

# Citizen Apologies and Forgiveness as Diplomatic Gestures of Peace

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**Abstract:** The paper explores the extent to which citizen apologies and forgiveness are important tools of citizen diplomacy and peace-making efforts. In recent years, there has been an increase in the frequency of apologies by state leaders and research into the reasons for these apologies. However, there has been little research into apologies by citizens in citizen diplomacy efforts. This paper seeks to fill a gap in research by exploring the role of citizen apologies and forgiveness in citizen diplomacy efforts in transnational conflicts. Conflicts are no longer just state-to-state, but instead involve a whole host of state and non-state actors alike both in perpetrating conflicts and in peace-making efforts. As such, there is a need to explore the diplomatic tools needed in building dialogue and improving relations between states that have a history of conflict. This research looks at case studies of conflicts involving Bosnia/Serbia and Libya/America. It can be concluded that citizens, as members of a collective, have the right and moral responsibility to apologise for offences of their states. These apologies do not serve as official legal acts of contrition, but as helpful diplomatic gestures of good will used to improve relations between states that have a history of conflict.

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Keywords: Apologies, Forgiveness, Citizen diplomacy, Peace, Conflict

## Introduction

This research explores the significance of citizen apologies in international relations. For the purposes of this paper, apologies are defined as the offering of regret or remorse for some action or past wrong and a validation of the feelings of a perceived wrong. Forgiveness involves the acceptance of the gesture of the apology and letting go of any bad feelings against the people apologising, whether they were directly culpable for the transgression or not.

It is clear that apologies have meaning, because an apology is something that people have come to expect in situations where someone has done harm or there has been a conflict. However, apologies can mean different things to different people. When citizen diplomats offer apologies on behalf of their state, they would not be legally culpable. However, in acts of war it is the citizens that are enlisted to fight so the line between state and citizen responsibility is not always clear. As a result, it is not

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uncommon for people to develop bad feelings and prejudices against certain countries and ethnic groups because of past conflicts. As such, diplomatic efforts can and should include citizen diplomats as ambassadors of reconciliation.

## **Overview of Citizen Diplomacy**

Citizen diplomacy has become a very important mechanism for building trust and understanding between states and citizens. At the heart of citizen diplomacy is promoting good will. The increasing role of citizen diplomats can be attributed to the shift in the power possessed by non-state actors and their role in perpetrating conflicts. For example, on September 11, 2001, a non-state actor killed more people in New York than the state of Japan did at Pearl Harbour in 1941 (Nye 2011, xii). Extremist groups like Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda are composed of non-state actors and their primary targets are citizens. As such, citizen diplomats play a vital role in preventing and resolving conflicts. Further, citizen diplomats are uniquely positioned to bridge the divide because they are not limited by political and ideological constraints as traditional diplomats would be. Marshall believed that it is people rather than states that are the ultimate foundations of good will; therefore, every possible means must be explored to enable people to plan and participate in the expression of international good will (Marshall 1949, 9).

Traditional diplomacy alone has proven insufficient in effectively restoring relations between countries that have a history of conflict because it often neglects the relational side of conflicts. Handlemann argues that political-elite diplomacy alone is not enough to create a long-lasting change in difficult situations of destructive social conflict (Handlemann 2012, 163). The lack of public involvement in the struggle to build a new social order makes any peace-making process 'unstable, fragile and vulnerable and it does not help the people on both sides to overcome psychological barriers, such as fear, mistrust and prejudice' (Handlemann 2012, 163).

### **Conciliatory gestures**

Apologies and forgiveness are conciliatory gestures that play a vital role in long-term resolution of conflicts. Without them it is impossible to achieve reconciliation and lasting peace (Hauss 2003). Apologies and forgiveness go hand in hand. Hauss (2003) says 'apologies and forgiveness are two sides of the same emotional coin'. Rushdy asserts that an apology can be understood as asking for forgiveness, and forgiveness as accepting the apology (Rushdy 2015, 38). Expressions of apology and forgiveness are vital because intractable conflicts cause deep feelings of pain, anger, hurt, and even hatred (Rushdy 2015, 38). Without apologies people remain stuck in the pain and cycle that caused the conflict in the first place; they are often destined to repeat the cycle if those wounds are not healed.

