular rise of ISIS, it is hard not to acknowledge the prescience of his remarks. It was pronounced during a debate initiated by the Jordanian presidency, lyrically entitled "War, its Lessons and the Search for Permanent Peace". Focused on dealing with the past in order to forge genuine reconciliation after war, it dealt with a topic the Council rarely takes the time to discuss in depth, usually satisfied with empty calls for dialogue in the conflicts under consideration.

But research shows that countries having experienced a civil war have up to a 50 percent chance of relapsing into conflict within ten years. Examples abound of elections held too early, fanning on the flames of entrenched wartime narratives. If reconciliation can take many forms, from healing to transitional justice, through to truth-telling and reparations, sustainable peace cannot happen without it.

It does not seem to be the Council's favourite agenda item. While the topic had been discussed once in 2004, the ensuing laconic presidential statement reflected the members' inability to agree on much beyond the "vital importance" of the matter. As noted by the Jordanian representative, states are so sensitive to the use and misuse of historical accounts that they have not wanted to "play with such a figurative bomb". The latter almost exploded in his hands, with countries seizing the opportunity to bring up their own wounds and settle scores, China with Japan, Israel with Iran, Georgia with Russia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo with Rwanda. Some were so busy arguing that they forgot to state their position on the concrete proposals to be discussed, and the meeting concluded without any agreement on a way forward.

Apart from its obvious potential for controversy, there are several reasons why reconciliation does not get the attention it deserves from the world body. The most obvious one is that, in spite of an increased concern for peacebuilding, the Council's attention span does not go beyond tasks whose impact can be measured in the short term. Reconciliation on the other hand is a difficult, long and unpredictable voyage, whose timescale must be measured not in months or years but in generations. It is also less

easy to measure tangible results on this front than, say, when separating warring parties, training police personnel, or assisting in the rebuilding of destroyed infrastructure. Material consequences of war are more visible than psychological ones.

So what can the Council do to address this difficult but crucial issue? One thing is certain: if society is not ready for reconciliation, the international community cannot force the process. Only the victims and the perpetrators can reconcile themselves with one another. And what works in one country might very well have catastrophic consequences in another. In the field of reconciliation, more than in any other, one size does not fit all and local culture is key. There is merit, however, in adopting a more systematic approach to reconciliation, instead of the piecemeal strategies that have been implemented until now, in cases ranging from El Salvador to Sierra Leone to Timor-Leste, among others. Referring situations to the International Criminal Court is not enough either as, more than genuine reconciliation, these efforts are based on a desire to attain justice, which is not exactly its synonym. What the Council needs is to mainstream reconciliation in the same way that the "women, peace and security" agenda has led to the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in peace operations since resolution 1325. This would encourage national reconciliation processes and make sure that this issue is not as easily overlooked as it is now.

The establishment of commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions by the Council has proved useful in documenting events, gathering eyewitness testimony and investigating competing claims. As was suggested during the debate, this tool could be strengthened by the creation of a historical advisory service at headquarters on the model of the legal office already in place. It would assist member states in resolving the divergent narratives setting their communities apart, and help them establish appropriate reconciliation mechanisms. Strong emphasis should be put on providing a voice for the most vulnerable groups, in order to avoid the pitfall of an official uniform narrative of the past. It is only by drawing attention to the importance of reconciliation, and by mandating competent organs to address the issue, that the Council can prevent conflicts from recurring in an endless cycle of violence and deceptive, shallow peace.