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Religion, Political Fragmentation, and Inclusive Peacebuilding in Plural Societies

Stephane Lacroix
Departement de Science, France
stephane.lacroix@sciencespo.fr

Abstract

Drawing on the inter-war period as a formative phase of modern state formation, Lacroix demonstrated how ethno-religious diversity in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq became both a cultural asset and a potential source of conflict when politicized within fragmented political systems and shaped by external interventions who offered critical insights into the relationship between religion, politics, and peacebuilding through the lens of Middle Eastern history. This article discusses Lacroix's key arguments, emphasizing that conflict is not driven by religious identity alone, but by the interaction of historical legacies, governance failures, and geopolitical interests. The discussion further highlights the relevance of these lessons for other plural societies, including Indonesia, where inclusive political arrangements, egalitarian inter-communal dialogue, and recognition of plural identities are essential for sustainable peace. The article concludes that historically informed and context-sensitive approaches are vital for designing effective peace strategies in diverse societies.

Keyword: *Religion, Fragmentation, Inclusive Peacebuilding*

Introduction

Contemporary peacebuilding scholarship increasingly challenges the assumption that religious and cultural diversity constitutes an inherent source of conflict. Rather than viewing diversity as a destabilizing factor, recent studies emphasize that violence more often arises from the ways in which difference is politically managed, institutionalized, and instrumentalized within specific historical and structural contexts. From this perspective, religion is not an autonomous

driver of conflict but functions within broader configurations of power, governance, and geopolitical influence. (Rosen, 2009).

This analytical approach is particularly evident in studies of the modern Middle East, where ethno-religious pluralism has long intersected with state formation, colonial legacies, and external intervention. The inter-war period represents a critical historical juncture in which newly imposed territorial boundaries and political institutions reshaped communal relations across the region. In countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, diverse communities—including Maronite Christians, Druze, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and various minority groups—were incorporated into fragile political arrangements that often-prioritized elite bargaining over inclusive governance. While this diversity reflects a rich social and cultural landscape, its politicization within weak institutional frameworks has generated enduring vulnerabilities that continue to influence patterns of conflict and instability. (Sandal, 2019).

Within this context, religion frequently becomes a mobilizing resource rather than the primary cause of violence. Exclusionary governance, fragmented political authority, and competition among local and international actors transform communal identities into instruments of political contestation. Such dynamics underscore the limitations of security-centered explanations that attribute conflict primarily to religious extremism, redirecting analytical attention toward issues of political inclusion, institutional capacity, and historical contingency. (Schliesser, 2019).

The implications of this perspective extend beyond the Middle East to other plural societies, including Indonesia, where religious and cultural diversity constitutes a foundational element of national identity. Similar challenges arise in balancing democratic participation, social cohesion, and the recognition of plural identities within complex political landscapes. By emphasizing inclusive political processes, equitable inter-communal relations, and historically informed policy approaches, this article situates insights drawn from Middle Eastern experiences within broader debates on peacebuilding. It argues that sustainable peace in diverse societies depends not on suppressing difference, but on developing political and institutional arrangements capable of managing diversity in a just, participatory, and context-sensitive manner.

Discussion

Stéphane Lacroix's contribution to discussions on religion, politics, and peacebuilding represents a significant intervention in contemporary scholarly debates. His analysis challenges dominant narratives that frame religion as the primary or autonomous cause of violence in conflict-affected societies. Rather than treating religious difference as an explanatory endpoint, Lacroix approaches it as a social and political phenomenon embedded within wider historical and institutional contexts. This perspective allows for a more rigorous understanding of how conflict emerges and why religious identities become salient in particular moments of political crisis (Cox, et. al., 2017; Danca, 2023).

By drawing on empirical and historical experiences from the Middle East, Lacroix demonstrates how religious identities are shaped and mobilized through processes of state formation, political fragmentation, and elite competition. He situates conflict within the legacies of colonial intervention, fragile governance structures, and externally imposed political arrangements that have often failed to accommodate plural social realities. In this framework, religion functions less as an inherent source of violence and more as a symbolic and organizational resource that political actors deploy within contested power structures. Such an approach moves beyond reductionist explanations and highlights the structural conditions that enable religious difference to be politicized (Deng, 2025).

