

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN TRANSFORMING NUCLEAR CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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### ABSTRACT

The nuclear conflict between the US and Iran is one that is complicated to be resolved. Although the prevailing conflict has not reached the point of war, the political and social tensions precipitate concerns to the international security. Various stakeholders are involved, not only the government, but also the society as external parties in influencing the conflict. Therefore, this research centralises on examining interfaith dialogue as one of the approaches in efforts to transform the conflict through describing and analysing its process, role, and limitations in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran. Sample data are obtained through a literature study by collecting secondary data. This research draws on three examples of interfaith dialogue between the US and Iran upon examining the interfaith dialogue approach's process, role, and limitations examined through the Constructivist theory, which were conducted by (i) USCCB and the Society of the Seminary Teachers of Qom, (ii) MCC and IRCS with IKRI, and (iii) Washington National Cathedral with Former President Khatami. This research indicates that the roles of interfaith dialogue are to prevent the escalation of conflict escalation and to facilitate conflict transformation process. However, this approach still needs to overcome numerous limitations as conflicted parties still show no signs of subsiding. These limitations are rooted from the strong ideas and identities of the two countries and the process of the approach itself.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Peacebuilding, Nuclear Conflict, Religion, Identity.

### 1. Introduction

Religious actors are often associated in a conflict, regarded as stakeholders in attempts to address or resolve a conflict, such as through an interfaith dialogue. The United States of America (hereinafter, US) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter, Iran) embark upon multi-track peacebuilding through interfaith dialogue involving religious civil society groups and policymakers. Historically, both countries have a hefty influence on religious beliefs significantly embedded in their political and social culture (Pew Research Center, n.d.). Both countries have also been conducting religious exchanges, either individually with other countries or between one another, such as through local interfaith dialogue projects in promoting collective understanding,

mutual esteem, and kinship between American Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims for over the past decade (USCCB, 2016). Meanwhile, in Iran, the first project of the biennial inter-religious engagement took place in Tehran in 1994, with the topic of "Muslims and Christians Serving Humans Together" (IQNA, 2019).

In terms of formal diplomatic ties, their friendly relations ended after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and have had no formal diplomatic relations since then. However, the US and Iran have recognized the maneuver of interfaith dialogue as a peace-building tool between them. For instance, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) has completed four years (between 2003 and 2007) of the US-Iranian inter-religious delegation programs to preserve informal

channels for productive engagement with Iranians (ICRD, n.d.). After years of meetings, ICRD has stated that Iranians are much more comfortable discussing delicate issues with Americans in a religious context, generating a more substantive and respectful outcome despite their apparent religious culture differences (Smock, 2008).

In the present day, the US-Iran tension on nuclear use becomes the most heated issue between the two and still shows no sign of abating as both countries are engaged in nuclear enrichment programs, including power plants and weapons, and are subjects to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) verification. They seek to preserve their national security agenda by possessing nuclear weapons from the international perspective. However, the Western point of view seems to exert domination over the issue as the US government prevails to exert pressure on Iran as the US Department of Defense is accountable for placing Iran's ambitions at nuclear weapons development under the Pentagon's radar (Inside Washington, 2018).

Treaties and international deals have been signed. However, there have been no significant changes in the behavior of both countries in their agenda of a nuclear use. Although the role of the government is the most crucial in resolving the issue, there is a need to address the conflict at a societal level to transform the public perceptions and construct a sustainable peace between the two countries through a theological approach considering both countries' affiliations with religious stakeholders. This is where the approach of interfaith dialogue is put on the table in addressing the issue, such as the the US-Iranian Religious Leaders' Dialogue: The Relevance of Moral Questions Related to Nuclear Weapons, conducted by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in October 2014 in scrutinizing the fundamental moral questions regarding weapons of mass destruction between Americans and Iranians (Arms Control Association, 2015).

From the previous and current

attempts, the essence of interfaith dialogue is rather promising. However, the approach of interfaith dialogue is still profoundly questioned, especially in addressing high political conflict surrounding nuclear use. It is still a complex matter considering that conflict transformation does not generate direct output and promoting tolerance and mutual understanding over religious and cultural differences is impossible to attain overnight.

### **1.1. Research Questions**

According to the background of the topic, there are two (2) research questions that will be answered in this research:

1. How does the process of interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran transpire?
2. What are the roles and limitations of interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran?

### **1.2. Research Purposes and Objectives**

Following the research questions and the making of this research, this research aims to describe the process and roles of the interfaith dialogue and analyze its limitations in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran for peace-building process.

Considering the nature of this research in describing the practice, roles, and limitations of interfaith dialogue, it is expected to give significant insights on the use of interfaith dialogue as a supporting instrument for raising the moral questions of a nuclear use, preventing the escalation of conflict, and facilitating conflict transformation at a societal level.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section contains several pieces of literature on related topics surrounding the perspectives on religion and faith in policymaking, interfaith dialogue as a tool of peacebuilding, and the perception of nuclear use in the US and Iran.

### **2.1. The Influence of Religion and Faith in Policymaking**

Although there is a separation between religion and politics in the US, the influence of religion and faith is still prominent in a different approach, such as the influence and contributions of interest groups and lobbyists in swaying domestic and foreign policies in the US (Yamane and Oldmixon 2006, 433-460).

Meanwhile, there is a direct influence of religion in an Islamic country like Iran. The presence of religious authorities in the government is still prominent in today's Iranian political behavior. With the close relations with religious clerics, the current Iranian government, has high adherence to the Shia Muslim ideology. Hence, the government has carried a prominent identity of Islam in Iranian society, which is also reflected in its policymaking decisions.

