

IDENTITY POLITICS AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES

This is the summary of the public event held on 10 July 2026.

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On 10 July 2026, the European Institute and Contemporary Turkish Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, as well as the Department of Land Economy at the University of Cambridge, jointly organised a workshop on the Political Economy of Türkiye. The event featured a keynote lecture, "Identity politics and intergroup relations in post-conflict societies", delivered by Professor **Melani Cammett**, Clarence Dillon Professor of International Affairs in the Department of Government and Director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.

Professor **Yaprak Gürsoy**, Chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, chaired the event.

Drawing on findings from her ongoing book project examining how societies rebuild intergroup relations after violent conflict, Cammett traced the origins of the project to her teaching on ethnic and religious violence in the Middle East, where the closing unit of her course asks why people kill each other in the name of ethnicity and religion — and, inevitably, how such violence stops. Reflecting on the persistence of divisions she had observed firsthand, including Belfast's peace walls and open sectarian partisanship in Lebanon, she noted a broader imbalance in the field: social science understands far more about how intergroup divisions escalate than about how they are brought down.

Research Motivation and the Turn to Elites

Cammett situated her project within the context of CDA Collaborative Learning Project's four-part framework for peace-building programming, which distinguishes interventions along two axes: mass publics versus elites, and micro-level attitude change versus structural change. She observed that the most methodologically rigorous social science has clustered heavily around micro-level, mass-public interventions, prejudice reduction, inter-group contact, and trust-building exercises of the kind associated with the Allport contact hypothesis. Yet meta-analyses, along with her own conversations with practitioners at NGOs and international organisations, suggest these interventions yield limited traction specifically on ethnic and religious divisions, constrained by selection effects (participants tend to be already open to intergroup contact) and by the non-durability of effects once people return to segregated communities.

She noted the distinction, drawn from work by Elizabeth Paluck, between attitudes, which tend to be highly sticky. She perceived social norms, which can be shifted more readily even when underlying prejudice remains unchanged. Given the scale of resources devoted to this kind of programming relative to its apparent returns, she suggested a cost-benefit reassessment was warranted while stressing she did not mean to dismiss this research tradition, given the scale of the problem, but rather to argue for complementary approaches. This diagnosis motivated her pivot toward what the CDA framework calls "key people," local and national elites who tangibly set the parameters within which ordinary people navigate intergroup life.

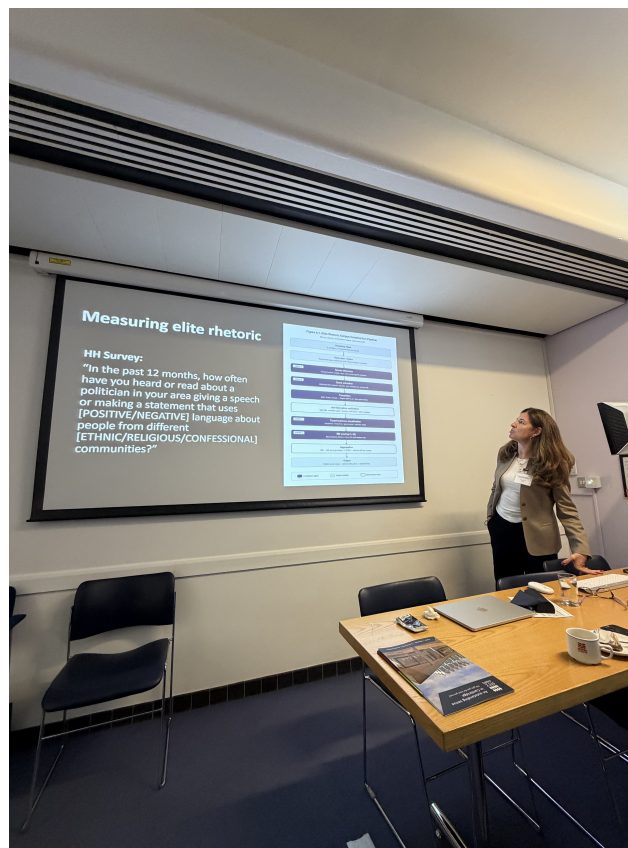
She noted that elites have not been neglected by social science generally (citing the "ethnic entrepreneur" literature), but that this attention has concentrated on how conflict escalates rather than on the post-conflict period, leaving a comparative gap she sought to fill.

