

Roundtable Report
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**Everyday Peace in conflict-affected societies in Lebanon, Syria, and Georgia:
Insights for research and practice**

Embassy of Finland in Beirut and Finnish Institute in the Middle East (FIME)



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Around twenty scholars and professionals gathered on Thursday 11th of May in Beirut for a roundtable discussion hosted by the Embassy of Finland in Beirut and the Finnish Institute in the Middle East under the title **Everyday Peace in conflict-affected societies in Lebanon, Syria, and Georgia: Insights for research and practice**. The objective of the roundtable was to engage in empirical and theoretical explorations of everyday peace and reflect on practices and conceptions of ‘ordinary’ people from various communities, to learn from each other, and to build bridges with and between local and international peacebuilding efforts.

Presentations by **Dima Smaira** (AUB), **Vadim Romashov** (Tampere Peace Research Institute), and **Armenak Tokmajyan** (Carnegie ME) examined processes of conflict mediation, security provision and everyday peace practices from below, critiquing dominant top-down approaches to peace and conflict resolution. Presenters argued that ordinary people are too often overlooked in peacebuilding efforts. They encouraged scholars and institutions engaged in peacebuilding to understand everyday peace as a grassroots process instead of a stable condition. They also highlighted the need to pay attention to long-standing but fluid and informal processes of mediation and reconciliation practices both on local community level and between communities and state institutions. The interventions by presenters were followed by a lively discussion that foregrounded entanglements of peace and security, as well as possible practical applications of the everyday peace approach.

The roundtable was opened by Ambassador **Anne Meskanen**. In her opening statement the Ambassador noted the importance of the roundtables’ focus on everyday lives and common people. She outlined that in peacebuilding efforts emphasis should be placed on not just academics and professionals but also ordinary citizens and students. In his opening statement, moderator **Ari Kerkkänen** highlighted that the panellists research is aligned and connected, although based on different research settings: urban Beirut and provincial towns and rural communities in Syria and Georgia. He stressed the importance of discussing the informal practices of peace and security vis-à-vis more traditional top-down approaches.

Ordinary people possess situational knowledge and can leverage complex local security assemblages to resolve low-level conflict situations, argued Dima Smaira based on her research on everyday peace in Beirut’s southern suburbs, or the Dahiyeh. She outlined her research on informal everyday mediation practices, asking who do citizens go to for everyday security. Utilizing an approach inspired by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, she explained how the situation in Beirut’s southern suburbs is more complex than mainstream narratives of the area as a ‘Hezbollah

Stronghold' suggest. Based on contextual and localized forms of symbolic and coercive capital, mediation in everyday situations is negotiated between local family-clans, the Hezbollah party, other local political parties, and state institutions such as the Internal Security Forces (ISF), municipal police and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Both restrained violence and negotiations managed through mediators are leveraged by the local population to gain access to everyday security provision, in a way that is highly context dependent. Depending on the type of the security incident, the location where the incident took place, and kinship and other social relations of the involved parties, everyday conflict mediation can take highly different forms in Beirut's southern suburbs.

In pre-revolutionary Syria local mediators played key roles in mitigating state violence against local communities, while simultaneously allowing state institutions access to these communities, explained Armenak Tokmajyan in his presentation. Such intermediaries, be they local sheikhs, wealthy merchants, mid-level bureaucrats or retired army officers stand between local communities and outside power such as the state. They facilitate local access to resources, protect local communities from outside power, and help the regime access communities where it does not necessarily hold strong legitimacy. In Syria informal relationships, such as family ties, between state officials and local intermediaries were central to such mediation. He described it as a "coffee and talking" approach. However, the uprising in 2011 witnessed a dual breakdown of these processes of mediation, as the state used exacerbated violence on local communities, which fuelled counter violence mainly from the youth. The increased levels of violence marginalized the local intermediaries and their ability to mitigate violence. Traditional intermediaries lost their standing between the state and communities, breaking down the established avenues of everyday conflict resolution and transformation.

Moving beyond local mediation in the countries of the Levant, Vadim Romashov turned in his presentation to discuss everyday peace and communal coexistence in South Caucasus. He noted that in established research communal peace is not a common notion, and its definitions are often too abstract. Romashov criticized how authorities and authoritarian rule are often emphasized in scholarship on everyday peace process in Central Eurasia, without discussing the peace agency of communities as such. The problem for peace researchers to tackle, according to him, is how to emphasize and understand the power of communities and their inherent capacity to peacebuilding, while accounting for the coexistence of multiple actors and perspectives in these communities. Building on his ethnographic research on rural communities in Georgia co-habited by ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani people, Romashov argued for the need to understand the interrelated intricacy of communal belonging and everyday peace-making. In these villages, the antagonistic

Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalist narratives co-exist, being deeply internalized by the respective inhabitants of village communities. Communal everyday peace, according to Romashov, consists of four key elements: communal narrative as the shared story of the community that helps neutralize internal conflicts; communal peace as the discourse of harmony inside the community; everyday peace as the everyday practices of living together with differences; and finally, communal ordering as the power of mutual accountability to the shared narrative of the community, discourse of peace, and practices of coexistence.

A lively debate emerged after the panellists' interventions, touching on both theoretical and practical issues of peace research and its applications. Discussed were possible comparisons between the research topics, how to apply the approach in situations such as that of public spaces in Beirut, and how to better account for gendered realities in conflict mediation. Intersections between peace and security were discussed at length, with some audience members questioning whether 'peace' is the proper term to use when analysing security provision in the context of authoritarian state or sub-state powers. It was widely agreed that dominant liberal approaches to peacebuilding are facing stagnation, and that a fresh perspective is needed; the starting point should be to ask everyday actors questions on security and communal peace. It was noted that it might still be early to say how this approach can help reconfigure wider peace-making processes.

Peace is not a fixed status, but a set of practices changing over time, the panellists asserted in common. Smaira noted that a central tension is whether funders and institutions interested in everyday peace should support locally powerful non-state actors in communal peace processes even if they engage in otherwise questionable activities. The tension according to her is one between efficacy and values. Tokmajyan continued that central authorities' power is intrinsically connected to local peace-making, and central authorities' weakness can lead to weaker local mediators as happened in Syria. Romashov concluded by noting that everyday peace scholarship endeavours to give voice to local communities and people, but they still operate in the context of global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. He argued that this tension has not been unravelled in the scholarship so far.

There was a unanimous understanding that these informal, community-level, reconciliation and mediation practices deserve further research not only for the sake of research per se but to better inform peace practitioners.