In the scope of foreign policy, the role of religion has gained recognition over the past decades. The hypotheses regarding the role of religion in foreign policy act as the basis for which appropriate action to take according to religious beliefs (Warner and Walker 2011, 113-115). It comprises a triangle of concepts that are intertwined with each other; ideas, interests, and institutions. One may postulate that if religion is seen as a fundamental component of a state's identity and certain procedures are in place, governments are more likely to consider religion when forming foreign policy and determines power interactions between self and others. These identities can be traced back to religious foundations; in that case, it is reasonable to conclude that religion influences foreign policy by incubating and transmitting role identities that dictate foreign policy decisions.

The findings have identified that religious influence does not solely indicate state structures of domestic political interests and geopolitical forces but rather shapes the leadership and directing attitude towards policymaking in response to how salient a particular historical relationship might

become. Thus, these literature sources can assist in building an understanding of how religion and faith often find a way to influence policymaking through the leaders, interest groups, or gathering of religious and political elites, which exhibits the relevance of interfaith dialogue as one of the tools to influence policymaking.

### **2.2. Interfaith Dialogue as a Tool of Peacebuilding**

In the international community, interreligious dialogue assists humans to interact and accept each other's differences rather than make conflicts out of them (Burell 2008, 300-310). There are four significant interreligious dialogue concepts that the Vatican's Pontifical Council identified; the "dialogue of life," which refers to contacts at the level of daily life; the "dialogue of social engagement" to "promote the integral development and the liberation of people"; the "dialogue of theological exchange" between religious specialists; and the "dialogue of religious experience" in which believers share their spiritual traditions concerning prayer, meditation, contemplation, and ways for searching meaning in God (Scheffler 2007, 173-187).

The need for interfaith dialogue was perceptible due to the pattern of international conflict, as religion has motivated and legitimized some of the world's most militant and gruesome political struggles. It has become apparent with polarizing religious beliefs. Therefore, employing interfaith dialogue relies heavily on the thoughts for a constructive peace-building approach in gathering religious leaders to engage in a conversation. This is due to most state governments still showing a lack of cooperation in realizing the attempts made by the interfaith dialogue due to national interests and power struggles in collision with different religious faiths (Smock, 2002).

Therefore, from all the scholarly findings in this section, interfaith dialogue can be used as a peace-building tool to a certain extend. All the sources have

mentioned the lack of evidence and measurement of success from the outcome of interfaith dialogue in resolving a conflict or dispute beyond promoting and acknowledging different values. Hence, the measurement of effectiveness is still extremely vague for interpretations. Rather, interfaith dialogue serves as a supporting tool for gradually constructing perspectives on interfaith differences to prevent the escalation of current conflicts and the outbreak of similar issues in the future.

### **2.3. Perceptions of Nuclear Use in the United States and Iran**

There are two things to be acknowledged regarding nuclear use in the US and Iran: the American and Iranian perspectives on nuclear use and the international community's perception of nuclear use in each country. The US and Iran both perceived nuclear power as an asset of the state that ought to be preserved. As a nuclear power state (NWS), the US is still pursuing nuclear activities within its military means. The policy of "no first use," which is still relevant today, indicates their possession of nuclear weapons, preparing to launch at a given time if being attacked by other states' nuclear strike (Leber, et al. 1982, 1157-1170). However, the US claims that reports regarding its nuclear weapon possessions and activities are constantly reported to the IAEA and still within the bond of the NPT. For the US, Iran's nuclear use is a common threat for other Middle Eastern countries and Western society worldwide (Bahgat 2006, 307-327). Their covert activities and constant violations generate anxieties as a nuclear strike from Iran might happen at any time.

Meanwhile, Iran's geopolitical threat ignited its nuclear weapons development to protect itself without allies. The international society perceives the US to utilize nuclear power for two distinct aspects: energy sustainability and weapons (Seig 2008, 305-373). However, the public trust has leaned more towards the US as they believe that the state can be trusted with peaceful nuclear use

than Iran. On the other hand, despite starting its nuclear power plants for peaceful nuclear use purposes, the international community still perceives Iran's sole objective on its nuclear activities as for non-peaceful purposes (Gul 2012, 35-52).

There is a constructed perception of the international community, mainly created by the US allegations and perspective, that Iran's nuclear activities are more aggressive and that their existence is seen as a threat to international security, even though both the US and Iran are in possession of lethal nuclear weapons.

### **3. Research Method**

This research adopts a qualitative research approach with descriptive research method to describe the process of interfaith dialogue conducted by associated parties from between the US and Iran in addressing nuclear conflict. This research starts by describing the process of interfaith dialogue conducted by parties from the US and Iran. After finding the result of the process, this research proceeds to describe the role and limitations of the interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran. This step of the research method aims to analyze the relations of variables and how one influences the other.