Case Selection and Multi-Method Research Design

The project centres on three post-conflict cases, Bosnia, Lebanon, and Northern Ireland — chosen because their violent conflicts ended decades ago, allowing long-run patterns of intergroup relations to be traced under conditions of formally ended civil war violence, rather than more recent or ongoing conflicts such as Syria. The cases share variants of power-sharing institutions while differing importantly in geopolitical positioning, economic development, and political context variation, proving more analytically consequential than she had anticipated at the outset.

Her research design combined roughly six years of qualitative fieldwork interviews with international and local NGO staff, politicians, municipal-level notables, local religious authorities, businesspeople, and civil society activists, which she hand-coded herself before cross-checking the coding against an independent large language model analysis; she reported that, without prompting the model toward particular themes, its identification of key factors matched her own coding closely. This qualitative stage was followed by household surveys of 3,000 respondents each in Bosnia and Lebanon, drawn from 30 municipalities randomly selected and stratified by wartime violence and contemporary diversity, with roughly 100 households sampled per municipality to allow reliable estimates of average patterns of intergroup relations. In addition, she conducted a parallel house survey in Greater Belfast for about 1,500 households. This was supplemented with embedded survey experiments, LLM-assisted coding of elite rhetoric, and municipal-level administrative datasets capturing relevant covariates. Two factors emerged consistently from the initial qualitative work as central to shaping

intergroup outcomes: the behaviour of local and national political elites, and the legacy of violence, the latter consistent with evidence alongside a secondary role for local diversity, consistent with contact hypothesis logic.



Conceptualizing Intergroup Relations as Multi-Dimensional

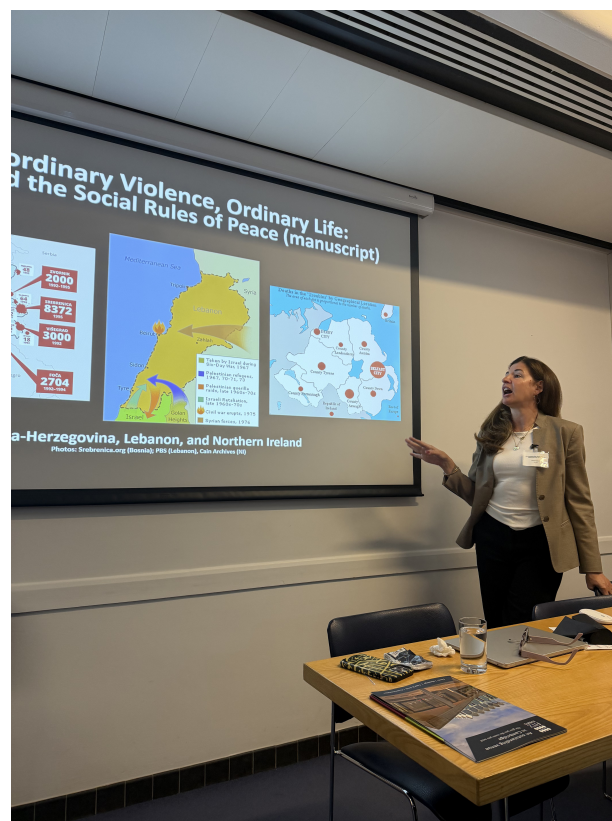
A central argument of the lecture was that intergroup relations should not be treated as a single, undifferentiated concept, since it is inherently multidimensional and the concept is defined and measured, which shapes the conclusions researchers draw. Cammett proposed disaggregating it into economic interaction (cross-group shopping, geographically constrained though it is, and co-investment by business elites, drawing on themes from Ashutosh Varshney's work on ethnic politics), social attitudes and behaviour (acquaintanceship, friendship, workplace contact) and political openness (willingness to vote for an out-group party not aligned with one's own community, carefully distinguished from voting for an out-group party in alliance with one's own community).

