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OSLOFORUM

Spaces for dialogue in a polarised world



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Centre for
Humanitarian
Dialogue

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

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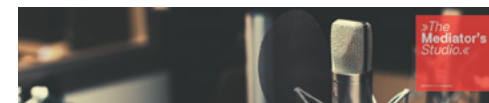
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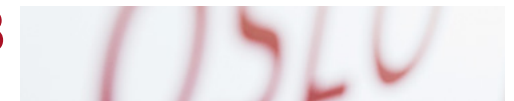
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Participants**The Oslo Forum Team**

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Photos: HD, Unsplash, iStock

About the Oslo Forum

A global series of mediation retreats

The Oslo Forum is widely acknowledged as the leading international network of conflict mediation practitioners. Co-hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Oslo Forum regularly convenes conflict mediators, 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, complemented by regional retreats as well as publications and podcasts. By facilitating open exchange and reflection across institutional and conceptual divides, providing informal networking opportunities, and sharing insights, the Oslo Forum aims to improve the practice of conflict mediation. On occasion, the Oslo Forum has also provided space for conflict parties to advance their negotiations.

Sharing experiences and insights

The growing number of actors involved in mediation practice is testament to its emergence as a distinct field of international diplomacy. But the pressured working environment of mediation and dialogue – especially today, in the context of the growing risk and harsh reality of inter-state conflict – rarely provides time and space for reflection. Given the immense challenges of bringing conflict parties to the table, starting dialogue processes, and eventually achieving sustainable negotiated solutions to violent conflicts, mediators benefit from looking beyond their own experience for guidance, inspiration and support. The unique setting of the Oslo Forum provides this opportunity.

Where politics meets practice

Sessions at the Oslo Forum are designed to stimulate informed exchanges and take the form of closed-door discussions, under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution. Participants, who attend by invitation only, comprise a range of key actors and decision-makers in mediation and peacemaking. They include government and elected officials, representatives of multilateral organisations, practitioners from civil society organisations, analysts, experts and journalists.



Among the list of eminent previous participants are:

- **Kofi Annan**, former Secretary-General of the United Nations;
- **Catherine Ashton**, former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy;
- **Fatou Bensouda**, former Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court;
- **Jimmy Carter**, former President of the United States;
- **António Guterres**, Secretary-General of the United Nations;
- **John Kerry**, former Secretary of State of the United States;
- **Thabo Mbeki**, former President of South Africa;
- **Catherine Samba-Panza**, former President of the Central African Republic; and
- **Juan Manuel Santos**, former President of Colombia.

The Oslo Forum is proud to have welcomed several Nobel Peace Prize laureates.



Agenda overview

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Tuesday
June 2022

08:30 – 09:00	<i>Opening conversation with the Prime Minister of Norway</i>		
09:00 – 10:15	<i>Opening plenary</i> Spaces for dialogue in a polarised world		
10:45 – 12:00	Session 1 Yemen: from truce to political settlement?	Session 2 Ethiopia: options for dialogue	Session 3 Making the stars align: local and international interests in peace processes
13:30 – 14:45	Session 1 Negotiations with jihadists in the Sahel	Session 2 Mediation and mass protests	Session 3 Lebanon – situation report
15:15 – 16:15	<i>Afternoon tea</i> with Rob Malley and Enrique Mora on the JCPOA negotiations		
16:45 – 18:00	Session 1 Dealing with the fallout: peacemaking in post-coup contexts	Session 2 Between superpowers: inter-state dialogue in Southeast Asia	Session 3 What next for Afghanistan?
18:15 – 19:45	<i>The Mediator's Studio</i> with David Gorman		

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Wednesday
June 2022

09:00 – 10:15	<i>Opening plenary</i> European and international security in the wake of the war in Ukraine		
10:45 – 12:00	Session 1 Libya: the way forward	Session 2 Opportunities and risks on the humanitarian – political spectrum	Session 3 The Mediator's Dilemma – roundtable
13:00 – 14:00	<i>A lunchtime conversation</i> with former President Santos and former President Chissano		
14:15 – 15:45	Session 1 Venezuela: expectations for a negotiation process	Session 2 Private military companies: the elephant in the room?	Session 3 Nigeria – situation report
16:15 – 17:30	<i>Closing plenary</i> Balance of power: dialogue and energy security		

Oslo Forum 2022 report

John O'Callaghan and Giles Pitts
with Sebastian Kratzer and Yodit Lemma

The Oslo Forum returned in June 2022 after a two-year pandemic hiatus. More than 120 senior mediators, diplomats and conflict experts from 50 countries gathered to assess prospects for peacemaking as seismic shifts transform geopolitics, redraw alliances and challenge norms.