This analytical shift is particularly significant in an era when religious diversity is frequently misrepresented as a natural source of instability. Lacroix's framework instead underscores the role of governance, institutional design, and power relations in shaping the outcomes of pluralism. By reframing religious diversity as a social reality that can generate either conflict or coexistence depending on political context, his analysis contributes to a more nuanced and constructive understanding of peacebuilding. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to reconsider policy approaches that focus narrowly on religious extremism and to engage more deeply with the political and historical foundations of conflict in diverse societies (Fazlić, 2015).

One of the central arguments advanced by Lacroix concerns the inter-war period as a decisive moment in the formation of modern Middle Eastern states. During this phase, colonial powers imposed new territorial boundaries and political systems that often failed to reflect existing

social and communal realities. In countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, ethno-religious diversity—encompassing Maronite Christians, Druze, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and other minority groups—was managed through fragile power-sharing arrangements or exclusionary state institutions (Barbato, 2020; Bamidele, 2014). While diversity itself enriched cultural and social life, the politicization of identity within these externally designed frameworks generated long-term vulnerabilities. These historical legacies continue to shape contemporary conflicts, demonstrating that present-day tensions cannot be understood without reference to their structural and historical roots (Kaufmann, 1996).

Lacroix's analysis also highlights the role of fragmented local politics in sustaining conflict. Weak institutions, clientelism, and competition among elite factions often transform communal identities into political instruments. In such contexts, religion becomes a mobilizing resource rather than a primary cause of conflict. This insight challenges dominant security paradigms that focus narrowly on religious extremism, redirecting attention instead toward issues of governance, political inclusion, and institutional accountability. By emphasizing political fragmentation, Lacroix underscores the importance of building resilient and inclusive political systems as a foundation for peace.

Equally significant in Lacroix's analysis is his critical examination of external intervention as a persistent factor shaping conflict dynamics in the Middle East. Historically, the region has functioned as a strategic arena for both global and regional powers, whose political, military, and economic engagements have rarely been neutral. Rather than mitigating conflict, such interventions have often intensified existing divisions by privileging certain actors, entrenching sectarian identities, and reshaping local power balances to serve external interests. In this context, external involvement interacts with domestic political fragmentation, transforming local grievances into protracted and internationalized conflicts (Kwuelum, 2024).

Lacroix's critique aligns closely with postcolonial and critical peacebuilding scholarship, which emphasizes that interventions detached from local social and political realities risk reproducing cycles of dependency and instability. Peace initiatives that prioritize short-term security objectives or geopolitical calculations frequently undermine local agency and erode the legitimacy of domestic institutions. From this perspective, effective international engagement

requires a careful calibration that centers local ownership, contextual knowledge, and inclusive political processes. Lacroix's analysis thus highlights the need for peacebuilding approaches that move beyond externally imposed solutions and instead support locally grounded pathways toward sustainable peace.

A major strength of Lacroix's analytical framework lies in its comparative relevance across diverse sociopolitical contexts. Rather than treating the Middle East as an exceptional case, he situates its experiences within broader patterns of how plural societies negotiate identity, power, and governance. By drawing explicit connections between Middle Eastern cases and other heterogeneous societies, Lacroix demonstrates that the challenges of managing diversity are not region-specific but structurally embedded in political systems marked by inequality, historical legacies, and contested authority. This comparative orientation allows lessons from one context to inform peacebuilding strategies elsewhere without reducing them to universal or prescriptive models. (Nicholas, 2014).

