osloFORUM2013

Through a Different Lens:
Innovative approaches to mediating conflict

Authored by: Paul Dziatkowiec | Sabina Avasiloae | Till Papenfuss

Meeting
report

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The Oslo Forum
Improving the mediation of armed conflict

A global series of mediation retreats

The Oslo Forum is the leading international network of conflict mediation practitioners. Co-hosted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Oslo Forum regularly convenes conflict mediators, peacemakers, high level decision makers and key peace process actors in a series of informal and discreet retreats.

The Oslo Forum features an annual global event in Oslo and is complemented by regional retreats in Africa and Asia. The aim is to improve conflict mediation practice through facilitating open exchange and reflection across institutional and conceptual divides, providing informal networking opportunities that encourage coordination and cooperation when needed, and allowing space for conflict parties to advance their negotiations.

Sharing experiences and insights

Mediation is increasingly seen as an effective means of resolving armed conflicts and the growing number of actors involved testifies to its emergence as a distinct field of international diplomacy. The pressured working environment of mediation rarely provides opportunities for reflection. Given the immense challenges in bringing about sustainable negotiated solutions to violent conflict, mediators benefit from looking beyond their own particular experiences for inspiration, lessons and support.

The uniquely informal and discreet retreats of the Oslo Forum series facilitate a frank and open exchange of insights by those working at the highest level to bring warring parties together. By convening key actors from the United Nations, regional organisations and governments, as well as private organisations and prominent peacemakers, the retreats also provide a unique networking opportunity.

Where politics meets practice

Participation is by invitation-only. Sessions take the form of closed-door discussions, and adhere to the Chatham house principle of non-attribution. Sessions are designed to stimulate informed exchanges with provocative inputs from a range of different speakers, including conflict party representatives, war correspondents, outstanding analysts, thinkers and experts on specific issues.

Participants have included **Kofi Annan**, former Secretary-General of the United Nations; **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi**, General Secretary of the National League for Democracy in Myanmar; **Lakhdar Brahimi**, Joint Special Representative for Syria of the United Nations and the League of Arab States; **President Martti Ahtisaari**, President and Chairman of the Board of the Crisis Management Initiative and former President of Finland; **President Mohammad Khatami**, former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran; **Gerry Adams**, President of Sinn Féin; **Dr Surin Pitsuwan**, Secretary-General, Association of Southeast Asian Nations and former Foreign Minister of Thailand; **Dr Salim Ahmed Salim**, former Secretary general of the Organisation of African Unity and Special Envoy of the African Union; and **Ambassador Thomas Pickering**, former US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs. The Oslo Forum is proud to have hosted several Nobel Peace Prize laureates.

The retreats refrain from making public recommendations, aiming instead to advance conflict mediation practice.

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Innovative approaches to mediating conflict

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Contents

Overview

The 2013 Oslo Forum was the largest in the event's 10-year history, attracting over 140 prominent mediators, peacemakers, conflict actors and decision-makers. Participants included Lakhdar Brahimi, Joint Special Representative for Syria of the United Nations and the League of Arab States; Jeffrey Feltman, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs; Louise Arbour, President of the International Crisis Group; the Foreign Ministers of Norway, Brazil and Niger; U Khin Yi, Myanmar's Minister of Immigration and Population; and a range of other relevant personalities and conflict parties from around the world (a guest list is provided at the end of this publication).

The retreat took place against the backdrop of some impressive progress in peacemaking over the previous year, including historic breakthroughs in Myanmar, El Salvador, the Philippines and Colombia. Prospects appeared decidedly less promising elsewhere, though, notably in Syria and Mali.

In line with this year's overarching theme, 'Through a Different Lens: innovative approaches to mediating conflict', invitees explored areas that had previously garnered little attention among a mediation community that usually focused on traditional forms of armed conflict. Sessions on negotiating with criminal gangs and the unique role of faith-based actors in peacemaking allowed mediators to think 'outside the box' and draw unique lessons for their work from atypical contexts. Also in line with the same theme, participants explored creative approaches to conflicts in Syria, the Sahel, Somalia, and other complex environments. As such, the Oslo Forum once more served as a 'laboratory' for new and innovative approaches to peacemaking.

There was important business conducted in the margins of the event. For example, during the Forum a breakthrough was achieved in the process between the Philippines Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with the two sides agreeing to resume formal exploratory talks on wealth sharing, power sharing and normalisation of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (signed by the two sides in October 2012).

On several other sensitive processes, protagonists met and made positive progress in their respective peace talks. Perhaps equally importantly, the Forum exposed practitioners to other conflicts and allowed them to discuss delicate problems with experienced peacemakers, learn comparative lessons from elsewhere, and draw inspiration from success stories. For example, Yemen's ongoing transition, notable for its broad consultative character, offered an interesting case study for those exploring innovative approaches for mediation in Mali. Similarly, those involved in Somalia's challenging transition were presented with some important lessons from a comparable exercise in Afghanistan.

During the formal sessions, there was considerable focus on countries experiencing long-running internal disputes (Myanmar, Somalia, Colombia), seemingly intractable crises such as that in Syria, and highly complex and multi-faceted conflict arenas like the Sahel. Valuable opportunities were exploited for cross-fertilisation of lessons and experiences between practi-

tioners active in Colombia, Yemen, Egypt and elsewhere. Meanwhile, discussions on international engagement in Syria, Mali and Somalia, and on the role of Special Envoys in peace processes, underscored the need for improved coordination and greater policy coherence among outside parties.

The controversial subject of the utility of force in peacemaking generated robust debate. While mediators were ostensibly opposed to violence by definition, some argued that force could, paradoxically, aid peacemaking efforts by generating momentum behind talks or pressuring recalcitrant parties to seek political solutions. Mali was cited as one example – without the French military intervention, mediation would arguably have achieved little. In Somalia too, the outlook for political stability was looking more promising than it had for many years, following military interventions by the African Union, Kenya and Ethiopia. There was a vigorous exchange on whether the same would apply to Syria – could that conflict be resolved through dialogue alone, or would it take additional armed intervention from outside to improve the chances for peace? Many participants observed that outside actors had only served to exacerbate the conflict thus far; their lack of agreement on the way forward, coupled with unprincipled support for various protagonists had muddied the waters and discouraged political compromise.

Inclusivity in peace processes was a prominent theme. While acknowledging the relative expediency of concluding agreements with as few parties as possible, many participants observed that these tended not to deliver sustainable peace. The Yemeni national dialogue sought to include as broad a cross-section of society as possible – a difficult exercise. It was thought that allowing all key stakeholders a chance to be heard should, in turn, prevent disaffection later. Past agreements in Mali had faltered precisely because they had overlooked the interests of certain segments of the population. The common trap there had been to include actors in negotiations on the basis of their relative military strength, which naturally excluded many others who would be important to post-conflict nation building. The same issue would eventually arise in Syria, once the various parties could

agree to discuss their country's future. Predictably, in almost all cases women were conspicuous for their absence from peace talks; while some argued that agreements like Dayton (which had paid little heed to the views of women or civil society) were acceptable if they stopped the fighting, others countered that conflict relapse was common when women were not heard.

As the nature of conflict evolved, new types of actors appeared on the scene. Criminal gangs, non-state armed groups, the private sector, media and local communities were increasingly important players, and potentially key to the sustainability of peace. Mediators who had historically viewed conflict through a state-centric prism needed to pay due attention and adjust to these new realities. Militant groups and gangs could in some circumstances be lured towards a constructive dialogue – ignoring them instead, or engaging with force, often exacerbated conflict. The case of El Salvador demonstrated that business could play an important role in conflict response; there the gang truce could realistically only succeed if young people had alternative livelihoods open to them. The media could be an important ally too; rather than leave them to draw attention to negative stories, oversimplify facts, and thus aggravate tensions, peacemakers could engage more proactively to ensure that constructive, accurate information was also disseminated – for example on religion's (usually under-reported) positive impacts on peacemaking.

