



Article

Religious Mediators Key to Resolving Global Conflicts

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Lessons from grassroots peacemakers to US Diplomats

The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding has recognized, supported, and enlisted the expertise of peacebuilders throughout the world since 1998 through its Peacemakers in Action program. During those years, Tanenbaum’s team has documented the work of peacebuilders through reports, interviews, and podcasts. In 2018 Joyce S. Dubensky (former CEO of the organization) and Clayton Maring distilled the lessons from the program in a policy brief titled, “[Strategically Engaging Religious Peacebuilders](#).” The report is divided into two sections. The first outlines areas where US diplomats can improve their understanding of religious peacemakers, and the other offers specific recommendations to improve this engagement.

Areas of Improvement:

While many in the diplomatic community institutionally recognize that individuals may influence U.S. foreign policy goals through the exercise of political, social,

cultural, and intellectual capital, few are well versed in recognizing individuals who exercise spiritual capital to foment social change that aligns with U.S. goals.

First, the report addresses the historical problem of religious illiteracy among the US diplomatic community—a concern of several specialists on religion and international affairs, including the [team of experts](#) who contributed to the Baker Institute’s [analysis](#) of US foreign policy intervention in the Middle East. Accordingly, the authors of Tanenbaum’s policy report pointed out the following obstacles to US diplomatic engagement with religious peacebuilders:



Source: Monstera Productions via Pexels.

1. **The US diplomatic community frequently overlooks the work of religiously motivated peacebuilders.** The US foreign policy establishment, the authors argue, has “a tendency to correlate value with roles of public leadership.” As Tanenbaum’s Peacemakers in Action Network proves, many religious leaders and activists who contribute to peacebuilding may not be officeholders or specifically ordained ministers in their religion.
2. **US diplomats wrongfully consider religious peacebuilding to be an “anomaly” and assume that secular actors are more dedicated to human welfare.** The authors of this report suggest that the US foreign policy establishment reconsider its negative bias towards religious actors and see the similarities between secular and religious efforts towards conflict resolution.
3. **Awareness of religion is not an “institutionalized component of diplomatic calculations.”** Dubensky and Maring urge US diplomats to formally recognize the

profound influence that religion plays for the majority of the world population.

4. **Negative cultural stereotypes about religious groups influence the US foreign policy establishment.** Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination negatively impact US diplomatic decision making.
5. **US diplomats' religious illiteracy impacts their effectiveness.** The report's authors cite the failures of the US diplomatic establishment to recognize religious diversity, how religion informs people's lives, and that the Western distinction between secularism and religiosity is not universal.

Recommendations:

In light of their critiques, Dubensky and Maring offer the following recommendations:

1. Congress should designate funds to the State Department to institutionalize religious competency.
2. The Foreign Service Institute should expand religious competency training for its officers.
3. The State Department should establish networks with religious and social actors that do peacebuilding and democratic work.

[Strategically-Engaging-Religious-PeacebuildersDownload](#)