Survey data across the three cases, scaled zero to one, showed a consistent pattern: economic interaction reported as highest and easiest to rebuild after conflict, social interaction more variable (measured partly through a novel indicator based on respondents' most recent phone contacts), and political openness consistently the lowest and hardest to shift. Northern Ireland reported the highest levels of intergroup interaction across all three dimensions, a finding Cammett noted often surprises Northern Irish interlocutors who perceive their own society as deeply divided; she has told them, only half-joking, that they would feel better after visiting Bosnia or Lebanon. She noted clear evidence of social desirability bias, confirmed through a list experiment on comfort with out-group neighbours, particularly pronounced in Lebanon and Bosnia and less so in Northern Ireland. Rather than concentrating peace-building efforts on the hardest reconciliation outcomes prejudice reduction, inter-group trust, acknowledgment of in-group responsibility for violence, all of which she measures directly

in her surveys she argued for prioritising the more mundane, easier-to-shift economic and social domains first, on the premise that trust might accumulate from there, though she acknowledged this sequencing argument remains a hypothesis for future research rather than something she has directly tested.

Mechanisms of Elite Influence

Drawing on her interview data, Cammett outlined several distinct channels through which elites shape intergroup relations on the ground, framed around whether elites have direct influence, activate emotions, shape social norms, or exert material leverage. The first is signalling: in Beirut, for instance, communities reportedly wait for political leaders to indicate whether conflict or de-escalation is the order of the day, with elites capable of both activating and later defusing tensions through informal local agreements. The second is a politician in Belfast who told her that cooperation among parties at the top opens space for communities to come together, while its absence raises local tensions, particularly around elections, bonfires, and marching season (a dynamic she noted she would soon observe firsthand on a planned visit to Belfast around 11–13 July). The third is material and patronage leverage: in Lebanon, sectarian parties broker access to loans, grants, healthcare, and schooling that the state does not adequately provide directly; in Bosnia, thanks to the legacy of socialism, the equivalent leverage runs less through basic services and more through access to public sector employment, given high unemployment, job insecurity, and an underdeveloped private sector, creating a documented fear of job loss tied to political loyalty.



Northern Ireland, by contrast, showed little evidence of this kind of patronage, thanks to institutionalised social rights, the closest analogue being ex-paramilitary networks turned criminal enterprises offering discretionary loans in some working-class Unionist areas of Belfast, which Cammett characterised as a marginal, non-systematic phenomenon rather than a mainstream form of political leverage. The fourth mechanism is an indirect peer or norm effect: in Srebrenica, site of the worst violence in the Bosnian war, a local politician recounted that Serbs feared being labelled traitors

by their own community for interacting with Bosniak Muslims, suggesting that the barrier to intergroup contact often lies less in individual unwillingness than in fear of in-group social judgment a dynamic Cammett compared to findings from research on female labour force participation in Saudi Arabia, where updated information about social acceptability increased women's willingness to work outside the home.

Elite Rhetoric and Survey Experiment Findings

To move beyond anecdote, Cammett and her collaborators built an original dataset coding individual statements by politicians and religious figures, with the statement as the unit of analysis, coded for topic (inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, governance, external actors) and valence of the message (divisive or reconciliatory). The project initially attempted to collect this data at the municipal level to match the survey sample but shifted to a national-level focus after finding local-level statement counts too sparse to be useful, and concluding that most citizens are primarily exposed to national rather than local elite rhetoric in any case; the resulting dataset now comprises thousands of coded statements, a substantial expansion from the earlier municipal-level effort. The data show that religious authorities are, on average, significantly more reconciliatory than politicians on inter-ethnic issues, a somewhat counterintuitive finding given the close ties between party and religious leaderships in some of these contexts, such as Lebanon, and one that Cammett suggested merits further scrutiny. She noted that in Northern Ireland, religious figures rarely make statements specifically about inter-ethnic relations at all, focusing on other matters instead.

Survey experiments exposing respondents to reconciliatory versus divisive elite messaging framed as coming from an actual municipal politician on the two issues respondents rated as most salient, resource distribution and security, found that elites can shift some intended economic and social behaviours, alongside a notable "backlash effect": divisive security-related messaging appeared to increase, rather than decrease, openness to intergroup interaction. Cammett reported having specifically investigated whether this pattern reflected genuine backlash or merely social desirability bias, and concluded from subgroup analysis and qualitative debriefing data that genuine backlash was the more plausible explanation.