Over two absorbing days, the Oslo Forum's unique combination of thought-provoking topics, stimulating debates, access to many of the leading peacemaking practitioners, and private exchanges in the margins, allowed participants to test new ideas and craft innovative solutions to some of the complex problems they faced in responding to armed conflict.

Oslo Forum 2013 agenda

18 Tuesday June 2013

9.30 – 11.00	**High level opening plenary** The Syrian quagmire: searching for the right approach

11.30 – 13.00

Four parallel situation reports for participants to choose from:

Option 1	Option 2
Colombia: addressing justice in peace talks	Egypt

Option 3	Option 4
Yemen	The role of Special Envoys and Special Representatives in conflict resolution

13.00 – 14.15	**Informal buffet lunch**

14.30 – 17.30

Two parallel discussions for participants to choose from:

Option 1	Option 2
Syria: no end in sight?	Sahel: navigating a perfect storm
Session 1 Is a diplomatic solution still feasible?	Session 1 Strengthening peacemaking efforts in Mali
Session 2 Avoiding a sectarian conflagration	Session 2 Supporting stability in the Sahel

18.00 – 19.00	**Mediators' studio**
19.15	**Reception and formal opening dinner**

19

9.30 – 11.30

Two parallel discussions for participants to choose from:

Option 1	Option 2
Negotiating with criminal groups	The role of faith-based peacemaking in conflict resolution

12.00 – 13.30

Informal buffet lunch

14.00 – 15.30

A choice of two parallel discussions

Option 1	Option 2
At a crossroads: sustaining transformation in Somalia	Myanmar's peace process at a critical juncture

16.00 – 17.30

Closing plenary
Regional approaches to conflict mediation and inclusivity

19.30

Boat trip/dinner

Opening Session
The Syrian quagmire: searching for the right approach

The Oslo Forum was opened by David Harland, Executive Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Espen Barth Eide, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs. The discussion surveyed the achievements of peacemaking over the last year and then focused in detail on efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict.

It had been a good year for historic successes and solid progress in some regions, but frustrating deadlock prevailed elsewhere. Of the successes, a number were notable for their locally-driven character, including the El Salvador gang truce and ceasefire agreements between the Government and ethnic armed groups in Myanmar. Complex peace talks in Colombia had also produced a significant recent breakthrough, namely a momentous agreement on the issue of land reform. Many other difficult items remained to be addressed there, though, including political participation and transitional justice. Meanwhile in the Philippines, after many years of arduous negotiations, the Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had concluded a framework agreement on the status of the Bangsamoro.

In contrast, there was cause for concern on other fronts. In particular, the Syrian conflict was deteriorating, with the death toll approaching that of all the 1990s Balkan wars combined. Syria was being torn apart, helped by widening schisms at every level – from sectarian and ideological local divides (which in turn were exploited by the external allies of the respective parties); to profound policy differences between the Permanent Five of the UN Security Council, and other countries in the region and beyond. While the protagonists continued to believe in military victory (with the encouragement of their international patrons), they were unlikely to reach for a political compromise.

Drawing on the example of Syria, one of the panellists lamented the general lack of clarity in international policy responses to conflict. Today's foreign policy was, it seemed, driven more by interests than values, which put to shame an international community that for decades had worked assiduously to codify basic

moral values and construct a rules-based approach to international relations (including through the development of criminal justice standards and the Responsibility to Protect, R2P). Nowadays, as evidenced in Syria, these concerns were steadily being marginalised – the impetus behind R2P, in particular, had receded.

As such, continued the speaker, the international community's conduct today resembled the workings of the international system 50 years ago, prior to the emergence of modern notions of international justice, and when violence was the usual way to resolve conflict. States had begun to 'trip over their own rhetoric' in recent years, and defiance of the rules-based system by Sudan, Libya and Syria had contributed to the weakening of the international justice project. Justice could still serve as an important conflict resolution tool, but it was often overlooked. For instance, mediation could in some contexts be supported by the fallback option of adjudication by independent outside courts – but such 'outside the box' inventiveness was rarely on display in peace processes.

As a result of these developments, conflict management too had become more anarchic. Of late, rather than searching for lights at the ends of tunnels, the international community seemed to awkwardly fumble around identifying suitable tunnels. Take Syria, where the goals of powerful governments appeared muddled – did they wish to align with one side in the sectarian conflict, or to simply help 'the opposition' or the regime to win at any cost? And what would follow? There were few clear answers. Some governments' eagerness to support elements of the Syrian opposition appeared to have been the direct result of public pressure – but as observed elsewhere, foreign policy that was driven by the public mood tended to produce dangerous results.

Others noted that the simplistic 'Assad must go' policy favoured by various Western governments was a rigid one that limited peacemaking options – as was Russia's unflinching support for him. Prescribing specific outcomes for Syria at this time could

prove to be rash; to promote a constructive international discourse, the major players ought to keep open some of their less favoured options. These may not necessarily require regime change, but instead some form of power-sharing or other governance arrangement that would better suit Syria's circumstances at the end of hostilities. In short, there may be workable middle ground yet to be discovered, but it required flexibility. Some lessons might be drawn from the Dayton process which, while flawed and ultimately doing little to alter the balance of forces, settled important political questions that stopped the fighting. Extending the Balkans analogy further, one participant glumly speculated whether 'another Srebrenica' would need to occur before the world would mobilise and impose 'another Dayton' on the conflict parties.

Despite the difficulties, one panellist expressed hope that Syria may yet prove 'mediatable.' Mandela had demonstrated in the 1990s that, no matter how formidable the obstacles, sensible dialogue could prevail. The space existed for dialogue in Syria too – one just had to find it. In the meantime, expectations of mediators needed to be realistic; mediation could never be a quick, magic fix, but should serve instead as a bridge to help the parties discover and enlarge their common ground. A mediator's task, therefore, was not to arrive on the scene with a solution, but to help the stakeholders craft their own.

Meanwhile, international wrangling over Syria continued to render impossible any real progress in the near term. Often, suggested one speaker, the external actors looked to be in greatest need of mediation. Their failure to find a common position, or indeed any discernible common ground, did nothing to induce any sense of urgency for compromise on the ground. While it was understandable that the international community would never align on every issue, participants considered there to be sufficient overlapping interests at play to inspire the development of a coherent strategy for Syria; one that would build on the already solid foundations of Kofi Annan's 2012 six-point plan.

Situation Report
Yemen

Uniquely among the political transitions initiated in 2011 following the Arab Spring uprisings, Yemen had attempted to transition to a new political reality through an agreed plan that included a national dialogue, which in turn would define the core principles of the country's future constitution. The dialogue was an effort to expand political participation beyond the signatories of the 2011 agreement and to bring into the process marginalised and other groups.

The 2011 upheaval resulted in a negotiated transition agreement and the transfer of power from long-term President Saleh to his Vice President Hadi in late 2011. Coupled with relative policy coherence in the international community, face-to-face negotiations between the parties had made such an outcome possible. Confronted with a popular uprising, military defections, and splits in the regime, Yemen's disparate factions chose to settle their differences politically rather than by force. As a result, the ruling elite was allowed to 'exit' gracefully, retaining most of its assets and significant political influence, and the space for political change was created.

The 2011 agreement provided for a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) which was launched in March 2013, to be followed by a constitution-drafting process. A six-month preparatory phase preceded the NDC and settled crucial procedural aspects of the subsequent national dialogue, including participation, agenda and scope. The NDC was effectively a complex multi-stakeholder negotiation, scheduled to be completed in six months, comprising nine working groups and over 500 participants representing all segments of Yemen's society: the former ruling party, the opposition, insurgents, separatist movements, youth and women (representing both a distinct constituency, and at least 30 % of each of the parties to the negotiations). Issues on the agenda include the conflicts in the North and the South, transitional justice, federalism (devolution), and constitution-making. Importantly also, the architects of Yemen's national dialogue process took pains to study comparable experiences from other countries – something participants recommended to practitioners working on Mali, who might learn from other contexts in francophone sub-Saharan Africa.