Secondary data is collected through online platforms, such as internet browsing in search of academic journals, books, e-books in which research regarding the procurement of interfaith dialogue and nuclear conflict between the US and Iran has been studied, and reports from related institutions, such as research institutions and civil societies involved in conducting the interfaith dialogue addressing nuclear use. Narrative analysis technique is used to obtain the data through path dependency tool. Data on previous interfaith dialogue events were gathered to determine the chain of the events (Newman 2014, 497). The results from the interfaith dialogue events will be obtained and further analyzed towards describing the roles and limitation of the interfaith dialogue approach.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. The Process of Interfaith Dialogue in Addressing Nuclear Conflict Between the United States and Iran**

The three dialogues will serve as the main cases in analyzing the process, roles, and limitations of the interfaith dialogue effort in addressing nuclear conflict between the two countries for the following sections. The peace-building approach deployed through interfaith dialogue is through conflict transformation, as there is a critical prerequisite to building a shared understanding in transforming the public perceptions of two parties with opposing religious views prior to the emergence of the latent conflict. The nuclear conflict between the US and Iran becomes the pinnacle to this instance, considering that there is an element of religious discrepancy that contributes greatly to the dire state of value conflict that the government cannot tackle alone.

#### **4.1.1. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Supreme Council of the Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom**

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the dialogue was conducted with delegations from USCCB who travelled to Iran on October 29, 2014. This engagement of a religious and moral dialogue was hosted by a notable center of religious scholarship in Iran—the Supreme Council of the Seminary Teachers of Qom.

The dialogue itself included the discussion of the negotiation of Iran's nuclear program beyond the original July 20, 2014, target date. The topic of nuclear programs insecurity emerged subsequently to the acknowledgement of the IAEA's inspection of the Iranian nuclear activities, followed by the P5+1 working on the solutions and negotiations on the issue to reduce the Iranian capability of uranium enrichment programs for weapons. Considering the interstate measures on nuclear use, the speakers stated that the political portrayal on this issue would only create more fractures for more value

conflict to infiltrate the behaviour of states towards each other. Overall, the discussion was centralised on adopting the Second Vatican Council's aim in 1963 to seek a worldwide ban on nuclear weapons, with an effective system of mutual control to apply it on the US-Iran status quo on nuclear use following the Iran Nuclear Deal.

Points have been stated regarding the defect of the current system, such as political media discourse in the US that often demonizes Iran and its leaders driven by the identity given as the 'Axis of Evil' as part of its national lexicon. Not to mention, the religious leaders and scholars noted that terrorist attacks are more linked to Sunni extremists than to Shia Muslims; hence, they wondered why America and the West were closer to Arab governments that support many of these extremists in contrast to their discrimination against the Shia Muslims.

The discussion focused on questioning the morale of nuclear weapons from the American and Iranian perspectives. In Islam, according to Sharia law, there is a fatwa stated by Ayatollah Khamenei as believed by many Iranian Muslims; "The Islamic Republic of Iran regards the possession of nuclear weapons as a great sin, in terms of thought, theory and religious edict and also believes that holding such weapons is useless, costly and dangerous" (Chane, 2015). This is not something Ayatollah Khamenei invented; the fatwa has become the moral principle of the Shia Islam, profoundly rooted in the Shia jurisprudence.

In Qom, the event culminated in a joint declaration released on June 14, 2014. The declaration states that this dialogue is a commitment of the US Catholic and Iranian Shia Islam societies to serve humanity that transcends government and national boundaries and is determined to engage in continuous dialogue based on shared values (Republic Affairs Office, 2014). The dialogue between Catholics and Shia Muslims have rejected all forms of transgression and injustice and opposed any action that endangers the life, health, dignity, or welfare

of others, and admitted to promoting peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

A year later, an open letter was addressed to the US Senate and House of Representatives on July 24, 2015, responding to the signed Iranian Nuclear Deal by the UNSC and the P5+1 to signal a global nuclear non-proliferation after the negotiation of P5+1 and Iran regarding the peaceful use of nuclear power and endorse and foster a peaceful environment after reaching the agreement to maintain stability with Iran (USCCB, 2015). Furthermore, the statement acknowledges the legitimate nation's right of self-defense to protect its people against transgression and restore their rights through applying proportionate forces.

The context of understanding the fatwa emphasized the resemblance religious practice of both Islam and Catholicism, in which they highly adhere to the values of religious leaders for such issues as the Shia Muslims has their Ayatollah. Similarly, Catholics have faith within the Pope. There are strong shared practices and values in viewing a particular issue, especially one that disrupts the existence of humanity, which facilitates inter-religious tolerance in achieving a common goal, namely the peaceful idea of using nuclear force against weapons of mass destruction.

Although the dialogue received positive and mutual reactions from the discussants and audiences, both the USCCB and Qom Teachers Seminary did not have a follow-up dialogue after this conference, reflecting the government's indifferent actions towards nuclear use policies. Furthermore, the main speakers in Qom only consisted of the representatives from USCCB; hence, for future dialogues, with imbalance point of view from the Iranian representatives.

Moreover, the open letter released was addressed to the US Senate and House of Representatives. Consider the role of clerics within the Iranian legislature, emphasizing the results of a joint statement in the name of a fatwa will provide an opportunity to trigger the government to consider the results of the

joint statement in policymaking.

#### **4.1.2. Mennonite Central Committee and Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) with Iranian Red Crescent Society**

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is an independent relief, service, and peace agency representing the 15 Mennonite, Brethren Church in Christ Church, and Amish agencies in North America (MCC, n.d.). Meanwhile, IRCS is a non-governmental organization founded as the Red Lion and Sun Society in 1922 and has been involved in numerous public activities, including establishing maternity hospitals and clinics with free medical services, water supply, road construction, and army health centers (Martin 2012, 113-139).

For interfaith dialogue, MCC and IRCS have conducted seven series of dialogue conferences from 2002 to 2018. Over that period, ICRS has been facilitating MCC's connections with other Shia religious organizations in Iran, such as the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI). For this issue, the interfaith dialogue was held in Qom on May 24-27, 2009, with peace and justice—"Shia Muslim-Mennonite Christian Dialogue IV".