The relevance of this approach becomes particularly evident when applied to the Indonesian context, where religious and ethnic diversity is a foundational element of national identity and democratic life. Indonesia's experience illustrates both the opportunities and vulnerabilities inherent in pluralism, especially when democratic institutions coexist with uneven political representation and social inequalities (Saiya, 2019). Lacroix's emphasis on inclusive political participation underscores the importance of ensuring that all communities have meaningful access to decision-making processes, while his focus on egalitarian inter-communal dialogue highlights the need for sustained engagement beyond formal institutional arrangements. In this sense, diversity management is understood not as a static policy goal, but as an ongoing political process.

More broadly, Lacroix's approach reinforces the argument that effective governance of diversity requires more than symbolic recognition or passive tolerance. Sustainable peace in plural societies depends on continuous negotiation among social groups, institutional frameworks that uphold fairness and accountability, and normative commitments to mutual recognition and equality. By rejecting top-down or securitized approaches to diversity, Lacroix advances a vision of peacebuilding grounded in democratic practice and social justice. This perspective contributes to a

deeper understanding of how pluralism can serve as a foundation for cohesion rather than conflict when supported by inclusive and responsive political institutions. (Omer, 2015).

The interdisciplinary orientation of Lacroix's analysis further strengthens its practical relevance for peacebuilding scholarship. By engaging perspectives from political science, religious studies, and policy analysis, his framework facilitates critical reflection on how theoretical insights can inform concrete approaches to conflict management. This integrative stance highlights the value of crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to better understand the complex interactions between religion, governance, and violence in plural societies. (Rosen, 2009).

Moreover, the emphasis on translating historical and analytical insights into actionable peace strategies underscores the applied significance of this approach. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract theory, Lacroix's analysis demonstrates how historically grounded and politically informed scholarship can contribute to the design of more effective and context-sensitive peacebuilding practices. In doing so, it affirms the relevance of political science and religious studies not only as interpretive disciplines but also as essential contributors to addressing real-world challenges in conflict-affected and diverse societies.

Lacroix's concluding message—that understanding history, politics, and diversity is a practical foundation for peacebuilding—captures the core significance of his intervention. Peace, in this view, is not a technocratic project or a purely security-driven agenda, but a socially embedded process that requires intellectual rigor, ethical commitment, and contextual sensitivity. By foregrounding historical awareness, political inclusivity, and respect for plural identities, Lacroix offers a framework for peacebuilding that is both critical and constructive. In sum, the CEPASO 2025 seminar session led by Stéphane Lacroix contributes meaningfully to global discussions on peace in heterogeneous societies. It challenges dominant narratives, enriches comparative understanding, and provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners. Most importantly, it affirms that sustainable peace can only be achieved by addressing the deeper political and social structures that shape conflict, rather than by reducing complex realities to singular explanations.

Conclusion

Stéphane Lacroix's keynote at the CEPASO 2025 International Seminar offers a compelling reorientation of how religion, diversity, and conflict should be understood within peacebuilding discourse. By situating religious identities within historical trajectories, political structures, and patterns of external intervention, Lacroix convincingly demonstrates that violence in plural societies is not an inevitable outcome of diversity itself. Rather, conflict emerges when diversity is governed through exclusionary institutions, instrumentalized by political elites, or exacerbated by geopolitical rivalries. His focus on the inter-war period in the Middle East underscores how colonial legacies and fragile state-building processes continue to shape contemporary instability, reminding scholars and practitioners alike that present conflicts are deeply rooted in historical and structural conditions.

Beyond its regional specificity, Lacroix's analysis holds significant comparative value for other diverse societies, including Indonesia. His emphasis on inclusive governance, institutional fairness, and sustained inter-communal dialogue highlights practical pathways for managing diversity within democratic frameworks. Ultimately, the seminar reinforces the idea that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through security-centered or technocratic approaches alone. Instead, it requires historically informed, politically inclusive, and context-sensitive strategies that recognize plural identities as a resource rather than a threat. In this sense, Lacroix's contribution not only enriches academic debate but also provides meaningful guidance for policymakers and peace practitioners seeking to address the deeper social and political foundations of conflict in heterogeneous societies worldwide.

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