The theme '**Spaces for dialogue in a polarised world**' served as a red thread through the two-day retreat and a reaffirmation of a key objective of the Oslo Forum. As the co-hosts – Anniken Huitfeldt, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and David Harland, Executive Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) – said in their welcome letter, it is "more urgent than ever to preserve the Oslo Forum as a space for dialogue and reflection across institutional and ideological divides".

Against a backdrop of political polarisation and the reality of inter-state conflict, this year's

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Distinguished participants

Participants at the 2022 Oslo Forum included:

- Yemen's Minister of Foreign Affairs **Ahmad Awad Bin Mubarak**
- United Arab Emirates' Minister of State for International Cooperation **Reem Al Hashimy**
- Iran's Deputy Minister for International and Legal Affairs **Reza Najafi**
- Chad's Senior Minister for National Reconciliation and Dialogue **Acheikh Ibn-Oumar**
- United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs **Rosemary DiCarlo**
- African Union Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security **Bankole Adeoye**
- Three former presidents: **Joaquim Chissano** of Mozambique, **Juan Manuel Santos** of Colombia and **Olusegun Obasanjo** of Nigeria, who is now the African Union High Representative for the Horn of Africa.



Jonas Gahr Støre

theme encouraged participants to reflect on the place of mediation in a contested world. How does dialogue and mediation practice need to evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st century? And in the absence of a shared global paradigm for conflict resolution, what norms and values should guide this work?

Opening with keynote remarks from the Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre, the Forum welcomed many distinguished guests (Box 1) and – under the Chatham House Rule – discussions were frank and far-ranging.

The Forum also remains a conducive space to support negotiations. This year, participants included government and opposition negotiators from Venezuela. Discussions on Ukrainian grain exports took place between Rustem Umerov, Special Envoy of the President of Ukraine; Martin Griffiths, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs; and David Gorman of HD.



Martin Kimani (top left); Mutlaq M. Alqahtani and Christina Buchhold (top centre); Anniken Huitfeldt (top right); Rosemary DiCarlo and Ghassan Salamé (bottom right); Aliyu Gebi, Bashir Aliyu Umar and Knut Eiliv Lein (bottom left)



Throughout the event, participants reflected on opportunities and challenges for mediators and peacemakers as the old order and its safeguards fade, and many conflicts defy efforts to achieve peace. As one participant noted about the international system: “We have become good at starting wars but not at stopping them”.

Glimmers of hope exist, participants said, even if many situations remain fragile and regular routes for dialogue are narrowing.

“Negotiators must look at big screwdrivers rather than big hammers,” one speaker said, emphasising the use of subtle techniques and incentives to help conflict parties move towards a solution, in contrast to blunter tools such as sanctions. “We have to be opportunistic to find openings for peace.”

European and international security

The global implications of the war in Ukraine were a recurring topic – from the opening plenary where participants discussed the rupturing of the global order and its impact on other conflicts to a dedicated session

on **‘European and international security in the wake of the war in Ukraine’** and a closing plenary on **‘Balance of power: dialogue and energy security’**.

In the midst of “an 18th century war in the age of the iPhone”, participants spoke of the need to avoid past mistakes and make up for missed opportunities by redesigning the security architecture of institutions, treaties and norms to promote stability in Europe and beyond.

In the case of the UN Security Council, the veto power and privileges of its five permanent members are under scrutiny. As one participant noted, there was acceptance of the undemocratic nature of the UN in return for global stability but institutional trust is now waning. A move by the General Assembly requiring Security Council members to explain the use of their veto was seen as a potentially positive development and, more broadly, there was hope that reforms would emerge from this crisis.

Many countries reacted quickly with sanctions against Russia and weapons for Ukraine but participants noted that the deep historical roots of the conflict, Russia’s role as a key energy exporter and a tradition of mistrust



Joaquim Alberto Chissano (top left); Juan Ramón de la Fuente and Judyta Wasowska (top right); Robert Malley (bottom right); Shah Gul Rezaie and Sanam Naraghi Anderlini (bottom centre); Romain Grandjean, Salah Elbakkoush and Stephanie Williams (bottom left)

between Russia and the West all require more long-term vision – rather than “damage-control diplomacy” – to achieve a long-term solution.

“Without a clear definition of Ukraine’s security status, it will be impossible to imagine a sustainable European security architecture,” one speaker said. “Otherwise, it will be a system of sustained insecurity.”

In the immediate term, another said, the parties must “move towards painful negotiations” to end the war by working on small pieces so that big pieces fall into place. At the same time, major themes such as food and energy security must be integral parts of diplomacy more broadly.

A grinding stalemate in Ukraine would not help mediation efforts elsewhere or be a strong foundation for a new security order. And given the interlinked nature of the war in Ukraine with other crises involving some of the same major powers – such as Libya, Yemen and Syria – there were concerns that anything less than a comprehensive solution would lead to further instability.