The dialogue commenced with presentations rooted in each theological understanding of peace and justice. The fourteen presentations clustered around three topics. The first three were conflict, peace, and security. Both communities hold opposing viewpoints on peace and conflict, with Muslims arguing that war is evil and Mennonites rethinking the justice implications of pacifism. The subjects of just war and the philosophical significance of peace were also discussed. The second point addressed how the Qur'an and the Bible influence the values of peace and justice held by their followers. The contribution of these scriptures to our understandings of peace and justice was given special emphasis. The third set of lessons looked at fundamental concepts relevant to both spiritual systems. Traditions

emerge in all religions, and express rituals and customs that give the faith substance.

From the three discussion clusters, peaceful nuclear use becomes the center of the panel. The dialogue highlights the dangerous aspects of a non-peaceful nuclear use, considering both countries' nuclear ambitions imperative. The Mennonite Christians perceive the use of nuclear weapons as it is regarded as "a sin against God and a degradation of man". Nuclear weapons are a threat to humanity if they exist. Meanwhile, Iranian Muslims still believe by the fatwa that nuclear use should not result in the development of nuclear weapons at any cost. However, they were referring to the first use of nuclear weapons. The Mennonite representatives highlighted the biblical perspectives to centralize Jesus' teachings and practices as a foundation for peace and justice advocacy. Meanwhile, the Shia presentations looked at the Qur'an's relationship between justice and peace, war and jihad, divine mercy, and the nature of the international political order.

Unlike the previous dialogue, this event is the least prominent among the three, with only limited publications available for the public. This dialogue does not have tangible results, such as a joint declaration or letter. Although there has been no official follow-up surrounding the nuclear use debate, the sustainable programs of MCC and ICRS are still based on the same goal, bringing the values of peace and justice taken from the results of the interfaith dialogue.

Both Mennonites and Shias are minority representatives from Christians and Muslims with experiences of oppression in the past; hence, the idea of peace and justice is rooted in their identity to shape their worldview and have a sense of resemblance to building solidarity with each other. Both parties agreed that humans should not make any judgements of injustice and conflict as God's peace and justice does not ground them.

Furthermore, they have also addressed the differences in their theological language and acknowledged significant

differences as part of the main agenda of the dialogue. It takes the logic of convictions that differences should be embraced and respected than become the pivot of conflict. There is a strong foundation of a mutual understanding in viewing peace and justice from the perspectives of the US Mennonite Christians and Iranian Shia Muslims. Endangering the lives of fellow living beings is considered a form of violation of justice and peace that humans create that is not in harmony with God's will and teachings. Although this dialogue has received positive responses from parties in both countries, there are still no significant results in reducing tension. The main goal of this dialogue in minimizing the latent value conflict still exhibits rather slow progress from grassroots levels than to be directly transmitted to the government.

Despite having no follow-up of the dialogue, MCC continues to put the US-Iranian relations under MCC's Peace Programs. They continue to strive as a bridge of peace for the US, Canada, and Iran, especially for peace-building, to build understanding in Iran through making frequent visits to Iran and extend further connections with people perceived as enemies through grassroots peacebuilding.

#### **4.1.3. Washington National Cathedral and Former President Khatami**

In September 2006, they hosted Former President Mohammad Khatami (upon Khatami's request) for a lecture on interfaith dialogue and the role of religion in creating peace among human beings.



Figure 4.1.2.2 Former President Khatami's Visit to the Washington National Cathedral

The main dialogue was held in the Cathedral; however, Khatami also spoke at the University of Virginia after he visited the Church. Mohammad Khatami served as the President of Iran from 1997-2005 and initiated the "dialogue among civilizations" during the United Nations General Assembly in 1998 to promote diplomatic strategy in lieu of an aggressive policy approach between the West and the Islamic East (Inbar 2006, 95).

In holding the dialogue, Khatami initiated the discussion regarding the long-tainted relationship between the US and Iran, emphasising the virtue of inter-religious dialogue rather than threats and violence. Khatami stated that the given political and religious identity poses a powerful barrier in realising an official talk between the US and Iran. He has emphasised that at this point, the language of hard power should be terminated, referring to the US and UN sanctions on Iranian nuclear programs (National Cathedral 2006). Furthermore, he commenced the session by revealing the importance of longing for peace and security amid religious differences – as demonstrated by the prophets through both religious teachings:

"Jesus is the prophet of kindness and peace. Muhammad is the prophet of ethics, morality, and grace. Moses is the prophet of dialogue and exchange." It's good at the present time, where war, violence and repression are so prevalent across the world, for all of us who are followers of God's religion to pursue all efforts for the establishment of peace and security."

On the contrary to the two previous interfaith dialogues in this section, there was a limited engagement between the speakers and the audience since the two-way discussion centralized on Khatami's answers. The dialogue was attended by then representatives from the Washington National Cathedral, including Episcopal Bishop of Washington. From his visit, questions regarding the Iranian nuclear

program were raised that started during his presidency; Khatami pointed out that the program was for peaceful civilian purposes. Moreover, the hard sanctions have generated more fear and insecurity for both countries in developing nuclear weapons from the Iranian perspective. In his presentation, Khatami emphasized that:

"Up to the present time, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) has not found any evidence that Iran has pursued a non-peaceful nuclear programme. But on the contrary, three states in our region possess nuclear weapons. At least there are 200 nuclear warheads in Israel, and fewer than those exist in India and Pakistan. None of these is members of the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty), and one of them is under any safeguard."