The national dialogue process had reached its scheduled halfway mark and despite a positive overall picture, a number of challenges could yet threaten not only its continued progress, but Yemen's stability as a whole: 1) despite efforts to weaken it, Al Qaeda maintained an operational and territorial stronghold in Yemen (while the controversial drone campaign had eradicated some of the movement's layers, it had not fundamentally affected its human, financial or operational resources); 2) the state had lost control over large swathes of territory, particularly to Houthi insurgents; 3) the landscape was characterised by diverse coalitions of Islamist movements (ranging from the more liberal to those linked to militant groups, some of which supported Al Qaeda); 4) the former president continued to exercise considerable influence, including control of significant military assets; 5) large segments of the population lived in abject poverty, and many international donor pledges had not been honoured.

A key lesson from Yemen's experience – and one that differentiated it from many similar processes elsewhere – had been the concerted effort to make the transition as inclusive as possible through the national dialogue. Extensive outreach, including via public meetings and traditional as well as social media, had prevented it from becoming the typical elitist exercise; and had instead allowed many of Yemen's diverse stakeholders to participate in the nation-building project.

Colombia: addressing justice in peace talks

Launched in October 2012 with Norway and Cuba as its guarantors, the Colombian peace process still faced formidable challenges ahead. Its success would require painful political compromises on both sides, and any deal would be heavily influenced by several key factors, including the expectations of the Colombian public, the extent to which the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) would be willing to make concessions, and international legal standards. Public surveys indicated that although around 70 % of Colombians supported the peace process, most did not expect it to succeed. There was significant public distrust of the FARC's intentions, with many expecting a surrender of arms to be a bridge too far for the guerrillas.

Nevertheless, the Santos Government had detected a window of opportunity for a political solution. Its calculation was that mutual interest in dialogue had converged as prospects of a decisive military solution receded. The FARC had also reached a similar conclusion.

One considerable roadblock had already been overcome during the dialogue, through a historic recent agreement on land reform. Next on the agenda was the thorny issue of political participation, which was fundamental to the post-conflict landscape as it concerned FARC's potential transformation into a political player. Some audience members were dubious about the prospects for such a 'metamorphosis', which assumed that a 9,000-strong rebel group with a long history of violence would agree to disarm for the sake of participating in elections, at which its chances were uncertain. The suggestion came from the floor, though, that peacemakers could help the FARC to take this leap of faith by exposing it to other militant groups that had similarly changed direction from armed militancy to politics.

On the horizon loomed yet another divisive issue – transitional justice. It was broadly agreed that any legitimate process had to account for the violence perpetrated by both sides. Realistically, though, no political agreement could cure all of Colombia's ills, and any proposed solution to the justice issue

would also be imperfect. There was disagreement over whether an accommodation could be found that would satisfy both conflict parties as well as the victims. One participant believed it to be possible, with the assistance of Colombia's fiercely independent judiciary, but others doubted that a political resolution to the conflict could please all of the stakeholders.

Although public demands for criminal accountability and the political weakness of FARC were two serious obstacles to a political settlement, one member of the audience suggested that combining the two in a holistic approach could, paradoxically, open up interesting possibilities. For example, a deal could be struck that offered the FARC a 'slice of the political pie' in exchange for reduced prison terms for the crimes it had committed. While this would certainly be seen publicly as an imperfect solution, it offered a way forward that would give something to both sides. According to another audience member, while the FARC needed to understand that accountability was a critical attribute for any credible political player, what was most im-

portant for Colombia was the maintenance of the 'rule of law' writ large, rather than what would happen to each individual FARC leader.

Clearly, both the State and FARC were responsible for grave violations, and for the peace process to be deemed legitimate, crimes on all sides would have to be accounted for (both the public and the media in Colombia were keenly focused on the issue of criminal accountability). The International Criminal Court (ICC) might act as a point of leverage in the process; the ICC prosecutor was already monitoring Colombia, formally in a 'preliminary investigation' phase. However, it was noted that the ICC could only open investigations if it determined that national authorities were unable or unwilling to investigate and prosecute certain crimes.

The issue of amnesties for serious crimes generated a robust exchange. Recalling the example of El Salvador (which, after its truth commission had concluded, had legislated a broad amnesty for crimes of its civil war), one audience member maintained that despite firm public opposition to the move, peace would have been impossible there without the amnesty. He suggested that something similar (perhaps accompanied by large-scale reparations) may prove to be a necessary evil for achieving peace in Colombia.

In contrast, some in the audience felt that Colombians considered amnesties to be unconscionable. For many Colombians, the Government's outreach to the FARC had been distasteful enough; indeed, in some quarters it was seen as having granted legitimacy to a terrorist group. Some in the audience suggested that amnesties would undermine the prospects for real peace. The internal constraints were significant in any case: not only was the general population strongly opposed to a blanket amnesty, but the Colombian Constitutional Court had ruled in the past that such immunities for serious crimes were not legally acceptable. The external constraints, in part emerging from the ICC's engagement, were also an important factor.

One mediator well-versed in other peace processes warned that peacemakers in Colombia would do well to study the Aceh and Northern Ireland processes and avoid their pitfalls. In both cases, much-lauded peace agreements were struck, but they were notable for their failure to ensure real justice for victims. It was suggested from the floor that in Colombia, the minimum means of ensuring proper justice would be to establish a truth commission. In any case, there was a strong consensus in the room that for the peace process to succeed, it would have to strike a delicate but broadly acceptable balance on the difficult question of justice; one that managed to satisfy the demands of a war-weary Colombian public (particularly the victims of the civil war), and also meet the requirements of Colombian and international law.

Situation Report
Egypt

Note: this discussion took place prior to the removal of President Mohamed Morsi in early July.

Predicting the eventual outcome of Egypt's tumultuous transition (from what the presenter called the 'stable' regime of President Mubarak to the more tenuous dispensation that had emerged since President Morsi won office) was a challenge for even the shrewdest Egypt observers. As part of that challenge, the session focused on exploring possible options for a workable compromise between the government and opposition. In general, Egypt's recent troubles were presented as the result, among other things, of resistance to dialogue and political conciliation. It followed that, absent any significant impetus for exploring genuine, mutually beneficial compromises, little if any space was available at this time for third party mediators to engage meaningfully in the Egyptian domestic context.

President Morsi's administration was, according to one commentator, perceived by most Egyptians to be a leadership exclusively for and by the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than one that sought to cater for the interests of all Egyptians. Until November 2012, the President had ostensibly sought to engage in dialogue with the opposition over the new constitution. However, observed the presenter, this outreach proved to be a false dawn, as Morsi rushed to a referendum on the constitution before a genuine compromise had been found that would accommodate opposition concerns. Effectively, Morsi's message was that the constitution was not open to debate. As a consequence, a relatively calm situation had deteriorated rapidly, and the subsequent vote on the constitution divided Egypt as the opposition grew increasingly fearful of a larger 'Islamisation project'.

Given the recent turmoil, Egypt's political transition was in many quarters already being labelled a failure. One speaker feared that the inability of Egyptians to resolve their differences through dialogue could have one of two possible consequences: an eventual shift back to authoritarianism, or a descent into civil strife. Inflexibility at the top meant that the energy for change would instead be generated from the lower levels of the social pyramid, which would make it difficult to control.