Lyse Doucet and Pierre Vimont



Gerardo Blyde, Teresa Whitfield and Jorge J. Rodríguez Gómez

Binding security guarantees such as NATO’s Article 5 on collective defence do not rule out the risk of regional escalation. As one participant put it, a change of mindsets in Moscow, Washington, Brussels and other capitals is required. Efforts must go further to “build up institutions and confidence to change the game we’re playing”.

Despite roadblocks in the Security Council and the need for a clearer UN diplomatic mission, the UN-led efforts to negotiate shipments of Ukrainian grain from Odesa’s port were seen as positive steps to encourage dialogue and lessen the impact of the global food crisis on developing economies.

Work on fresh arms control measures was another potential avenue for progress, participants said, noting that non-aligned and in-between states have constructive roles to play.

While much attention has focused on the current and potential roles of China, a partner to Russia without being an ally, one speaker dismissed the idea that Beijing would act as a global go-between.

“China is playing an interesting diplomatic game,” he said. “China is too big a country to be invested in honest brokering. It will not mediate as it has too many interests. Big countries are not the best players in the mediation game.”

Two paths have emerged for countries in between, one participant said. For the likes of Sweden and Finland, the war has eliminated grey zones around neutrality and persuaded them to seek NATO membership. For many nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, new grey zones have emerged and alliances are now more fluid.

The broken global supply chains and lack of solidarity during the pandemic had shown many countries that it was important to look out for themselves and to pivot towards more regionally focused platforms and initiatives.

“Africans understand how important their security architecture is and will focus more on that,” one speaker said. “It’s time to focus on what can be done, first of all for Ukraine but also as an opportunity to address



Sanam Naraghi Anderlini

other issues in Africa. So this crisis may lead to an Africa that is more self-sufficient.”

For all countries, the issue of energy security looms large – even as accelerating climate change impacts economies, conflicts and the lives of billions of people.

Participants agreed on the need to prioritise the reduction of emissions and global temperatures but there was considerable debate about whether immediate needs and fears for the future would ramp up the use of fossil fuels at the expense of progress on the transition to renewable energy.

“To mediators, if you haven’t seen the energy crisis in your work yet, you will soon,” one speaker said. “Energy will play into dynamics that can cause conflicts, but the good thing is we know what is going on and we know how to diversify and tap into the new energy value chain. We cannot think about energy in a silo but as part of a holistic approach to transition.”

For developing countries, the transition is not as straightforward, several participants said. Issues include energy and climate policies dictated by wealthy nations, the supply of fossil fuels controlled by relatively few producers and a lack of infrastructure, investment and sharing of expertise in renewable energy.

“Step out of your zone of privilege and understand that there must be a vision of investment,” one participant said. “If Africa does not get the technology and partnerships to handle that, I anticipate large parts of the developing world will go into denial or surrender and see [the green transition] as a trade-off with development.”

Humanitarian challenges, fragile processes

The world’s humanitarian needs are the most severe in recent history – just as the international system becomes more fragmented, the prices of food and fuel surge, the impact of climate change grows and the challenges increase for governments and aid agencies to access areas and people in crisis.



Olusegun Obasanjo (top left); Alexandre Liebeskind (top centre); Lyse Doucet (top right); Gerardo Blyde, Teresa Whitfield, Jorge J. Rodríguez Gómez and Dag Nylander (bottom right); Kholood Khair (bottom left)

In Ukraine, the war has triggered one of the largest refugee crises on record, with more than 7 million people fleeing the country. Many millions more are displaced internally. In Myanmar, about 1 million people are displaced, most of them since the military coup in early 2021.

In Yemen, almost a decade of armed conflict has caused tens of thousands of civilian casualties and displaced more than 4 million people. As many as 24 million people in Yemen – about 80% of the population – and at least half of the people in Afghanistan need humanitarian assistance.

The UN estimates that 90% of Ethiopia's Tigray region needs urgent aid as war compounds the misery of chronic drought and economic collapse.

With their urgent humanitarian crises, Ethiopia and Yemen were the focus of roundtable discussions that brought key actors together to discuss opportunities and challenges for advancing a political process (see Boxes 2 and 3).

For mediators and peacemakers, the challenge is that humanitarian issues often become the focal point of political negotiations and can be used as bargaining chips by conflict parties and others.

Drawing on Myanmar, Ukraine and other cases, participants discussed '**Opportunities and risks on the humanitarian/political spectrum**'. The session focused on how to promote the protection of civilians in highly politicised environments, the perils and opportunities of moving from issues of humanitarian access to the political track and what more effective cooperation might look like.

For many aid agencies, it is better to keep the two tracks separate to maintain the principles and trust that allow for access and protection, several participants said, even though politics and humanitarian efforts are increasingly intertwined.

"What we see is that this overlap is more and more evident as international frameworks are being dropped and there is disregard and disrespect of these principles," one speaker said. "What do we do in a case like this? We provide guidance to negotiators to maintain these firewalls."