At the University of Virginia, Khatami also conducted an open dialogue with students, scholars, and academicians. The dialogue was in the form of a lecture than a formal negotiation process. Khatami reminded the audience of his ideology, which he meticulously applied during his presidency: how major religions, particularly Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, may assist mankind in solving modern issues and challenges by returning to their vital, lively, and shared essence.

Overall, Khatami's visit to Washington was imitated in response to the nuclear sanctions from the UN Security Council joined Germany (P5+1) and after the US is pressing for new international sanctions on Tehran over its nuclear program. The US' response to the focus of Iran's nuclear program has overshadowed the human rights violations perpetrated by its oppressive regime.

This dialogue is one of the most talked-about dialogues between the US and Iran and internationally. The visit was rather an unprecedented occasion to the Cathedral,



with President Khatami as the spotlight with the most publications and coverage from the media compared to the two dialogues above. Through President Khatami, the concept of "dialogue of civilizations" was re-expressed in this dialogue which emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue to build mutual understanding, compassion, and empathy among different civilizations, as well as being a means of overcoming conflicts and building relations between countries by addressing differences in religion, ethnicity, and culture.

From his prominent idea, President Khatami conveyed that there are indeed differences and imbalances between the West and East things such as ideology, culture, and religion so that they are more prone to conflict. Therefore, in this dialogue, it is expected that the idea of "dialogue of civilizations" can be the basis of ideas for addressing the issue of a nuclear conflict between the US and Iran and producing long-term peace.

Despite having a promising discussion for long-term relations between the US and Iran, unlike the previous two dialogues, the dialogue initiated by President Khatami received immediate responses with a more pessimistic attitude by the US Congress and citizens. In this case, several US politicians and Jewish rights groups protested and criticized the government and the Cathedral for easily granting visitation visas to the former Iranian leader, stating that they are a threat to the country and excessively focused on Iranian nuclear activities while their human rights violations and the perpetuation of an oppressive regime of Iran seems to be overlooked (Wright, 2006). Furthermore, there were protests outside the Cathedral and the University delivering messages to Iran in support of victims of the Iranian government while posting a photo of Reza Pahlevi toppled with the 1979 Revolution.

From the three dialogues, the process of interfaith dialogue can be outlined. Generally, the process of an interfaith

dialogue does not require any formal decorum, unlike a formal UN Assembly or a legal proceeding commenced by the International Court of Justice. It can be in a form of a seminar, centralized on the key speakers followed by a Q&A session, or a workshop involving participants to discuss a specific topic. There are no requirements to involve high-level actors or speakers from the government or intergovernmental level, as the objective of the interfaith dialogue rooted from addressing the issue at a societal level.

From the three examples, only two interfaith dialogues, which are the dialogue conducted by the USCCB and Seminary Teachers Society of Qom and Former President Khatami's visit, explicitly addressed the issue of nuclear conflict as their main topic. Meanwhile, the dialogue by MCC and IKERI facilitated by IRCS did not centralize their discussion on nuclear conflict, rather, it is packaged under the topic of peace and justice upon discussing their nuclear conflict. This is due to their connection with the government; the USCCB is the largest Catholic episcopal church conference in the US and has maintained benevolent ties with the state, meanwhile, President Khatami still maintains a close relation with the Iranian government despite the end of his administration. Meanwhile, MCC and IKERI do not have the direct connections with neither government, which discouraged them to clearly expressed nuclear conflict as the center of the discussion. Moreover, this also explains the reason why only limited dialogues were able to attain tangible results, such as a joint declaration or open letter to the government, which will be discussed further in the next section of this thesis.

Lastly, the result of an interfaith dialogue cannot be attained at a short period, as seen by the three dialogues. Only the dialogue conducted by the USCCB, and Seminary Teachers Society of Qom released tangible results. Meanwhile, the two other dialogues produced non-tangible results in promoting the idea of shared understanding to fight against the use of nuclear weapons

despite their differences. However, this does not mean that the approach is insignificant. It indicates their small contribution in assisting the government to accommodate the public perceptions on nuclear use and to extend the desire of the public to build friendly relations between the two countries.

## 4.2. The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Addressing Nuclear Conflict Between the United States and Iran

### 4.2.1. Prevent the Escalation of Conflict

The US-Iranian nuclear conflict is considered a latent conflict where outbreaks of violence have not resurfaced. Yet, the apparent tension greatly affects the behavior of both states when interacting. Conflict discourses are embedded in everyday reality's normative and discursive structure, drawing on and reflecting the cultural and historical context in which actors operate (Jackson 2009, 172-180). A social construction on identity produces the 'other' identity with 'other' goals and interests, hence, stirs up the engagement of conflict against them. Actors with intersubjective understandings interact with one another as they aim for different goals and viewpoints on certain issues concerning their identities.

The dire state of value conflict has brought special attention to religious leaders worldwide, especially because of the prolonged religious and cultural sentiments infiltrated through the concern surrounding nuclear weapons. Hence, the approach of an interfaith dialogue considers the issue's urgency by examining the nature of the conflict. From Galtung's ideas on conflict and violence, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse have constructed the "hourglass model of conflict resolution" to visualise the escalation and de-escalation of an ongoing conflict by interconnecting them with the suitable conflict resolution responses (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall 2011, 12).