The apparent distaste, on all sides, for inter-party cooperation was the cause of many of Egypt's current woes; even major economic instability had failed to motivate the parties to work together. But while most speakers acknowledged that reaching a compromise in Egypt would prove to be a difficult task, the general sense was that cross-party dialogue was an unavoidable first step. Some were deeply sceptical that the Islamist government would cede any ground to the opposition while it retained power, particularly in the atmosphere of mistrust that prevailed. Outside attempts to mediate Egypt's domestic disputes were also considered unlikely to succeed in a nation that, according to one expert, was too proud to accept external intervention.

One contributor proffered the view that 'compromise' was still a relatively alien concept in Egyptian political discourse. Moreover, the definition of democracy, Egyptian style, was subjective: while the opposition might focus on the benefits of pluralism and cross-party dialogue, the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood understood it to mean the rule of the majority.

The regional ramifications of Egypt's instability were of great concern. Some feared that, in the wake of the schisms emerging within, Egypt was rapidly foregoing its mantle as the 'anchor of regional stability', which it had enjoyed in decades past. Even worse, one speaker warned ominously that Egypt was bound to further 'go down, before it would come up again'. Others were more hopeful, though, with some expressing faith in the younger generation that had been involved in opposition movements; and, more specifically, in the emergence of a healthy, competitive political system characterised by a more moderate strand of Islam.

The role of Special Envoys in conflict resolution

Drawing on the experiences of a number of attendees who had served in such positions, participants examined the role and effectiveness of Special Envoys and Special Representatives (SEs/SRs) in conflict resolution, with a view to identifying the factors that contributed to success, as well as common pitfalls to be avoided.

There were mixed views about the effectiveness of SEs/SRs. Their work and impact was determined to a large extent by the nature and structure of their appointments, which varied markedly (for example, some SE/SRs had extensive managerial and programmatic responsibilities, whereas others had little or none). Some participants considered that their effectiveness largely depended on the degree of authority they commanded, and the extent to which they influenced the policy machinery and resources at headquarters. To illustrate, according to one speaker, if an envoy had no real decision-making authority but simply reflected the policy set by his/her superiors, then he/she was destined to spend an inordinate amount of time arguing over policy with the home bureaucracy rather than doing important operational work. As is often the case, though, personal chemistry was key – it could go a long way towards ensuring that the envoy's initiative was not overly hampered by red tape.

Other participants felt that success greatly depended on the type of engagement that was allowed by the particular conflict situation. For example, an earlier Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) in Myanmar had been appointed following a UN General Assembly Resolution that had urged the Myanmar Government to respect the results of the 1990 elections. Thus the mandate of the SRSG was immediately perceived as representing a Western 'regime change' agenda. When the country was subjected to sanctions, the role of the SRSG was seen as essentially to convey to the Government the criticisms of the international community. However, after the 2010 elections, the situation began to change, and there emerged an opportunity to redefine the role of the SRSG in a way that would allow

the international community to help steer, rather than push, Myanmar towards peace and democratisation.

More generally, it was noted that the potential for emissaries to engage in effective diplomacy was greatly enhanced when the incumbent had the permission (implicit or explicit) to engage with all relevant parties to a conflict. In most conflict situations, real progress towards peace required contact with 'rogue' actors whose human rights records and war-making practices were objectionable. However, in the current international climate, such outreach was controversial; envoys needed to tread a fine line and often had to defend their inclusive approaches to avoid being perceived as overly sympathetic to the plight of the 'bad guys'. One speaker argued that some governments had spoiled their chances of assuming future mediation roles by imposing constraints on their envoys regarding engagement with certain groups or individuals (for example in Sudan, where official interaction with the President was not allowed by such governments).

Relationships between envoys dispatched by international organisations and national governments were often complex and at times hostile, with envoys 'tripping over' each other or providing conflicting advice. However, where consensus was achievable and coordination worked well among envoys (through high-level panels, 'Groups of Friends,' troikas etc), major steps could be taken to move a peace process forward. A sensible division of labour meant, for instance, that the lead mediator would have the political space to identify solutions, while other envoys could play a complementary role by leveraging political clout and know-how in the negotiations. Pooling resources was essential, especially when dealing with rebel groups that had little capacity to deliver, but vast capacity to play a potential spoiling role.

The ability to contribute strongly to conflict resolution suffered when the envoy could not sufficiently 'connect' with local communities or, conversely, when the conflict parties became so comfortable with a particular emissary that the peace process, devoid of new energy, became stagnant. Bearing in mind that appointments of envoys raised expectations, one contributor cautioned against diplomatic appointments that might carry political 'weight' (for example that of a former head of state) but lack a strong substantive mandate. As ever, finding a way out of ongoing conflict hinged on the deployment of multiple policy tools by the envoy and his/her team, and the continued strong support of the appointing organisation.

Syria: no end in sight?

Is a diplomatic solution still feasible?

In a lively discussion, actors involved in efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict canvassed options for, as well as alternatives to, a negotiated settlement.

The debate revealed serious divisions between the various opposition groups, as well as among the external actors who could influence events on the ground. Judging by the robust exchange of opinions around the table, Syria's political landscape was dominated by strikingly divergent attitudes on how to end the conflict: while some groups sought a peaceful path to peace, many unequivocally rejected dialogue as a dangerous compromise, and believed the war would be won militarily. Others still believed that warfare and negotiations should continue in parallel.

The assessment of many participants was that the regime was not amenable to genuine dialogue; over the past two years, they observed, it had only responded to resistance with heavy-handedness and incitement to sectarian violence. As such, while some in the opposition welcomed the prospect of dialogue in principle, others insisted that the regime would never be disposed to making concessions. What incentive was there, after all, for the government to compromise politically while it believed that it could win militarily? Consequently, several participants contended that peaceful means alone would not force President Assad to the negotiating table, and therefore opposition forces had to be empowered to 'finish the job'. Accordingly, some elements of the opposition had welcomed the US decision to provide military assistance to certain factions, but insisted that more military and diplomatic pressure was needed.

An alternative view was that the opposition should not try to compete on the battlefield with a regime whose military forces remained vastly superior. Even if the allies of the opposition were to increase the flow of arms, this would be matched by supplies to the Assad regime. On the other hand, if the opposition approached dialogue as enthusiastically as it had committed itself to the 'chaos of weaponry', then a political track might yet stand a chance.

As the conflict increasingly affected Syria's neighbourhood and potentially beyond, greater unity of purpose in the UN Security Council had become as crucial as it was conspicuously lacking. Breaking the impasse at the multilateral level was proving difficult, though the prospect of Russia- and US-sponsored talks

on Syria was seized upon as a faint ray of hope. Others, however, cautioned that it would remain impossible to find common ground between the parties – with or without international engagement – as long as the splintered opposition lacked a coherent position.

The much touted 'Geneva II' meeting (which had not yet occurred at the time of publication) was the subject of robust debate. Some speakers appealed to the opposition representatives present to send a delegation that was credible and representative in the eyes of the Syrian people. Another contributor broached the possibility of seeking a ceasefire ahead of Geneva II, as a means of building confidence and creating the space necessary for real negotiations. Few believed such a scenario to be realistic, given the involvement of so many disparate groups in the conflict; more likely, only 'militarised' negotiations would lead to an eventual political settlement, which would then need to be followed by the deployment of peacekeepers.

The international community needed to reflect on whether a 'bad' Geneva conference would necessarily be preferable to none at all; and relatedly, what influential external players such as Russia, the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia could do to persuade the relevant actors to shift from their entrenched positions. The odds for this were slim, according to some observers, as there were enough people inside Syria willing to 'fight to the finish', and plenty of external actors to supply them indefinitely – thus feeding their hope for an ultimate military victory. Sadly, the alternative to a constructive dialogue would be a continuation of the fighting; and while this might eventually yield a victor, far fewer Syrians would be left to enjoy the 'spoils'.