Ultimately, any long-term humanitarian solution must be founded on a political solution, participants agreed. At the same time, cases such as Ukraine and Myanmar provide examples of parties being willing to talk about immediate humanitarian deals without a political solution.



Philip Spoerri, Noeleen Heyzer, David Harland, Rustem Umerov and Ramesh Rajasingham

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Yemen: From truce to political settlement?

The truce in Yemen, agreed on 2 April and extended on 2 June 2022, was a major achievement that provided an important pause to the intense fighting and bloodshed witnessed on multiple fronts. However, the situation remains unstable and the status quo unsustainable; over the past seven years, many truces in Yemen have been agreed and have subsequently broken down.

The big question guiding this roundtable discussion was how to build on the latest truce, which at the time of the Forum was still largely holding. How could peacemakers help to move the situation towards a political dialogue and an eventual settlement?

Several participants suggested that approaching the conflict from a humanitarian angle and not addressing its root causes has been a problem in the past, and cautioned against this happening again.

Participants also discussed the risk of being caught in the weeds of trying to implement the truce – the potential trap of a piecemeal approach with new conditionalities being brought into play – and instead urged peacemakers to focus on the bigger picture. For example, they said, the security and economic elements of the truce could be used as potential foundations for a multitrack process.

Contributors noted that deepening the truce could help to strengthen the deterrent of breaking it and show it is delivering for various constituencies rather than simply providing temporary respite for conflict parties. One participant argued that the focus should be on “creating a political horizon that shows that the peace dividend is the better option” compared to repeated cycles of violence.

Regarding the international community, one participant suggested that too much eagerness to reach a political settlement could sow the seeds of further conflict. Instead, if the situation is not yet ripe for peace, international actors should avoid rushing and help to formulate an interim strategy that will ease living conditions for Yemenis.

The discussion also touched on the importance of institution building, with several participants urging international actors to provide technical and economic support to the Presidential Leadership Council.

Comparative cases raised during the discussion included Colombia, with one participant noting the importance of having a vision for sequencing and how the road to a permanent ceasefire links to political objectives. “What is the formula and narrative that gives hope that you can get to a settlement at some stage?”

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Ethiopia: Options for dialogue

In a roundtable discussion on Ethiopia, participants noted several key points: that the inability of the international community, including the African Union (AU), to prevent the war has eroded trust; that a resolution will require small steps to open the way for a wider agreement; and that Ethiopia's problems cannot be fixed by focusing solely on the conflict in Tigray.

Participants called for a comprehensive solution, starting with a three-pronged approach to dialogue – between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and between the federal government and representatives of the Amhara and Oromia regions – before an all-inclusive national dialogue process can take place.

Some progress has been made and there are opportunities for dialogue, participants said. The mutual recognition of political parties was an important stepping-stone. There was hope that a range of international actors engaged in Ethiopia – the UN, EU, AU, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the US and Kenya – can help to generate consensus on the comprehensive issues for dialogue in Tigray, Amhara and Oromia, and then a broader national dialogue as the next phase.

In relation to Tigray, participants said a permanent declaration of a Cessation of Hostilities between the federal government and the regional state must be agreed to consolidate humanitarian access, remove the blockade and enable the broadening of space for dialogue on national issues. There were calls for international actors to provide coordinated support to former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as the lead AU mediator between Tigray and the Ethiopian government.

Despite the potential for progress on a negotiated solution, challenges abound. Participants said envoys should agree on an approach for more robust regional engagement by the AU, UN, US and EU to avoid a spillover of the Ethiopia conflict into the Horn of Africa and to minimise the impact of potential regional spoilers.

Looking further afield in the context of a multipolar world, leverage points over Ethiopia also include China, Russia and the United Arab Emirates. Participants noted a current lack of complementarity between the AU, the West and the East, and argued that overlapping international and national interests must be coordinated or else conflict parties could exploit the gaps between different dialogue processes and external actors.

Either way, a realistic imagining of the future is vital. As one participant put it: “We must tell ourselves that resolving the Ethiopia conflict is going to take a long time”.



Dag Nylander and Jorge J. Rodríguez Gómez (top left); Babatunde Afolabi and David Harland (top right); Jens-Petter Kjemprud, Haile Menkerios and Hanna S. Tetteh (bottom right); Jeff Feltman, Annette Weber and Yodit Lemma (bottom left); Bilahari Kausikan (left centre inner); Mona Juul (left centre outer)

It is important to engage with a wide range of parties – from international actors and the government to armed groups, community organisations and the people affected – to find the most pragmatic path.

“The old way of delivering humanitarian assistance cannot fill the last miles, so we need new ways of delivering it,” one speaker said. “Put the suffering of people at the centre and use whatever channels you have to deliver to the people.”