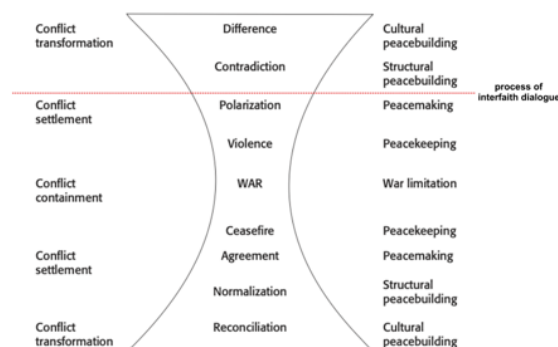


Figure 4.2.1.1 Hourglass Model of Conflict Resolution for Interfaith Dialogue Process

Analyzing from the structure of tension in the US and Iran, the nuclear conflict is still at the earlier stage, which is at the upper half of the model; from acknowledging the differences and facing contradictions in their differences.

From the descriptions above, the first role of interfaith dialogue is to bring back the public trust through a theological perspective to prevent the polarization stage from reaching a violent state. The prevention of war for the US-Iranian nuclear conflict through an interfaith dialogue adopts the "deep prevention," which builds domestic, regional, or international capacity to manage conflict (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall 2011, 17). As the conflict of nuclear use is based on different ideas and perceptions of power; it is still difficult to achieve the abolishment of nuclear weapons for these two countries because of their separate agendas that are difficult to breed. Therefore, the interfaith dialogue facilitates the prevention of violent conflict by adapting two ways; changing human nature and reducing the prevalence of the belief that resorting to arms is a legitimate function of the state.

Firstly, changing human nature, in this case, is an attempt to change the perspective of society in thinking that differences in culture and religion are the reasons for developing nuclear weapons and providing violence and coercive sanctions. With the development of many dialogues that raise this specific topic, especially if

represented by religious figures, more awareness is shown in the community, especially in countries that greatly influence religious teachings, thus affecting the public way of thinking in tackling religious differences.

Through an interfaith dialogue, acknowledging each identity and intention assist in building the shared ideas and mutual value of peace amongst differences and standing against the development of nuclear weapons. Thus, the result from the interfaith dialogue meetings acts as a foundational approach towards constructing a mutual agreement for the nuclear conflict than to burst sanctions towards prejudiced Iran to minimize the demonization of the other.

Secondly, another measure for deep prevention adopted by an interfaith dialogue is to reduce the prevalence of using arms and weapons of mass destruction. In any religion, any threats to disrupt the existence of humanity are highly condemned; hence, the development and use of nuclear weapons should not always be considered and should not be regarded as a resort. As discussed by the USCCB and the Seminary Teachers of Qom, the understanding of the destructive nature of nuclear weapons against humanity depicted between Shia Islam and Catholicism.

Through emphasizing shared values on this issue, the dialogue insisted on the religious and moral context in which Iranian leaders and the Iranian people will be making decisions about their nuclear program and their future role in international affairs and the decisions made by the US on their nuclear programs that are often stimulated into a contest of power in advertising its ideological and cultural assets to the world.

#### 4.2.2. Facilitate Conflict Transformation

Assessing how the two states view each other, the assumptions towards one's identity and ideas must be addressed thoroughly. However, it is rather challenging to pursue national-scale peace-making to gain immediate results from the government. Therefore, cultural and structural

peacebuilding are addressed at a societal level through conflict transformation by interfaith dialogue. Observing from the relationship between the US and Iran, there is an attitude of discrimination from both perspectives that transcended into a brewing conflict, not full-fledged violent conflict as a latent conflict (Galtung, 1996). The perception of individuals carrying the same identity is internalized as a societal phenomenon.

From the hourglass model, the current nuclear conflict has passed difference and contradiction stages, which requires conflict transformation as the conflict response. Interfaith dialogue becomes a supporting agent for conflict transformation, through promote peace by integrating faiths and reciprocal understanding, acceptance, and tolerance among disparate religious groups prone to violent conflicts. Analyzing from the results of the interfaith dialogues conducted above, it is apparent that the implied results lead to a long-term goal that raises the issue of sustainable peace regarding the use of nuclear weapons and reviving relations between the US and Iran.

Stage of conflict	Strategic response	Examples of tactical response (skills and processes)
Difference	Cultural peacebuilding	Problem-solving Support for indigenous dispute resolution institutions and CR training Fact finding missions and peace commissions
Contradiction	Structural peacebuilding	Development assistance Civil society development Governance training and institution building Human rights training Track II mediation and problem-solving
Polarization	Elite peacemaking	Special envoys and official mediation Negotiation Coercive diplomacy Preventive peacekeeping
Violence	Peacekeeping	Interposition Crisis management and containment
War	War limitation	Peace enforcement Peace support and stabilization
Ceasefire	Peacekeeping	Preventive peacekeeping Disarmament and security sector reform Confidence building and security enhancing measures Security in the community through police training
Agreement	Elite peacemaking	Electoral and constitutional reform Power sharing and de-centralization of power Problem-solving
Normalization	Structural peacebuilding	Collective security and cooperation arrangements Economic resource cooperation and development Alternative defence
Reconciliation	Cultural peacebuilding	Commissions of enquiry/truth and justice commissions Peace media development Peace and conflict awareness education and training Cultural exchanges and initiatives, sport as reconciliation Problem-solving as future imaging

Figure 4.2.2.1 Conflict Resolution techniques, complementarity, and the hourglass model by Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall

From this stage of the conflict, differences and contradictions are addressed through two strategic responses as part of the conflict transformation response as forms of

peace-building activity, which are, cultural and structural peacebuilding. Interfaith dialogue for cultural peacebuilding aims to transform the perceptions of actors, namely the US and Iranian society, in viewing the conflict (Askandar 2021, 17-18).