In spite of the inauspicious prospects and generally pessimistic mood, many contributors continued to stress the urgency of talks between the protagonists, however difficult these may seem. Any nonviolent interaction between the sides, they argued, could at least create the basis for a future political dialogue that would eventually have to take place.

Avoiding a sectarian conflagration

As Syria continued its alarming slide into sectarian warfare, participants discussed the ethno-religious dimensions of the conflict and prospects for addressing them. The debate brought to light contested narratives of the country's record of religious pluralism, and mirrored the broader patterns of disunity that had emerged across the fragmented opposition front.

One participant recalled that tolerance 'of the other' had deep roots in Syria, where a vibrant multi-ethnic, multi-confessional society had lived in relative harmony for centuries. It had therefore come as a shock when peaceful cœxistence was supplanted by vicious sectarian violence that had engulfed the country and spread through the region, embroiling neighbouring Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. Part of the explanation, according to some participants, lay in the Government's longstanding neglect of Syria's numerous sects, its repressive minority rule and history of disproportionately allocating key governmental positions to favoured groups. According to this argument, when the uprising began, the Government continued to deliberately cultivate sectarian tensions, with the aim of fracturing the opposition. For example, it had portrayed the conflict as an existential fight for survival for the Alawites, Christians, Jews, Shi'ites and other communities against extremist Islam. In turn, this strategy paved the way for Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict, led to widespread displacement, and set in motion a process of mutual demonisation, while also planting the seeds for future retribution.

Other speakers argued that Syria's sectarian divisions traced back further. One participant contended that sectarianism had always existed beneath the surface, nourished by cultural indoctrination and political linkages between respective religious or ethnic groups and their 'brethren' in the wider region. This, however, was not a reality to which many Syrians would readily admit.

Certain opposition groups had stood to benefit from the hardening of confessional fault-lines, exploiting the opportunity to shore up their ranks with members of the Sunni majority. For their part, the Sunni-majority Gulf states were also playing the 'sectarian card' to justify their actions. Other factors that aggravated confessional tensions included foreign jihadist fighters and largely unaccountable, even seditious media outlets. In keeping with the broad sense of pessimism in the audience, some speakers contemplated whether it may not already be too late to rewind the clock on more than two years of mounting mistrust, polarisation and violence.

Some participants suggested ideas that might help steer the country away from sectarianism. Absent a peace agreement, some considered that there was little headway to be made at the 'macro' level. However, dialogue at the community level and across the sectarian spectrum could lead to concrete improvements on the ground and an increased sense of cross-faith solidarity. To this end, members of non-governmental and interfaith organisations had been channelling aid and negotiating the release of prisoners across communities. Even so, some stakeholders with a potentially stabilising influence (for example, religious leaders, women's groups and civil society) had thus far played a limited role in alleviating sectarian tensions – their skills and influence could be better harnessed in peacemaking efforts.

In the search for solutions, parallels were drawn with other countries affected by sectarian strife, including Lebanon, where a power sharing accommodation had been reached between religious communities. In Syria, some opposition leaders had committed to a pluralistic, tolerant post-conflict society, but others had not, which made many minority groups uncertain whether their rights would be respected in a post-Assad Syria, should that eventuate. Efforts to date by opposition groups to reverse the slide into sectarianism were generally seen as unconvincing. One contributor proposed that the opposition draft a 'constitution' that would reassure minority groups by guaranteeing them a share in Syria's future. In re-

sponse, an opposition representative noted that such a concept (namely the 'Day After' project) was already under development; its aim was to outline the key principles that would guide a future constitution-making process, including equality of all citizens and respect for Syria's diversity.

While there was agreement that a post-conflict Syria must protect the human rights of all its citizens, views differed as to how to guarantee this. Some believed that minority rights should be a key feature of any new constitution, while others contended that highlighting societal differences would serve only to entrench sectarian (and other) divisions.

Overall, the debate left the impression that Syria's opposition groups were struggling to articulate a clear, common vision for their country's future. While the parties to the conflict continued to manipulate sectarian differences to suit their specific agendas, Syria's social fabric risked sustaining irreparable damage – as, potentially, would that of some of its neighbours. Any hope of reversing this trend rested on real dialogue taking place between the faith communities; but while this and other constructive ideas emerged in the session, they had yet to properly bear fruit amidst the chaos in Syria.

Sahel: navigating a perfect storm

Strengthening peacemaking efforts in Mali

In discussions on Mali during this year's Oslo Forum, participants recalled that a range of peacemaking tools had been employed in recent decades to address that country's conflicts, none of which had proven effective in isolation. The conflict drivers were many and multifaceted, and hence the situation did not lend itself to a simple peacemaking strategy. Although both had been tried, neither Track I mediation nor military intervention alone could deliver sustainable peace – thus peacemakers would have to equip themselves with a broader toolkit. Above all, they should draw basic lessons from Mali's unhappy history of conflict resolution; namely by ensuring that dialogue initiatives were inclusive rather than narrowly focused on armed combatants, and addressing the conflict triggers in the wider region.

Since the beginning of 2012, Mali had experienced a multipronged security and political crisis, highlighted by an armed campaign by Tuareg and Islamist fighters for the independence of the North, a military coup, and regime collapse in nearby Libya which triggered an influx of weapons and fighters to northern Mali. Subsequently, foreign military intervention, peacekeeping, and a variety of mediation efforts have been attempted to stabilise the country.

A common remark during the debate was that Mali's problems could be traced back to multiple root causes. Typically, repeated insurgencies had led to the conclusion of ill-fated agreements between the government and various rebel groups – for example the Tamanrasset Accord of 1991, the National Pact of 1992, and the Algiers Accord of 2006. Those agreements granted limited autonomy to the North, provided for the development of the region, and sought to clarify the status of insurgents and the Malian army there. The key problem, however, was the lack of proper implementation of these agreements, which triggered frequent relapse into conflict. Furthermore, according to some speakers the agreements had focused too narrowly on armed actors, thus disregarding the interests of Northern Mali's population more broadly. All in all, past peace agreements had demonstrably failed to produce a recipe for sustainable peace.

Persistent instability and bad governance – the latter characterised by a rule of law deficit, weak institutions, and limited state authority – provided fertile ground for illicit activities, to the extent that drug trafficking and abductions for ransom (much of which could be traced to the weapons trade in the region) now provided a major source of revenue. One participant argued that the resulting contest for control of trafficking routes, coupled with the deleterious impact of criminal rents on state governance and on the loyalty of the military, could rapidly lead Mali back to conflict. What was therefore needed most urgently was the re-establishment of a legitimate and efficient government.

Beyond the fundamental goals of establishing stability and security, a number of speakers stressed the importance of learning from past mistakes. With that in mind, a cornerstone of the peacemaking effort in Mali would be the National Commission for Dialogue and Reconciliation, which was intended to provide space for open dialogue on the future of Mali. Mediators could add value by supporting complementary efforts to facilitate the involvement of local communities in the dialogue process, or as one speaker expressed it, to 'build peace from the ground up'. Augmenting this point, several participants emphasised that the possession of arms must not be allowed to become a key determinant of who should be at the negotiating table.

Turning to the various international efforts to address the crisis, speakers credited the French-led military intervention with the weakening of the extreme Islamist threat in Mali. The challenge now, though, would be to fill the space that had been carved out by this campaign. While military force had served its short-term purpose, the emerging consensus was that a long-term solution

to Mali's problems would require a strong and unified regional approach. In the meantime, the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) would also have a key role to play in helping the government to re-establish its authority and legitimacy and to create the conditions for justice and political dialogue.

Overall, there was a sense that the international community had good reason to be self-critical of its approach (or lack thereof) to the Sahel conflagration in recent years. Still today, according to some participants close to the conflict, there appeared to be no serious plan, for example, for dealing with international drug trafficking that passed through Mali; little consensus on what the priorities should be for mediation efforts; and, according to at least one critical voice, a conspicuous absence of any overarching political strategy for ending the conflict.