Careful management is required in cases where humanitarian issues have become a “sweetener” to start a political process, participants agreed, but cooperation is vital to share expertise and ensure different elements of negotiations are coordinated. “Complementarity is the word on a broad range from the tactical to the strategic.”



The Mediator's Studio, with David Gorman and Lyse Doucet

Prospects for negotiations

The Oslo Forum offers an opportunity for peacemakers, mediators and conflict parties to reflect on and debate the prospects for ongoing or potential negotiations. The agenda featured a range of such sessions, including a plenary discussion on progress in the JCPOA negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme and several country-specific cases – where instability and economic crises have become chronic and there is often a lack of international media attention.

JCPOA negotiations

At the time of the Oslo Forum, hopes for a positive resolution to negotiations to restore the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) were fading into uncertainty. In a lively session, participants discussed a range of issues including the impact and potential lifting of sanctions, the role of regional actors and the prospects for an agreement.

While indirect talks had taken place between the US and Iran, with the EU acting as an intermediary, there was acceptance among participants that the more time passes without a deal, the less likely it becomes. As one person said, “it's dangerous to think that time passing doesn't have a cost”.

The conversation also covered the challenges of building a shared understanding of compliance between the US and Iran, and the influence of the US political climate, including upcoming mid-term elections and the lack of certainty about the longevity of an agreement under a potential Republican administration.

While one participant argued that the majority view is that both sides would be better off with a deal, it was recognised that politics are currently prevailing over rationality. As such, the session concluded with the reflection that there are reasons to be optimistic but also many justifications for pessimism.

Venezuela: Expectations for a negotiation process

In the case of Venezuela, with the government and opposition heads of delegation on the panel, the discussions looked back at the negotiation



process and ahead to the possibility of resuming talks. The conversation touched on possible outcomes and the support needed from the international community and especially the region, bearing in mind recent political changes in Latin America.

Participants noted the election of US President Biden had given fresh impetus to the process. The softening of US sanctions and positive signals from the parties had helped to create momentum, although there was some uncertainty around the potential impact of the upcoming US elections.

There was recognition of the international community's support for the process after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in Mexico City in August 2021 and of Norway's role in facilitating and building the dialogue process.

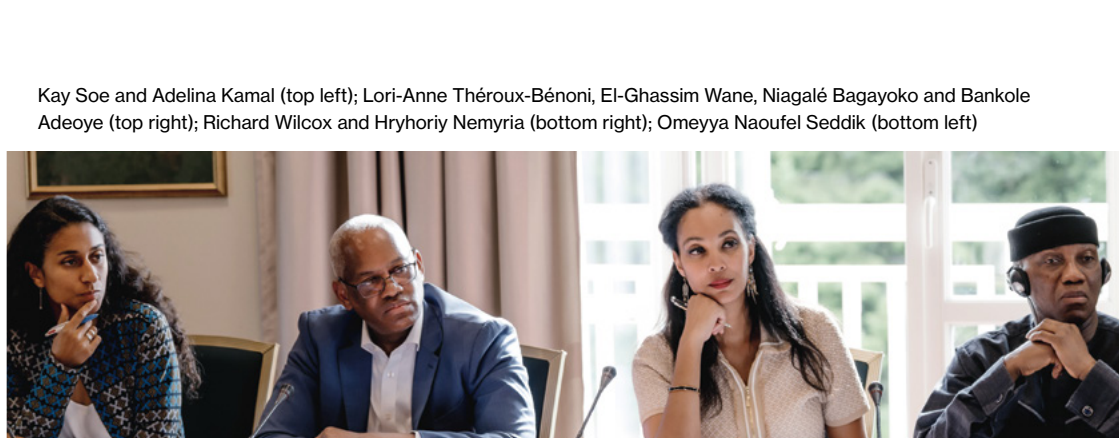
The wide-ranging discussion also touched on the issue of building support for an agreement in the context of political polarisation.

It was emphasised that civil society is likely to support the process when people start to see the benefits in their daily lives, and there must be a consultation mechanism so the public feels heard. While the session concluded with cautious optimism, there was recognition that the hard work is only just beginning.

Libya: The way forward

Much work also remains for peacemakers in Libya. The Forum's session – held at the same time as the interim government's mandate was being questioned in Libya – included discussions on the direction of the current process, the ideal sequence of events (elections first or the formation of a new interim government?) and the role of Libya's High Council of State and House of Representatives.

The 2020 ceasefire and Roadmap were rare bits of good news in recent years, participants said, but with planned elections postponed and a rival government now present, the situation risked sliding backwards.



Kay Soe and Adelina Kamal (top left); Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni, El-Ghassim Wane, Niagalé Bagayoko and Bankole Adeoye (top right); Richard Wilcox and Hryhoriy Nemyria (bottom right); Omeyya Naoufel Seddik (bottom left)

They agreed that a major challenge, demonstrated by the emergence of rival governments, is the question of legitimacy in Libya – and that this cannot be known until elections are held. But as one participant argued, many politicians elected 10 years ago are still playing an active part in Libyan politics, with some considering elections a threat.