Through conflict transformation, changing the attitudes towards each religious group will have a long-term impact in reducing conflicts and eventually make a special basis for promoting the peaceful use of nuclear power in each country than to perceive their nuclear activities as driver for conflict.

Furthermore, structural peacebuilding is also attained through transforming the relationship structure of the actors. From the encounter of Mennonite Christians and Shia Muslims, there is a mutual understanding upon friendship—the model of friendship, common understanding, while perhaps a by-product of the encounter, is nevertheless not the primary driver, especially not if by "understanding" is meant agreement. The driver here is the process itself; truth arises out of the encounter in ways we do not control (Huebner 2016, 47-53). Interfaith dialogue is expected to be a place to transform the public perceptions from the grassroots and bottom-up levels through people-to-people understanding since it allows them to instill ideas sustainably to the public that can overcome conflict resolution at its root.

It is evidently challenging to completely shift their ideas on perceiving political security based on their given identities, hence, through conflict transformation, the clashes in ideas are addressed and acknowledged through far from the political environment. That way, interfaith dialogue aims to put aside the political interests, rather enhances efforts for cooperation based on a theological construction to acknowledge, the common values on peace that both religious groups have professed. From this understanding, the relationship between the two countries can be repaired through a societal level first in

slowly changing the public perceptions on how they view one's identity.

Although the nuclear conflict between the US and Iran still requires a high negotiation resolution, the role of the society should not be neglected in transforming the conflict as this research aims to emphasize. Thus, it is also important to include the Iranian society in this context, not only to change the public perceptions, but also as future policymakers. Moreover, Interfaith dialogue could contribute to a shift in the frame of mind or mood at a societal level, given that, in the end, it is the people of the United States and Iran who must be viewed as key policy stakeholders in the two countries' nuclear conflict. The role of the society is pivotal as stakeholders to influence the conflict and to maintain a long-lasting peace between the US and Iranian communities.

#### **4.3. Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue in Addressing Nuclear Conflict in the United States and Iran**

From the three cases, it is apparent that the approach of interfaith dialogue in addressing nuclear conflict between the US and Iran still carries limitations. It is challenging to generate the measurements of success even with the acknowledgment of tangible and non-tangible results. Hence, four limitations of the interfaith dialogue approach are found in this research.

##### **4.3.1. Requires a Lengthy Process to Achieve Results**

This limitation indicates the process of interfaith dialogue as a peace-building tool that requires a relatively long period to see the results. Compared to government policies and law enforcement, the interfaith process a prolonged time to transform the attitudes of both religious groups due to the long engagement of conflict involving parties with contradicting religious backgrounds and understandings. It is more complicated to resolve value conflicts thoroughly than with tangible root causes that trigger competition

between actors.

From its nature, this approach refers to a supporting tool of conflict resolution to harmonize the relationship between the conflicting parties. Building trust and understanding from a long-standing value conflict is not a one-time solution. This factor reflects the conflict resolution process, which states that constructing the way of thinking and altering perceptions and attitudes requires a long and constant period. In this case, the case of conducting an interfaith dialogue must be done repeatedly following the concept of conflict transformation.

From the three cases of interfaith dialogues above, no concrete results of success or failure were obtained. One of the main limiting factors is the absence of follow-up dialogues. For instance, the dialogue held by USCCB and Qom Seminary Teachers, neither representative have initiated another dialogue from 2015 to 2021 to observe the dynamics of the conflict and attain acknowledgment from targeted policymakers. There were also no follow-up statements or letters addressed to neither government.

#### **4.3.2. Requires Prominent Figures or Institutions**

This limitation depicts another critic of a bottom-up conflict resolution process, which does not involve more vital actors to influence policymaking. For example, the USCCB has an office of government relations that represents the USCCB in front of the US Congress with each congressional liaison staff person is allocated a specific set of topics (USCCB 2021). Furthermore, the government is also a significant contributor to USCCB's portion of revenue through grants earmarked for programs to assist humanitarian services, such as to refugees and migrants under the Department of Health and Human Services. As of 2019, those grants totaled \$52.7M in revenue and must be directed to provide those services through annual reports (USCCB, n.d.). Hence, USCCB has a strong affiliation with the US

government, which explains its greater leverage to send open letters and get responses from the government than most religious institutions in the US.

Another example derived from the dialogue initiated by President Khatami at Washington National Cathedral as the most prominent visit of the former Iranian president to the US. There was a relatively high media exposure; they also received direct responses from the US, Iranian government, and the international community. Moreover, President Khatami's role in the dialogue also reflects the need for a prominent figure. He is a well-qualified speaker to discuss the nuclear conflict and US-Iran overall relations from the Iranian perspective. Although the event received negative backlashes from the US government and societies, it reflects how the interfaith dialogue has captured the public attention and received immediate responses from the government. Due to Khatami's visit, another Iranian leader has determined to bring the Iranian perspective on nuclear activities to the international stage. On September 24, 2013, Iran's then-president, Hassan Rohani, addressed the UN General Assembly stated that exchanges between the people of the two countries to convey their view on the recent sanctions are essential.