'Apologies abound and figure prominently in often invisible and unnoticed normative patterns that shape our moral expectations and sensibilities' (Tavuchis 1991, 2). Apologies are meant to reconstruct social meanings in the present and the future (Celermajer 2006, 176). These apologies are relational symbolic gestures taking place in a 'complex interpersonal field' (Tavuchis 1991, 14). Since apologies are largely social constructs, the importance of apologies varies greatly across cultural divides. Hickson (1986) contends that apology works differently in different cultures and that it is often tied to social hierarchies. Apologies can be used to defuse anger and promote reconciliation. However, because identity is a social construct, it can be influenced and changed through interactions with individuals (Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996).

Failure to acknowledge one's part in a conflict can have a negative impact years later (Butler 2007, 1). Traumatic pain and guilt become a time bomb in both the psyche and political history (Shriver, 1999). 'Nations, groups and individuals are haunted by the past, but the question remains how to break the past cycles of vengeance and find a doorway to peaceful coexistence?' (Shriver 1999, 9). Until leaders and citizens address the past, their future relations will likely be affected by undercurrents of hostility (Shriver 1999). Forgiveness breaks the cycle of vengeance and creates a bridge to peaceful coexistence.

The period of individual healing cannot be separated from social and political reconciliation (Charbonneau and Parent 2012, 2). Reconciliation means that victims and perpetrator groups do not see the past as defining the future (Staub 2006, 868). Galtung defines reconciliation as 'the process of healing the traumas of both victims and perpetrators after violence, providing a closure of the bad relations' (2001, 3). 'It means that they come to see the humanity of one another, accept each other, and see the possibility of a constructive relationship' (Staub 2006, 868).

### ***Showing respect and restoring trust***

Apologies can be a gesture of respect. 'Apology's role in the present is to acknowledge and pay respect to the survivors who may continue to suffer the scars of their encounters with past injustice' (Murphy 2011, 54). This is especially true where there has been loss of life. These apologies can bring no comfort to the dead but they 'may bring a measure of solace, and perhaps a sense of closure to the living who wish to see the memories of their loved ones and ancestors honored and respected' (Murphy 2011, 54).

Political apologies and forgiveness are about restoring 'seeming' trust (Rushdy 2015, 123). Trust is a very important element of diplomacy. 'Diplomacy is based on trust, so when trust is compromised, cooperation – no matter how longstanding – gives way to discord' (Skinner 2014). When there is a conflict between nations or groups,

trust is lost and must be rebuilt. 'Trust is a vital step in the de-escalation process – for any conciliatory act to be effective' (Notter 1995, 8). Trust may seem to be a short-lived quality, but it is at the heart of relations between states and is a principal goal of public diplomacy (Seib 2012). Trust is often based on familiarity and previous experience (Luhmann 1979, 18); however, trust also can be socially constructed despite unfamiliarity or even with a conflict-filled history (Hoffman 2006, 2). Trust is recognised as a necessary precondition for peace and prosperity in the world (Hoffman 2006, 1; World Economic Forum, 2012).

### ***Building good will***

Political apologies can be extended as acts of good will to signify the emergence of reconciliation between former adversaries (Rushdy 2015, 47). In this sense, the apology also could be a diplomatic formulation intended to clear the air without accepting full responsibility for a harmful act (Thomas 2014, 52). Good will is defined as 'a kindly feeling of approval and support' (Merriam-Webster, 2017). It is an emotion people feel that creates an emotional bond between people and results in trust and good relations (Pillai, 2012). Although not discussed very often in discourse on diplomacy, emotions do play a very important role in diplomatic relations. Even Aristotle recognised that 'emotions may move one to a particular judgment, may alter the severity of a judgment, or may change a judgment entirely' (Leighton 1996, 144). The offering of good-will gestures is part of diplomacy and international relations.