While one participant suggested it is “time to say enough is enough” and look for an alternative path, others cautioned that the political process has been defined in the Berlin process and the Roadmap, and there is therefore no need to reinvent the wheel despite the delays.

While there are many ongoing challenges, including the presence of various rebel groups and mercenaries in southern Libya, participants identified reasons for hope: the ceasefire is largely holding, and the level of foreign interference and impact of mercenaries appears to be declining.



Joaquim Alberto Chissano



What next for Afghanistan?

Nearly a year after the Taliban seized power, participants discussed how Afghans can chart a path towards sustainable peace and progress. In the midst of a grave humanitarian, human rights and governance situation, one contributor said the Taliban needs to be held accountable but that dialogue must happen to have any chance of change.

According to one speaker, lasting peace and an inclusive political settlement for Afghanistan will be achieved only through meaningful inter-Afghan talks. In the meantime, with the country's international isolation contributing to economic and humanitarian crises, there is a challenge for external actors to coordinate their response.

With some approaches now involving temporary cooperation without recognition of the Taliban, questions arose about the principles that might be used to build consensus in the international community around a strategy of engagement. “If we don't engage in Afghanistan now, we will have to intervene later to fight terrorism and to deal with new armed conflict between extremist groups,” one speaker said.



As another participant put it, engagement does not have to mean recognition. What matters is continuing to engage, including through backchannels. “It is better to be in close contact than not.”

This engagement includes the issue of girls’ education, which was a major topic of discussion alongside internal Taliban dynamics. Although the Taliban reversed a decision to open schools for girls, one contributor said, the episode shows there are elements within the regime that progressive actors can work with, but that discussions about ideology are always tough, even if hardliners are a minority.

In terms of next steps for international actors, participants discussed the role of the US, the merits of continuing to implement the Doha Agreement, and Pakistan as a part of the solution if it agrees to play a positive role. “Do I have hope? We cannot afford to lose it,” one panellist said.

Talking to hard-to-reach and hard-to-influence groups

Military coups and jihadist insurrections can be driven by the same shortfalls: the inability of civilian governments to provide security, basic services and economic opportunities to their people. Countries in and around the Sahel have suffered from coups and jihadist violence – plus the impact of mercenary groups and criminal organisations whose motives and influence are not always clear.

“Jihadism is here to stay. So far, it has been a conversation around if we should talk. We go beyond and say what if we did it,” one speaker said in the session **‘Negotiations with jihadists in the Sahel’**, adding that it is critical to find out what jihadists want and translate religious positions into political ones. “If you negotiate, there can be four objectives: de-escalate, freeze, solve, surrender. What is talked about by states in relation to jihadists is surrender but there are no initiatives for the three others.”



Juan Manuel Santos (top left); Fatima Gailani and Lisa Golden (top right); Ahmad Awad Bin Mubarak (right centre); Ghassan Salamé (bottom right); Khawla Mattar (bottom left)

The term itself should rightly be subject to nuance and debate, participants said, with some preferring to speak about terrorism and others pointing to the origins of jihad as a defensive resistance.

Frameworks are already in place to negotiate with rebel groups, participants said, but there are tensions between justice, accountability and stability when dealing with jihadists. While dialogue and sustained military pressure could potentially be complementary, participants pointed to the need to harmonise local and international initiatives.

They argued that, while the notion of an “ideal ratio” has been discussed for a long time, there is a general conclusion that a militarised response has worsened the situation on the ground as fighters shift across borders and civilians bear the brunt of the violence.



Pierre Vimont, Catherine Ashton, Oleksandr Chalyi and Renata Dwan

In the Sahel, people experience jihadism “as an imported ideology”, another participant said. “States or countries are basically disappearing, with grave consequences.”

Links between jihadists and criminal groups complicate the picture but exclusion and traditional grievances are often key drivers of the conflicts. “Our main problem in Africa is corruption, not religion,” one contributor said.

“They are rational actors to be taken seriously,” another person said. “Tools are there to engage but there is resistance by the western world to engage. When Muslims say they want Sharia law, they mean they want social justice.”

Ultimately, any peace settlement must involve revisiting the relationship between religion, state and society.

Participants identified the addressing of grievances and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms as potential ways forward, including the Hudna system of temporary truces and the Qadi system of judges interpreting and administering the religious law of Islam. A body of compromises that resonates with jihadists could show that much can be achieved without them interpreting the situation as an ideological defeat.

“Too many believe we need the stick instead of the carrot,” one speaker said.

The discussion turned to negotiating tactics and whether a country-by-country or regional approach is optimal. As one participant noted, trade-offs made by one national government might put their neighbours at risk.