These effects were notably weaker in Northern Ireland, which she attributed to the region's higher economic development, more limited scope for politician discretion over daily life, and unusually high levels of international peace-building investment from the EU, the US, and the Republic of Ireland investment so substantial that it has given rise to a dedicated professional sector of "community relations" workers, often themselves former combatants, now employed full-time in this field. She noted that causal mediation analyses, while not fully resolving underlying endogeneity concerns, suggest that patronage and material channels explain comparatively little of elites' influence relative to more symbolic or norm-based channels, partly, she speculated, because relatively few people directly benefit from patronage resources given limited budgets.

Incentives for Elite Conciliation

Cammett identified three families of incentives capable of encouraging more constructive elite behaviour. Electoral incentives include the need to court out-group voters and the rise of non-ethnic,

non-sectarian parties, such as Northern Ireland's "neithers," voters who identify with neither the unionist nor nationalist blocs, which she argued, drawing on work by Christina Zuber at the University of Konstanz on imperfect ethnic party markets, is reshaping the calculus facing traditionally ethnic parties by breaking the classic logic of ethnic outbidding. A similar dynamic is emerging in Bosnia, though less so in Lebanon, where thirteen independent candidates elected to parliament in the last election have had limited power against entrenched, coalition-prone sectarian parties, leaving the ethnic party "market" comparatively undisturbed.



Economic incentives were illustrated by the case of Bahamdoun, in Mount Lebanon, which saw some of the worst Druze–Maronite violence of the 1983–85 War of the Mountains, yet has since sustained comparatively conciliatory local politics, driven substantially by a cross-communal business pact to rebuild the local tourism economy to its former prominence. Similarly, in central Bosnia, shared responses to floods and fires have at times prompted mayors to explicitly set aside ethno-nationalist politics in favour of practical cooperation on disaster relief, though Cammett acknowledged this raises the question of how contingent such cooperation is on the presence of an external shock like a natural disaster.

External conditionality was illustrated by the case of an ethnically Croat politician in a Bosnian municipality, who inaugurated one of only a handful of memorials in the country honouring all ethnic communities rather than just his own- a decision Cammett has been researching in depth and suggested, based on informal sources, may have been linked to externally conditioned development funding, underscoring that elites can be moved toward reconciliation even absent altruistic motives. She was careful to note that she does not regard these individuals as unusually virtuous actors; rather, those who remain in ethnic politics over the long run tend to be those most responsive to incentive structures, since more conciliatory individuals often opt out of politics altogether, disillusioned by it.

Conclusions: Embedding Reconciliation in Political Economy

Cammett closed by arguing that the study of intergroup relations should be embedded within a broader political economy context rather than analysed through narrowly identified, isolated interventions, which by design strip out the surrounding context that shapes elite and mass behaviour alike. She pointed to an "institutional reform catch-22": Lebanon's economic collapse in October 2019 might have been expected to weaken entrenched sectarian parties by undermining the low-development conditions that sustain clientelist politics, yet instead these parties secured new external, dollarised sources of funding that cemented rather than loosened their grip on society with associated political-business elites, in her assessment, seemingly willing to let the country's institutions collapse entirely rather than reform them.

She closed by urging researchers and practitioners to lower expectations for reconciliation in the near-to-medium term, drawing an analogy to Northern Europe's post-Reformation religious wars, once existential and violent, now a non-issue after centuries while still emphasising that elites retain meaningful agency, evidenced by her finding that reconciliatory elite behaviour opens space for more comfortable cross-group interaction even in high-violence contexts. She framed this as evidence of "asymmetric elite influence": divisive rhetoric appears to carry diminishing, even counterproductive, returns as publics grow fatigued and tune it out, while conciliatory elite behaviour may open more space than commonly assumed. The most realistic path forward, she concluded, lies not in pursuing rapid reconciliation but in building more integrated relationships in the mundane, everyday areas of economic and social life, and observing over time whether this incrementally builds toward broader reconciliation.