### ***Intergroup apologies***

Research into the area of intergroup apologies provides some helpful insights into the role of apologies in international conflicts. Research has shown that harm directed toward a group member might inflict secondhand harm on all who identify with that group, especially if the harm is clearly attributable to group membership (Brown et al. 2008, 1407). In addition, direct harm is not necessary for someone to suffer psychological effects (Wayment 2004). People who witness conflicts can be vicarious victims and can have a desire for vicarious retribution, which can prolong hostilities (Lickel et al. 2006). Brown, Wohl, and Exline suggest that 'identifying strongly with groups whose members have been wronged could promote empathy for in-group victims, indignation toward perpetrators, and anxiety about the possibility of becoming a transgression target oneself' (Brown et al. 2008, 1408). In addition, their study found that apologies can reduce people's reluctance to forgive a transgressor who has wronged a member of their in-group (Brown 2008, 1417).

By taking public responsibility for the harm that members of one's own group committed against members of another group, 'the perpetrator group extends the proverbial olive branch with the hope that the two groups can move beyond the past toward a harmonious present and future' (Wohl et al. 2011, 71). The sincerity of the

apology is more important than the person apologising. If the apology is sincere and acceptable to the recipients, it breaks the link between responsibility and the wrong (Hornsey and Wohl 2013).

### **Collective responsibility**

Groups are not inanimate objects, but instead a collection of the emotions of their members, and it is not uncommon to hear groups referred to as expressing emotions such as sadness, sorrow, despair, and anger. Emotions are an integral part of political life including the 'inter-relations between emotions, social structures, and collective identities' (Linklater 2014, 574). Therefore, if groups can express collective emotions, they should be able to express apologies.

The rationale for apologising for a predecessor's actions is rooted in the idea of collective responsibility and is often accompanied by feelings of shame, regret, or remorse (Bhargava 2012, 375). The offering of a political apology is a moral and ethical act. Celermajer writes, 'Apologizing in this mode is not a way of compensating for wrongdoing, but is rather an expression of shame, where shame marks a recognition of ethical flaws in the identity of the collective' (Barkan and Karn 2006, 17). It is a recognition that as human beings, they have fallen short of the ideal behaviour. Shame can do ethical work that guilt cannot (Muldoon 2007, 216). The public expression and acknowledgement of a wrong is an attempt at moral repair by showing a commitment that the action will not happen again (Thompson 2008).

Humans, as social beings, bear responsibility not only individually, but collectively (Kukathas 2003, 174). Societies too have responsibilities, and we share in them as members of such communities (Kukathas 2003, 174). As a member of a society, a person is an actor or an agent of that group (Kukathas 2003, 181). 'If a good society is one in which responsibility is taken seriously, and if responsibility can only be borne by agents, then a good society must be one in which there are agents who can properly bear responsibility' (Kukathas 2003, 185).

Collective responsibility has been seen in situations where citizens are accepting responsibility for the wrongs committed by the past behaviour of their states. In these cases, there are differing views among scholars. Some argue that citizens cannot accept responsibility for their state, while others say they can. Generally, there is a belief that you cannot apologise on behalf of someone else (Tavuchis 1991, 49). When speaking of societies, it is very difficult to separate the government from the citizens, especially in conflicts between nations such as wars, where citizens are the primary actors (Tavuchis 1991, 46-47). Where there is collective memory, collective responsibility causes concerned individuals or groups to seek 'through symbolic reparation to redress past wrongs or injuries committed by other members' (Tavuchis 1991, 50).

Arendt noted that individuals can be responsible for crimes committed by nations, while not being guilty (Arendt 1945, 131). Guilt is a legal term, responsibility is a moral one (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 88).