Drawing on experience from Nigeria, another participant responded that groups’ demands are often simple and can be dealt with more effectively at the local level rather than country-by-country. At the same time, every country should develop national security policies that inform and align with regional security policy.

Despite the many civilian, military and theological aspects, often it comes back to issues of land, water and other necessities. “Even if dialogue happens, if basic services will not be provided, it won’t help much. Dialogue is not a panacea. It needs delivery of basic services.”



Dmitrii P. Novikov (top left); Oleksandr Chalyi (top right); Roxaneh Bazergan (right centre); Espen Barth Eide (bottom right); Ngozi Amu and John Kayode Fayemi (bottom left); Karin Landgren (centre)



If 2021 was a bad year for conflict in many parts of Africa, it was also bad for democracy – particularly in the Sahel, West Africa and Sudan.

In the session '**Dealing with the fallout: peacemaking in post-coup contexts**', participants noted that democratic backsliding and military takeovers can flow from a securitised approach to governance as many states in Africa battle violent extremism. The situation is complicated by contradictions within international positions on how to address coups.

For dialogue processes and mediators, a more nuanced approach is required. Preventative diplomacy and mediation may help to avert unconstitutional changes in government in advance, alongside addressing factors that can lead to coups – including corruption, rigged elections and squandering of state resources – and underlying societal issues that generate tensions.

Drawing on cases including Mali, Chad and Sudan, participants also discussed the need for a detailed breakdown of different kinds of coups beyond the basic definition, including democratic dissolution (as in Mali with protests against elected civilian leaders) and dynastic military transitions (as in Chad).

While participants shared concerns about the recent democratic direction of the African continent, the discussion focused on the importance of a measured and constructive approach to transitions back to democracy. In many contexts, the public's priority is security and some may see elections as simply a way of returning a discredited political class to power, one participant noted. Furthermore, a transition timeline set for one country is likely to have an impact on the timelines set for others.

As the session concluded, there was broad agreement on the need for truly inclusive dialogue to address issues of governance and security. There can be no long-term solution without asking the difficult question of whether democracy is working for people in terms of peace, security and development, and avoiding double standards in the scrutiny of the democratic legitimacy of military and civilian regimes.

There was also acknowledgement that the COVID-19 pandemic had restricted the work of mediators on the ground: "Zoom diplomacy can only go so far."

Looking ahead, there were calls for regional organisations such as the African Union to go beyond "statement diplomacy" and the suspension of states to more intensive engagement and diplomacy ahead of time with all parties, including civilians.





In various parts of Africa, as well as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Ukraine, private military companies (PMCs) add unpredictable elements to existing conflicts – not least because mercenaries are used as plausibly deniable proxy actors to advance the geopolitical interests of third-party states, such as the role of the Russia-affiliated Wagner Group in Central African Republic.

In **'Private military companies: the elephant in the room?'**, participants discussed the myriad definitions and terminology associated with private military and security actors, noting that only "mercenary" has an official definition under international law. As one participant put it, "the name that you use is a highly political act".

While the private security industry has tried to distance itself from "the two Ms" – military and mercenaries – participants were urged not to think about private military and security actors as a simple binary between legitimate and illegitimate groups.

In reality, there is a spectrum of actors involved to a greater or lesser extent in hostilities. They may also have other business interests, for example in extractive industries or guarding infrastructure. In any case, participants said, the proliferation of conflict is a breeding ground for new mercenaries.

The lack of any internationally binding instrument on PMC activities poses problems for attempts to regulate their behaviour. For peacemaking actors, the question of engagement is made more complex by their potential autonomy (how to assess when they are acting as proxies?) and, in many cases, their lack of incentive to end a conflict.

In some cases, one speaker added, the groups are becoming embedded in the framework and functioning of the state – a potentially defining characteristic of a new era of PMC activity.

4

Between superpowers: inter-state dialogue in Southeast Asia

In a geopolitically-oriented session, participants discussed the impact of US-China competition in Southeast Asia and cautioned against an oversimplified analysis that reduces the situation to a binary struggle for influence and supremacy.

While one participant noted that there are clear differences in how the US and China pursue diplomacy and conflict resolution – with the US tending towards a policy of compartmentalisation, compared to the Chinese approach of emphasising the inter-connection of different files – there remain issues and geographies in which their interests may converge, while still based on some level of trade-off.

It is too narrow to see the whole region being dictated by US-China competition, another participant argued, when there are other major powers that are sometimes more directly involved and that seek to advance their own regional interests – such as India, Japan and Australia.

Furthermore, regional competition is more complicated and subtle than often portrayed. As other participants pointed out, a situation of "ambivalent competition" predates US-China dominance in the Indo-Pacific.