However, not all religious institutions have favorable government relations or have representatives of prominent figures. An example from this research would be the dialogue between MCC and IKERI. They do not have a direct affiliation with the government, which hinders the benefit of acknowledgment. While the USCCB has more room to disclose its message directly to the government, the MCC has little leverage to convey its results. Moreover, MCC has less prominent figures to be recognized by the public, which is less dominant to capture mass attention. Hence, the smaller-scale dialogues have less prominence that hinders the expansion of government and public awareness of their peace-building efforts.

### **4.3.3. Misused to Pursue Political Agenda**

The third limitation focuses on how interfaith dialogue is often misused as an arena for conveying a political agenda. The nature of the interfaith dialogue is relatively flexible, with little restrictions on the event procedure and actors involved. Therefore, representatives from neither religious group are welcomed to be involved in the dialogue—from religious leaders to scholars and academicians. It is relatively common for these religious leaders or representatives to be involved in political affairs. Considering the conflict on nuclear use, the involvement of religion in both the US and Iranian governments is not an uncommon matter to be disclosed. With the nature of interfaith dialogue, any speakers are most likely to become the initiator of the dialogue. Therefore, political actors are often regarded as the key speakers, defeating the purpose of interfaith dialogue.

The limitation mentioned above can be perceived through the third interfaith dialogue event held in the Washington National Cathedral with Former President Khatami. Despite the claimed purpose of dialogue and encouragement of peaceful resolution to conflicts, the visit was all about symbolism as far as the media is concerned. Mr. Khatami's influence inside Iran is still considerable, despite having no formal power as he still maintains constant relationships with many in the clergy and many policymakers, which put the whole perspectives of the interfaith dialogue into a different agenda.

For many US government representatives, his visit was expected to make a new revelation about Iran's nuclear policy and its tense relationship with the US or convey a covert message from his successors. Moreover, many hardliners in Tehran were outspoken in their opposition to the trip. Still, some in the US political establishment and some in the media claimed that Mr. Khatami's trip was Iranian "propaganda" or that it was planned by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to

present a soft image of Iran at the right time.

Through the observations of responses, the essence of conducting an interfaith dialogue is tainted due to the involvement of a former president. It can be seen from the responses from the public; this interfaith dialogue aims to resurface the distrust and apprehension between the two parties due to the political implications in the dialogue. In this case, there is a dilemma where interfaith dialogue does require prominent figures to get more acknowledgment, but from the other side, including a prominent figure, such as from government, can become an obstacle to the interfaith dialogue process as a means of peacebuilding.

### **4.3.4. Lack of Peace Journalism**

Typically, a violent conflict generates a bias towards the violent groups and focuses on the conventions indicating general biases towards the violent groups, focuses on physical effects of the conflict while ignoring the psychological impacts, and generating a bias towards other parties or specific group of people involved based on what is perceived in the media.

Furthermore, the media often has biased towards reporting only to the differences and clashes of parties, rather than the similarities, agreements, and the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding or the progress of the issue and portraying that the conflict can be resolved when there is a defeat from another party. Thus, the purpose of peace journalism is to accommodate the gaps of a conflict resolution process that are only half-revealed to the public to overcome the bias of violence upon discussing conflicts.

Reporting on ongoing sociopolitical processes of cooperation, harmony, conflict transformation, or trauma conciliation—or as angles to look for additional subjects worth reporting on (Galtung 2015, 321-333). In the US exceptionally, peace journalism has not adequately accommodated the publicity of conflicts. The media's focus has always been the cautions for violence by Iran,

continuously portrays the other as enemies to exacerbate conflicts, thoughts on conflict resolution are focused on defeating the enemy.

The lack of peace journalism can be explained through the exposure of interfaith dialogue. From the three dialogues above, the media exposure on the information for the conduct is still at the bare minimum. As previously mentioned, the dialogue with President Khatami received the highest exposure due to his presence and prominence. However, the media does not always focus on the interfaith engagement itself, rather the reactions towards the visit. Meanwhile, the two other interfaith dialogues did not receive as many publicities. For instance, there has been highly minimum coverage on its existence in the interfaith engagement MCC and IRCS. Considering this factor above, the essential part is still missing—the therapy, the cure, or what to do about the identified underlying economic, political, or cultural contradictions. Reporting "peace" instead of focusing on "violence" hence, becomes one of the underlying factors that hinder the acknowledgment of interfaith dialogue as a process of peace-building that should be regarded within the society, especially for a more significant issue such as the US-Iranian nuclear conflict.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is indeed a need for interfaith dialogue in addressing the nuclear conflict between the US and Iran. This approach is acknowledged as a peace-

building tool through conflict transformation approach. From the three examples, the current roles of interfaith dialogue have not imitated significant changes to the conflict compared to other approaches, such as high-level negotiations in minimizing the development of nuclear weapons in the US and Iran as the tension between them exhibits no signs of abating. Nevertheless, these circumstances do not indicate that the efforts of interfaith dialogues in this conflict have failed. The role of interfaith dialogue in this case is not to resolve the conflict, instead, it aims to transform the relationship between US-Iranian societies and the conflict itself from a societal level that the government cannot tackle alone.

It is still important to address the nuclear conflict at a societal level as efforts to transform the attitudes of the non-governmental stakeholders. The society, both from the US and Iran, is also an important stakeholder in this conflict that is still often overlooked. Hence, their presence also influences the future of the conflict as potential policymakers and external parties to restore the relations between the two countries at a grassroot level. Thus, the contribution of interfaith dialogue generates tiny results in addressing the conflict through conflict transformation, nevertheless, it does not mean that the approach is insignificant. All matters concerning the issue of value conflict, differences in religious identities, and ways of thinking cannot be resolved in a short period.

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