Collective responsibility is connected to the idea of collective memory and collective identity. Individuals can experience emotions outside of the context of their own personal experience and in relation to 'collective or society experiences in which only a part of the group members have taken part' (Bar-Tal, Halperin and De Rivera 2007, 443). The ways in which people understand their present-day realities and imagine their futures are directly related to how they remember and talk about their past (Chaitin 2012, 151). Identity affects the way you see yourself individually and as a member of a group. It reflects how you see your past, present, and future. Public memory is a repository of a group's collective identity (Tsosie 2012, 194). The process of collective memory begins early in life through rituals of learning history, songs, and stories and through ceremonies (Chaitin 2012, 151). These rituals produce collective narratives (Zerubavel 1995) and 'social constructions... that are accounts of a community's historical experiences' (Bruner 1990, as quoted in Salomon 2004, 274).

Wrongs that have been committed against a group continue to be held in the collective memory and therefore must be acknowledged if healing is to begin (Salomon 2004, 195). Collective memories of conflict in a group's history concern facts and have an emotional component (Chaitin 2012, 151). Where there has been conflict, each side holds opposing narratives about the same historical events and 'these collective memories have psychosocial impacts on the victims and generations to come' (Witzum et al. 2001). The memories also can result in bitterness among individuals whose ancestors were wronged and who await apologies from the descendants of those they believe committed those wrongs (Howard-Hassman and Gibney 2008, 6). 'States and private actors now offer apologies to groups and individuals in the hope that they can thereby close the memory of an incident' (Howard-Hassman and Gibney 2008, 5). In addition, 'the more people attach their identity to a nation, the more likely they are to feel stronger emotions toward other countries when those countries' are perceived to have wronged their nation (Hermann 2017, 61).

As Kiss argues, collective responsibility 'requires that people who identify with a group be honest and accept that the moral and political future of their community depends on the actions its members take today to shape it' (Kiss 1998, 392). When it is looked at this way, Kiss argues that 'collective responsibility does not violate liberal norms of justice. It does not hold individuals causally accountable for things they did not do' (Kiss 1998, 392).

Lowenheim (2009) asserts that if citizens can inherit a legacy of bravery, they also

can inherit moral wrongs and insults, sins, and obligations. As a result, he believes future generations can be held accountable for earlier wrongs committed by their state (Lowenheim 2009, 535). The past and future are directly connected and only the group members of today can redress wrongs of the past.

Citizens carry the legacy of moral wrongs and with that comes an ethical responsibility to try to move past those wrongs. In this situation, the primary purpose of the apology is improving relationships between parties, rather than serving as some formal or legal act of contrition. Cunningham says, 'the case for apology is most convincing on the grounds that it has the potential to improve relations between groups if the apology in whatever formulation is sincere and acceptable to the recipients. This breaks the need to establish a linkage between responsibility and apology' (Cunningham 1999, 291).

## **Bosnia**

The war between Muslims, Croats, and Serbs began in 1991 and lasted four years. Part of the root cause was unresolved past conflicts. Experts believe that failure of the former Yugoslavian government to appropriately investigate and deal with the mass killing of Serbs by Croats during World War II left deep psychological wounds that likely contributed to the violence during the 1990s (Staub 1996). In addition, before the war started, President Slobodan Milosevic unearthed the body of Prince Lazar, who was killed by Muslims in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, ceremonially reburied the body in one Serbian village after another, and used this act to stir up the seeds of the past conflict to mobilise the population against Muslims (Malek 2005). During that time, 200,000 Bosnians were killed and more than two million displaced. There was serial rape, torture, starvation, and imprisonment in concentration camps. These horrors left the people deeply traumatised and filled with fear and anger. In 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement terminated the Bosnian war and peacebuilding efforts began. The international community did not limit its intervention in Bosnia to the mere termination of the violence but instead included a plan for rebuilding a new state (Lyon 2000, 50).

