

JONATHAN AUSTIN

Building Peace through Violence Prevention

Jonathan Austin studies the phenomenon of violence in the Middle East with the goal of preventing it. His doctoral study allowed him to confirm his thesis that violence is rarely the result of a desire or rational decision of an individual.

Jonathan Austin did not begin his academic career in the field of peacebuilding. He spent a lot time in the Middle East studying Arabic literature. Travelling from Jordan to Syria and then Palestine, Jonathan Austin acquired a contradictory image of the Middle East. Between the natural beauty in everyday life and an incredibly rich culture is what he calls an “underlying disease”. This disease is rampant violence, which erupted after the attacks of 9/11 according to Jonathan Austin.

Following this event, a terrible question loomed in his mind that would steer him towards his current career in peacebuilding: How could a place that he personally associated with so many beautiful memories, suffer from such a disease?

Doctoral study on torture

Jonathan Austin was strongly impacted by his doctoral study. The project was to interview individuals who have used torture. He therefore conducted face-to-face interviews with such people in Syria. During these interviews the perpetrators showed him the methods of torture they used, often using his own body as an example. This study was very demanding psychologically for Jonathan Austin, in particular because he started to sympathise with these people who turned out to be quite ordinary.



Following this study, Jonathan Austin came to a fundamental conclusion that would guide him towards his current work: violence is not the result of a rational decision. “Most normal people don’t want to do this, the average soldier does not want to torture someone, that’s not his job, nonetheless they end up doing it, and our goal is to try and help them, to increase people’s capacity to make good choices in these situations.” He considers the perpetrators, not in the same way as the victims of torture of course, but as another type of victim of a broader system.

Jonathan Austin is currently a researcher at the Centre on Conflict Development and Peacebuilding in the Graduate Institute in Geneva. He is working on a violence prevention initiative and describes himself as a political sociologist. This initiative aims to explain how violence happens, and to find means of preventing it. It is based on Jonathan Austin’s idea that people do not

desire to use violence, “Many forms of violence, the things that peacebuilding is trying to stop, are in many cases, not intentional, decided or even wanted by the people who carry them out.” Negative enforcement through sanctions and rules does not suffice to avoid acts of violence. New innovative ways of stopping it must be found. The idea is that by studying violent events on a micro level, they will then be able to generalize their findings, and make recommendations about violence prevention in general.

“The problem is not that people are bad. The problem is enabling people’s capacity to be good.”

The traffic light metaphor

To better illustrate his theory, Jonathan Austin uses the interesting metaphor of the traffic light. When a traffic accident happens, two aspects can be at cause. The first aspect is the decision-making process of the driver. Did he respect the rules? Did he drink before driving? Those are conscious decisions made by the driver. To prevent dangerous decisions from being made we have traffic regulations and sanctions. The second aspect however is not intentional; it can happen, for example,

because of inattention or routine. To avoid these problems, we have the assistance of technological equipment – the noise our car makes when we forget to use the security belt, the noise made by the road when the car goes out of the lane.

Jonathan Austin’s theory is that we can find the same kind of techniques to prevent violence, since it doesn’t come from a rational decision. That is why the initiative works in collaboration with engineering schools to create new technological equipment capable of preventing violence. For example there is a project to create a black box. Knowing they are being observed through the black box, people will act differently. The problem is that such a black box would need a lot of energy to work continuously. Poor countries that need this box do not have the type of energy available. However, engineers are currently working on a way to make the box capable of functioning for a full year without human intervention.

Jonathan Austin believes that technology will become more and more important in the field of peacebuilding. Thanks to this technological equipment he hopes “to enable people’s capacity to be good.”

Marie Reynard