Sahel Session II

Supporting stability in the Sahel

As in the Mali session, it became apparent in this broader discussion that addressing the Sahel's multifaceted problems would require a holistic response. The region presented a concoction of ideological and religious conflict over land, political status and various other grievances, left to fester in a dangerous governance vacuum that, predictably, was being exploited by powerful criminal and terrorist networks. Mediation on its own was unlikely to make a long-term impact, if aimed primarily at conciliating between Track I actors.

Any hope for achieving sustainable peace in such an environment rested on addressing all of these issues, each of which, if neglected, could spoil good progress on the others. What was needed, according to many participants, was a coherent international strategy with a strong regional mechanism at its core. Any concurrent mediation effort would have to be multilayered – to address conflicts at the regional, national and local levels.

Mediation, in turn, should be synchronised with international support (and pressure) for governance reform.

In large measure, the Sahel's many problems traced back to deep historical roots. The region was home to diverse tribes, ethnic groups, languages, and cultures that, while existing within defined national borders, often did not reflect their official geographic distribution. In their efforts to address tensions arising from this diversity governments had, over recent decades, granted varying levels of autonomy to minorities within their territories, along with other security and territorial concessions.

Then, as state authority had progressively weakened, the conditions emerged for criminal networks to establish themselves in Northern Mali and across the Sahel. Its strategic location between hubs of drug production in Latin America and consumption in Europe, accompanied by a governance vacuum and im-

Mme Zakiyatou Oualett

proving access to transportation, sophisticated navigation and communications systems, had turned the Sahel into a breeding ground for illicit activity.

Criminal networks, backed by considerable financial capital, set in motion a 'criminalisation of the economy' and corrupted the political elites, thus further weakening fragile political and security institutions in the region. Simultaneously, poor governance, graft, and a lack of state authority inhibited the region from addressing its many challenges. To illustrate these trends, one participant alleged that drug seizures in some Sahelian countries appeared to have been discontinued, thus revealing far-reaching government complicity in the drugs trade.

Against this background, over the last two years the region had, perhaps inevitably, transformed from a low-intensity conflict zone into a major international security concern. The prolifer-

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ation of weapons, influx of large numbers of fighters after the Libyan conflict, and growing presence of terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had combined to generate something of a perfect storm that threatened the region and beyond. Accordingly, the international community had finally begun to pay due attention to the region, resulting among others in the French military intervention.

Speakers suggested that collective action was needed to address these dilemmas, and that it should revolve around several pillars: 1) establishing effective, credible governments, 2) developing a coherent regional mechanism to address common security threats, and 3) constructing mechanisms for dialogue and mediation at the local, national, and regional level. Beyond the immediate region, real recovery in the Sahel would depend on a more united approach by the international community; more specifically, the UN, African Union, European Union and others needed to better mobilise resources and coordinate their actions. Some participants drew parallels to examples of coordinated peacemaking elsewhere in Africa, including the Great Lakes region. There, according to one expert, an overarching regional coordination mechanism, robust peacekeeping mission and political agreement between the key stakeholders, had channelled the efforts of diverse players towards the achievement of a common strategic vision.

To date, the lack of a robust and timely international response had allowed the Sahel's crises to morph into a multi-faceted, global problem. A number of its sub-elements (including terrorism, drugs- and arms-smuggling) posed serious security threats to the continent, but also well beyond. As such, the key leitmotif throughout the session was that the Sahelian conundrum could only be solved through holistic, coordinated approaches that combined the efforts of flexible third party mediators with those of other key stakeholders in the region and the international community.

Negotiating with criminal gangs

This session focused on an area of conflict resolution that had previously garnered little attention among mediators involved with more traditional forms of armed conflict, and allowed the latter to exchange experiences with negotiators who had engaged with criminal gangs in El Salvador and elsewhere. The discussion called attention to the fact that while mediated peace agreements might bring an end to what was conventionally defined as 'armed conflict', they did not necessarily preclude serious societal violence. Indeed in some cases the end of armed conflict had contributed to conditions in which gangs and other violent actors had proliferated, contributing to levels of criminal violence that approached or surpassed that of the armed conflict itself. Meanwhile other countries that had not experienced armed conflict of an ideological variety were also experiencing such high levels of violence (Honduras had the highest rate of homicide in the world) that it challenged notions of what was, and was not, defined as 'violent conflict'.

The Organisation of American States had encouraged governments in Central America to move beyond their often unsuccessful hard-line security policies and address the root causes of social exclusion that had perpetuated violence. This represented a change of tack, as for years the prevalent view had been that tougher anti-gang laws and stronger security force responses would solve the problem. El Salvador became the laboratory for a new approach; there the government sanctioned talks in the country's prisons with the leaders of the most violent criminal gangs. Led by a military chaplain and a former guerrilla commander, the talks quickly bore fruit as rival gang leaders agreed to a truce and directed their followers to refrain from violence. Subsequently, the homicide rate dropped by 50 % and attacks against security forces decreased.

Despite the results, the 'pacification' process remained controversial. As the government at first denied any official involvement in the talks, it had done nothing to raise public awareness of the benefits the dialogue might bring. In their quest to reduce violence and build trust with the gang leaders, those involved in negotiating the truce had neglected to secure broad public acceptance for the process. Civil society, for example, remained strongly opposed to any digression from criminal accountability. Some observers were of the view that the process would have been strengthened had the business community been engaged early; for calm could realistically only be sustained if alternative livelihoods were found for gang members and other youth at risk, a process that was now being pursued through pilot 'violence-free municipalities'.

simply failed to stem the violence. Consequently, dialogue had emerged as the most viable option.

On the other hand, the sceptics in the audience underscored the numerous risks involved in negotiating with criminal gangs, and the difficulties inherent in embarking on a process with no clearly defined ending. The gangs had created parallel economies across Latin America, acquired sophisticated weaponry, and set up proxy financial systems to manage their revenues. By negotiating with them, the State was essentially legitimising them and conceding that they were too powerful to rein in. According to its detractors, the truce rewarded perpetrators of mass violence with political capital, and created new concerns as to how the gangs would exploit their newly-won legitimacy.

The sense among participants was that however one judged the truce strategy – which was being closely watched by other countries in the region, as a similar experiment was being tried in Honduras – it did not in itself represent a long-lasting solution to the problem of gang violence. It was at best a stop-gap measure that offered some respite from violence; but maintaining the ensuing calm would pose continuing moral and political challenges for the government. Should dialogue remain the preferred policy, its chances of long-term success could be enhanced by the support of the international community, which had been generally critical of the process to date.

In any case, an important outcome of the Salvadoran initiative was that a fundamentally new approach to the criminal gang problem had emerged, and had enjoyed some success in curbing violence. Thus the conversation on this issue had dramatically shifted in El Salvador and inevitably beyond, from a steadfast insistence on strong-arm responses to greater acceptance of prevention, dialogue and rehabilitation.

These misgivings aside, many participants welcomed the truce model as a historic opportunity for the countries in Central America to address their serious gang violence problems. Recalling that all other approaches had failed to efficiently tackle armed violence, proponents believed that the benefits of the El Salvador truce far outweighed its disadvantages. Law enforcement agencies had previously been unable to cope with the problem, the judicial system was overwhelmed and prisons overflowed. Military-driven strategies and security crackdowns had

The role of faith-based peacemaking in conflict resolution

Although widely recognised as a key factor in conflict, participants noted that religion was often portrayed more as a cause than a solution. It could, however, also be a powerful force for conflict resolution; at its best, it acted as a societal 'glue' that brought people together. When religious leaders were supportive of dialogue, their weight could prove decisive. Having lived and worked locally before, during and after conflict, they had an intimate understanding of the origins of conflict, its context, key players and interests. They enjoyed considerable trust and respect in their communities, and could therefore influence conflict parties from a position of credibility.