Although peace currently exists in the country, the question remains whether stable and sustainable peace is present (Kriz and Cermak 2014). Divisions still exist along ethnic lines. Deep emotional scars persist among nearly everyone living in the country (Portilla 2003). The problem, according to Kriz and Cermak (2014, 7), is that the focus is on a state-centric view of peacebuilding, rather than a multi-dimensional approach dealing with the root issues of the conflict and focusing on reconciliation in society.

Conflict experts believe reconciliation is the missing ingredient (Portilla 2003). The process of focusing on reconciliation and sustainable peace is also known as focusing

on positive peace, which can be contrasted with negative peace, which is merely concerned with cessation of hostilities. Many international organisations are trying to facilitate reconciliation. However, it has not been easy. As one survivor, Sabahudin, said, 'International foundations organise roundtables to discuss living together but it is empty talk, and the reasons are simple: we cannot forgive or forget what happened, and they either deny it happened or say they had to do it – they were obeying orders' (Vulliamy 2004).

Another survivor, Nurseta, concurs with the sentiment. She says:

There is no remorse, no one has apologised or even admitted what happened. They say they know nothing about the camps. There are 145 mass graves and hundreds of individual graves in this region, and we invite the local authorities to our commemorations, but they never come (Vulliamy 2004).

Kriz and Cermak believe that a thin form of reconciliation focused on peaceful coexistence exists rather than a deep reconciliation focused on mutual forgiveness and a shared vision of history (2014, 20). This deep form of reconciliation is the important missing element in moving toward long-term restoration of relations, and apologies and forgiveness are necessary for that to be achieved.

## Libya

Libya's past involvement in state-sponsored terrorism led to years of sanctions by the UN and states like the US. Libya was responsible for the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. A total of 270 people lost their lives in that tragedy. There was a criminal trial and a conviction of a Libyan intelligence agent, Abdel Basset El-Megrahi, for the bombing. There was also a civil lawsuit and ultimately a formal acceptance of responsibility by the Libyan government as a condition of Libya being welcomed back into the world community and the removal of sanctions.

In 2004, after the US and Libya began to normalise relations, Lisa Gibson, the sister of one of the Lockerbie victims, worked with Libyan Ambassador Ali Aujali to arrange a personal reconciliation trip to Libya. She recounts her reconciliation journey in her 2008 memoir *Life in Death: A Journey from Terrorism to Triumph*. She discusses how she wrestled through the emotion of that tragedy, found herself thinking of all Libyans as terrorists, and believed that the only way to overcome those feelings was to go to Libya and meet the people so that she could forgive and learn to see them differently (Gibson 2008). On that trip, she met with individual citizens and governmental officials and discussed the conflict between the US and Libya, including the US air raid on Tripoli in 1986 and the Lockerbie bombing in 1988. When she shared her story with the local people the initial reaction was always shock (Gibson 2008, 188). She discovered that the Libyans had always been told that Lockerbie never happened

and that it was an American conspiracy, so when they sat face-to-face with a family member who lost someone, it was somewhat bewildering. In addition, the Libyans she met had the perception that Americans hated them. So, when they met an American who had lost someone in Lockerbie attack, the responses she received from the people were truly heartfelt. One man said, 'I am so sorry for your loss. It is so good for you to come. I will do everything in my power to help you' (Gibson 2008, 188). Moved by these gestures she found herself asking questions like 'what was it like when the US bombed Tripoli in 1986?' and 'what is it like to live in Libya?' (Gibson 2008, 188). Her translator Hamid said, 'No one has ever asked me that question. It is so good of you to ask' (Gibson 2008, 188-189). As a result of sitting face-to-face with Libyans in dialogue, she became envisioned about the power of forgiveness and reconciliation and how it could be used as a citizen diplomacy strategy to help restore relations between the US and Libya as well as a mechanism to hopefully improve the lives of Libyans who were still suffering at the hands of Gaddafi (Gibson 2008).

Gibson also shared her forgiveness in a written dialogue with Abdel Basset El-Megrahi the convicted bomber. In his reply to her he maintained his innocence for the Lockerbie attack but shared his condolences and how he appreciated her gesture (Gibson 2008). In 2009, she met with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi on his first and only trip to the United States to speak at the UN General Assembly. In that meeting, Gaddafi denounced the actions in Lockerbie and offered his condolences but never said he was responsible. The day after that meeting with Gaddafi, the story broke and was covered in media outlets around the world. In a CNN interview with Fareed Zakaria, Gaddafi said he was 'touched' by the meeting (Sterling 2009).

After visiting Libya, Gibson went on to start a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the Peace and Prosperity Alliance that facilitated citizen exchanges and people-to-people diplomacy activities as a strategy to improve relations between Libya and the US (Gibson 2008). Citizen dialogues, capacity-building programmes, and reconciliation activities were organised by the Peace and Prosperity Alliance and the Gaddafi Development Foundation in Libya for several years. Those efforts continued during the Libyan revolution and after. She travelled to Libya to assist with providing humanitarian aid during the revolution and was given the opportunity to speak at a rally in Freedom Square in Benghazi on the day the International Criminal Court issued the arrest warrant for Gaddafi. At this rally she spoke to a crowd of over 100,000 people, continuing to share how she had chosen to forgive and had started an NGO using Gaddafi's money to help the Libyan people (Gibson 2013). Her gestures and overtures of forgiveness and reconciliation were, time and again, received with appreciation and recognition, even prompting the crowd in Benghazi to cheer 'Thank you, Lisa' in English (Gibson 2013). She notes how she was truly humbled by the reception she received in Libya and how one simple decision to forgive and focus on

reconciliation had such an impact on a global scale (Gibson 2013).

It would be impossible to measure the impact of these efforts in the overall reconciliation process between the US and Libya. However, what can be said is that her decision to forgive and reach out to the Libyan government and the Libyan people allowed her to enter Libya and do capacity-building and peacebuilding projects when other American NGOs were not allowed to. She shows that one simple gesture can have a compounding effect. In addition, it created a global platform in the media to share about the importance of apologies and forgiveness to restoring relations between individuals and societies.

In an interview with BBC News, she described forgiveness as the moral high ground: 'At the heart of terrorism is hate and fear, and the only way to effectively fight it is to walk in the opposite spirit with love and forgiveness, she told the BBC' (Campbell 2012). Apologising and communicating forgiveness both serve as important gestures of reconciliation. 'I think that holding onto vengeance just causes the cycle of hate to continue', she said.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this research was to explore the extent to which citizen apologies and forgiveness are important tools of citizen diplomacy. Our case studies have shown that apologies and forgiveness are important parts of the reconciliation process between different groups. Studies into intergroup apologies and the role of collective responsibility have provided key insights into the importance of apologies in restoring relations between groups and the moral justification behind apologising for historical offences. The emotional and political sides of conflict are interconnected and the memory of a conflict can be carried between generations. Since the value in citizen diplomacy activities is in the relational component that citizens provide, apologies and forgiveness serve as additional tools to building trust and good will between states.

As citizens engage in citizen diplomacy initiatives, they are not just representing themselves, but the collective to which they belong. When citizens engage in diplomacy with countries that their sending country has a history of conflict with, they should not overlook the fact that there still could be memories or feelings regarding the past that could impact their current and future relations. Just as traditional diplomats want to respect individuals in the states where they work and present their state in a positive light, so citizen diplomats should also strive to achieve these purposes. It is also important to understand that views on apologies and forgiveness are heavily influenced by culture and so the way they are received may vary from place to place. However, if the end goal is restoring relations, it is the gesture that matters most, and any effort will likely result in more good than harm.

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