But religion could also be harnessed by the State as a political ideology and used for 'proxy warfare'. One participant observed that the longer a conflict continued, the more religiously charged it tended to become. In the hands of cynical politicians, religion was often used to incite violence and exploit societal divisions. Participants cited the examples of Pakistan, whose blasphemy law had been used as an excuse for violence; and various authoritarian States, where religious leaders were cynically manipulated to broaden the legitimacy of ruling regimes. In such instances, religious actors became mere pawns in a war game.

Distortions of faith were a common tool for fuelling inter-faith tensions, as seen recently in Indonesia (Muslim-Christian disputes), the Arab world (where democratic protest movements had morphed into sectarian clashes) and Myanmar (Buddhist-Muslim violence in Rakhine State). In some cases, religious leaders played a destructive role in conflicts, which in turn eroded the credibility of their faith. A Buddhist representative argued that while true Buddhism rejected extremism, recent events in Myanmar had damaged the reputation of that peace-loving religion.

One contributor emphasised that, since religions would always maintain their own narrative regarding certain issues, the most hopeful outcome was that each side would learn to at least respect the other's views. Accordingly, an important role of peace-minded religious leaders was to humanise the 'other.' This meant more than preaching 'tolerance', which by itself would never suffice to circumvent conflict; instead religious actors had to promote mutual understanding and acceptance of other parties and their narratives, even in the absence of substantive agreement.

Some participants called for the media to play a more constructive role by highlighting the positive aspects of religion in peacemaking. Media often exacerbated tensions by misrepresenting facts, exaggerating inter-faith rifts or inciting violence. The demand for real-time, concise reporting meant that religion was often covered in a cursory and oversimplified way; it was easier for a journalist to generalise, for example, than to delve sensitively into the underlying disputes between Syria's Sunnis and Shi'ites. Reporting tended to stress the pernicious aspects of religion, on the assumption that this was of greater interest to the audience. On the other hand, a good news story – for example a meeting between leaders of different faiths – was unlikely to be deemed newsworthy. However, the revolutionary changes currently afoot in the industry (including the rise of social media) could present new opportunities. To maximise them, one media representative urged religious actors and peacemakers to be more proactive in persuading journalists of their stories and ensuring that reporting was better informed and analytically critical.

Interlinkages between peacemakers and religious actors had strengthened in recent years. A report by the UN Secretary General that highlighted the underutilisation of religious leaders in peace work had triggered the launch of a religious leaders' peace mediation network in 2013. Other organisations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, had also taken recent steps to strengthen the role of religious actors in mediation.

The general sense in the audience was that religious actors and mediators frequently shared common end goals. They should therefore work together where practical by harnessing and complementing each others' skills and influence. (To illustrate the point, one participant claimed that a group of Jewish rabbis had once met with and convinced Yasser Arafat to call for non-violence – something diplomats had found impossible to achieve.) While it was not always advantageous, involving religious leaders in peace processes could often ensure that faith would not be used as a spoiler once agreements were signed.

At a crossroads: sustaining transformation in Somalia

In the context of Somalia's ongoing democratic transition, participants took the opportunity to debate the inclusivity of its state-building efforts, international involvement, and the divisive question of the future system of government. There was broad agreement that completing a comprehensive transition (including elections and a referendum on a new constitution) by the 2016 deadline would be an exceedingly difficult task in Somalia's uniquely trying circumstances.

Even so, there were grounds for cautious optimism. Steady progress had been made recently; federal institutions were being strengthened and the Government, despite controlling limited territory, enjoyed more legitimacy than its predecessors. Still, serious capacity constraints meant that it would have to rely considerably on continued international support which, if well-targeted, could help strengthen the Government's legitimacy and broaden its support base.

Drawing parallels with Afghanistan, one speaker recalled that a new leadership there had generated similar enthusiasm in 2001. The international community had attempted to shore up that central Government's legitimacy and, consequently, power had coalesced around the centre, while regional authorities were neglected. Eventually disillusionment with an underperforming central Government set in, by which time the regions were weak and the Taliban had exploited the situation to re-emerge as a potent force. The critical lesson was that in conflict environments, it was important to invest in all the levels of government that were playing a beneficial role. It would be prudent for the Somali Government and its international backers to learn from such cases, namely by working with and building on well-functioning existing institutions, including those in the autonomous regions.

Inclusivity would be vital to the transition's success. A sceptical populace had to feel that it owned the process; for example, commissions appointed to administer the various activities (constitution drafting, elections, etc) had to include mechanisms for proper public consultation, and be perceived as legitimate and representative. To be credible, the entire state-building enterprise should involve all sectors of society; were it to become identified with any specific group, spoilers would derail it. Views diverged on engaging with Al Shabaab, with some claiming that while its hardcore jihadist element (led by Moktar Ali Zubeyr, or 'Godane') was uncompromising, the nationalist/pragmatic wing could potentially be lured towards a more pragmatic stance, followed by much of the rank and file. Others thought this unrealistic, and insisted that outreach to Al Shabaab be considered only if it adopted a constructive attitude to societal reconciliation and nation building, which it had violently opposed until now.

Finding agreement on Somalia's future system of government would be challenging. The federal Government would have to engage in a difficult discussion with regions that had been autonomous or largely ungoverned for many years. One speaker envisaged the future central Government as little more than a 'coordinating mechanism' for the regions, mandated to manage revenue- and resource-sharing and similar functions. Another contributor encouraged flexible, 'positive-sum' solutions (inspiration might be drawn, for example, from the 'one country, two systems' arrangement between China and Hong Kong, or other creative examples of 'asymmetric federalism'). Ultimately, Somalis should be allowed to determine their preferred centre-periphery arrangement in a genuine, fair vote on the constitution (as was forecast by 2016).

In contrast, some speakers considered the determined push for 'federalism at all costs' (supported by much of the international community) to be misguided and potentially damaging to Somalia's regions. One contributor believed that forcefully reconstructing a Somali state that had 'ceased to exist' over 20 years ago would undercut the impressive progress made, on its own, by Somaliland – the only entity in the Horn of Africa that could claim to have achieved functional democracy, stability and the rule of law. Another speaker feared that the ongoing Somali-

land/federal Government dialogue was destined for a dead end, as neither side could move sufficiently towards the other's position: the Somaliland Government was bound by its constitution to uphold that entity's 'independence' and, conversely, the federal Government was obliged to maintain Somalia's territorial integrity. For each side, it would be political suicide to depart from these basic principles. Thus, common ground was hard to find.

There was criticism of the international community's historically haphazard and uncoordinated engagement in Somalia; it had tended to 'dip in and out' and without adequately consulting with civil society, elders and women. Somalia's political overhaul would have to be much more than a technical 'box ticking' exercise typically endorsed by donors; instead it represented a complete societal revolution that would require the buy-in of all Somalis. The international community thus needed to work in unison to encourage broad based intra-Somali dialogue. In turn, that dialogue process must not be imposed from outside (like so many failed peace processes) but should be shaped by local interests and draw on the strengths of Somalia's indigenous traditions.

Myanmar's peace process at a critical juncture

Since 2011, Myanmar had been on a path of rapid transformation affecting all sectors of society. According to most speakers in this session, significant progress had been made to overcome the legacy of Myanmar's longstanding military rule and reintegrate Myanmar into the international community. Participants discussed the challenges and opportunities encountered during Myanmar's democratic transition, with a particular focus on its peace processes.

Despite various attempts to reduce violence in the past, including the conclusion of numerous ceasefire agreements, a sustainable resolution of Myanmar's ethnic conflict had remained elusive. The conflicts in Myanmar, as one participant recalled, were some of the longest-running in the world and had involved up to 500,000 troops on the Government side, pitted against 60,000-70,000 opponents.

The Government had outlined a phased approach for settling ethnic disputes, namely through the conclusion of ceasefire agreements followed by political dialogue. Initial results had, by many accounts, been encouraging. At the time of the Oslo Forum, eleven ceasefire agreements had been concluded and there

were prospects of a breakthrough in the last remaining conflict between the Government and the Kachin Independence Organisation/Army.

Despite generally favourable assessments of recent progress, participants stressed the importance of the period ahead; in particular, the need to fully capitalise on the absence of violence and deliver real peace dividends. Specifically, focus should now shift towards the implementation of a comprehensive political dialogue aimed at achieving sustainable peace country-wide.

There lay significant challenges ahead, and in spite of the ceasefires, some ethnic minorities still harboured significant grievances. These included a perceived lack of autonomy for ethnic groups; military presence in their territories (which in some cases had swelled following the conclusion of ceasefire agreements); concerns about the environment and land rights as property belonging to ethnic groups attracted the attention of investors; ambiguity concerning the authorisation, construction, and sharing of revenues from large infrastructure projects; lack of language rights in schools; and the absence of political dialogue with the Government.

Many of these issues reflected a lack of trust between ethnic groups and the Government. In order to build that trust, the peace processes would need to become more transparent. In the past, one participant recalled that talks were often conducted without the public being informed. For peace to take root, progress had to be visible and tangible not only for those brokering deals, but also for women, peripheral minority communities, and other neglected segments of society, all of whom should be included in the political dialogue process and enjoy its benefits.

Additional trust-building proposals raised during the discussion included the introduction of a code of conduct for the various armed groups, and the establishment of local monitoring mechanisms comprising army personnel, civilian organisations, and local communities to oversee compliance with such a code

of conduct. Separately, humanitarian demining was mentioned as a measure that could help strengthen ceasefires, civilian oversight, and cooperation with civil society. Meanwhile, the United Nations and other external actors could play a useful guarantors' role in the ongoing transition.

Participants also discussed recent communal violence in Rakhine State between local Buddhist communities and the Rohingya Muslim minority. Against the background of an otherwise improving security situation in the country, some contributors considered that these tensions had the potential to disrupt Myanmar's transition. Strong Government action was needed to prevent these clashes in future.

The general sentiment was that Myanmar had come a long way in recent years, but that much still needed to be done to overcome Myanmar's challenges. Ultimately, prospects for sustainable peace hinged on Myanmar's ability to consolidate its recent gains and embark on a genuine political process of dialogue and reconciliation.

Closing Session
Regional approaches to conflict mediation and inclusivity

To conclude the Oslo Forum, participants engaged in a discussion on regional approaches to peacemaking, during which the issue of inclusivity was also addressed. Importantly, the session allowed participants to reflect on the main themes emerging from the Forum. Key exchanges revolved around three core areas: (i) regional characteristics of conflict management; (ii) the importance of inclusivity in mediation; and (iii) the need for creative responses to increasingly complex conflict dynamics (or peacemaking 'through a different lens').

Regional characteristics
In the Middle East context, one panellist suggested that today's Syria had become the archetypal case of the 'spill-in' effect so common to the region. In many conflicts elsewhere in the world, a major concern was 'spill-over' across borders. While the Syrian conflict was increasingly affecting the neighbourhood, it was notable too for the significant number of outsiders it attracted, each seeking to exploit the conflict for their own ends. They included 'international Islamic brigades' (possibly as many as 20,000 fighters from 40 countries) and Hezbollah.

Moving to Africa, there was an exchange regarding the choice of suitable mediators – or more specifically, whether it was prudent to involve neighbouring countries in mediation. Citing the case of Mali, one panellist suggested that this could be advantageous, as neighbours had a solid understanding of one another's cultures and contexts, and therefore knew best what tools to employ and how to apply pressure. But in Mali, mediation alone would never have been enough; without the French intervention, it was doubtful that dialogue could have achieved rapid results.

Asia represented a very different environment for outside mediators. There, governments tended to resist foreign involvement; it was suggested, for example, that India had effectively sealed itself off from excessive international scrutiny of its peace processes. In response, though, one expert countered that India was inclined to occasionally allow outside involvement, but in the

form of 'facilitation'. On the whole, India was still in the process of defining its conception of 'peacemaking'; as seen in Kashmir, it had become well-versed in conflict management, but not necessarily conflict resolution.

Inclusivity
As the debate turned to inclusivity, one speaker contended that there were certain scenarios in which a legitimate trade-off could be made between ensuring representativeness at the negotiation table, and getting the job done quickly. The Dayton agreement was one such case – it had effectively disregarded civil society and sidelined women in the negotiations, but achieved an end to the bloodshed. Might these 'oversights' be tolerable in some contexts, where the gravest need was to 'silence the guns' as swiftly as possible?

While conceding that it had stopped the fighting, others argued that Dayton was not a good model for delivering sustainable peace. For the mentality of peace to take root in any society, inclusivity was key; any national peace project needed to accommodate the unique perspectives and challenges of women and minorities. A truly representative dialogue would, consequently, help stave off the influence of spoilers from disaffected sectors of the community. Credible research had shown that the treatment of women in society was the most accurate bellwether of potential security problems. Therefore, although some mediators found it 'uncomfortable' to insist on women's inclusivity, their participation could be critical to the long-term success of any peace dialogue.

At the same time, mediators had to be cautious when determining who would participate in dialogue. It was particularly important to avoid the trap of confounding weapons with influence. Mali was a case in point: the notion that arming oneself was the simplest way to win a seat at the negotiating table had yielded counterproductive results, namely a more confused conflict landscape with more armed groups, and silencing of

the unarmed majority that would be crucial to Mali's eventual recovery. Mediators had to be alert to this problem when designing peace processes, by allowing all legitimate stakeholders a chance to be heard.

This point accorded with calls made throughout the Forum for policymakers to rethink their instinctive state-centricity and pay more attention to non-traditional conflict actors and local populations. Today's conflicts involved an increasingly broad range of stakeholders; hence the concept of the state as a baseline for all policymaking was becoming outdated.

Peacemaking 'Through a Different Lens'
In line with this year's theme, participants took a final opportunity to view mediation 'through a different lens' and explore innovative ways to respond to conflict. Fundamentally, there was broad recognition that the mediator's 'toolbox' required continuous upgrading to adapt to newly emerging actors and conflict triggers, and increasingly complex realities.

One example was gang violence, which in certain 'post-conflict' countries (and often their neighbours) was becoming deadlier than traditional armed conflict. As this area was still largely unexplored by the mediation profession, it deserved greater attention in the coming years. Given the interconnections between the end of armed conflict and the continuation of other forms of serious violence, it was worth considering what traditional mediators might contribute to mitigation efforts.

Finally, the theme of incoherent and inconsistent policy responses to conflict re-emerged in the closing session. Simplistic, impulsive judgments about 'good' versus 'bad' conflict actors had contributed greatly to a muddled policy landscape (see Syria), limited the flexibility of peacemakers, and risked prolonging conflict. In practice, the identities, allegiances, and attitudes of conflict parties could change frequently in the heat of battle. Accordingly, policymakers needed to be prudent in

their assumptions, as circumstances were rarely straightforward. In turn, peacemakers required sufficient space to operate when conditions, actors and dynamics changed. Restrictive government policies only served to limit the room for manœuvre, which risked ruling out good options further down the track. As had become evident throughout the Oslo Forum's wide-ranging discussions, mediators too needed to approach conflict with an open mind. Conflict dynamics were changing rapidly; and to respond effectively, peace practitioners had to keep adapting, with new and creative tools at the ready.

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