While states in the region may at times struggle to maintain a neutral stance and feel compelled to take sides when they are the direct subject of geopolitical tensions, often there has been no need to align neatly with one superpower or another: "It is a multipolar region, so the support extended and the prevailing competition is infinite".

"Once we start seeing it as binary choices, our futures seem fatalistic", another participant commented. "But in reality US-China relations are so complex that there is always some space to navigate. Sometimes the choice is easy and obvious and other times not, but it is never impossible."

While participants agreed on the difficulties of developing formal diplomatic responses to entities such as the Wagner Group that do not officially exist, they also concurred that it is vital for peacemakers to understand the potential impact of PMCs in conflict areas, even if direct dialogue may not be possible.

As one participant argued, PMC activities can affect the balance of power, which in turn affects the appetite of conflict parties to negotiate. When a powerful mercenary group props up a government's security apparatus, the state may feel less vulnerable and less inclined to come to the negotiating table. And in cases where PMCs are acting with impunity and committing human rights violations, this affects the conflict dynamics and may contribute to a growing risk of inter-ethnic violence.

Dialogue today and tomorrow

In today's multipolar world, mediators and diplomats must contend with a multitude of stakeholders and an array of interests, incentives and issues that shape the environment for negotiation.

Food and energy insecurity, climate change, competition for land and water, humanitarian crises, proxy wars, military coups, mercenaries, organised crime and the toxicity of social media are now major factors risking further conflict or increasing the complexity of existing peacemaking efforts.

While the global trend is towards geopolitical polarisation, conflict dynamics and the ways dialogue and conflict management are conceptualised can vary significantly between regions, as highlighted in a session on inter-state dialogue in Southeast Asia (see Box 4).

Despite operating in an array of contrasting contexts, mediators and peacemakers have many challenges in common, as discussed in a roundtable session '**The Mediator's Dilemma**'.

These range from the willingness of parties to engage and a lack of coordination among actors to the difficulties of ensuring inclusive processes, the dynamics of building trust and the pressure to deliver results quickly. As one speaker put it, "Mediation takes time".

"Dialogue to resolve conflict is really tricky these days," one participant said. "The traditional signifiers for mediation have fallen by the wayside. Things like ripeness and mutually hurting stalemates often feel usurped by spoilers."

In the session '**Making the stars align: local and international interests in peace processes**', participants suggested that the challenge posed by so many actors, agendas and spoilers demands a rethink of how to coordinate efforts, connect layers and create a multilevel approach that pulls in the same direction.

In aligning local, regional and international factors, one contributor said, it is important not to be distracted by competing interests and not to shift away from the root causes of the conflict and what the parties really want. Another voice cautioned, however, that mediators should be wary of becoming obsessed just with conflict parties – it is "not a football game" – at the expense of including other local actors.

To enhance opportunities, mediators can turn to other tools already on the table but not sufficiently used – including public health programmes supported by religious and civil society groups.



David Gorman (top left); Enrique Mora (top centre); Participants in the closing plenary (top right);
Catherine Ashton (bottom right); Mohamed Ibn Chambas (bottom left)



“Health, if not politicised, can be a useful tool,” said one participant, drawing on an example from Latin America. “We offered vaccines to children. That created conditions for a time to sit and talk.”

Other building blocks include the central role of women in communities and the desire of young people for a better future. Bringing in the human dimension of conflict and diplomacy can help to build trust.

“Start with what ties people together,” one speaker said, including basic health and education. “Sometimes we have to create the stars ourselves.”

Questions of inclusion also characterised a session on ‘**Mediation and mass protests**’. As protests in Sri Lanka heralded a potential new wave of mass uprisings, participants looked back on recent cases such as Sudan and Burkina Faso and asked what lessons mediators can apply in other contexts.

Engaging with leaderless movements can be challenging, contributors noted. They may be riven by internal divisions and key actors may lack political experience or struggle to articulate the alternative political reality they are striving for.

In these scenarios, one participant said, mediators should look at opportunities for compromise that get beyond the opposition’s repeated “no” and help civil society actors to focus on unity and their goals for a transition. Ultimately, “responsibility-sharing” may be a more helpful framework than power-sharing.



Across all of the sessions, many threads and themes emerged that can guide mediators in their work and re-energise their efforts to contribute to peaceful solutions despite immensely challenging contexts and a global outlook that gives little cause for optimism.

Since comprehensive processes and agreements seem out of reach in many conflicts, one participant said, it may be helpful to think more in terms of “network and ecosystem than alignment”.

A proliferation of efforts is not useful and having too many mediators can confuse the process and drown out the voices of the parties. Still, no one can do it alone. The best scenario, one participant said, is one lead supported by relevant regional and international partners. “Today’s mediation is more effective through a collective approach rather than individual action,” another added.

Using the hammer of a coercive, transactional approach does not work, participants said. Building trust is paramount – by understanding the culture and the conflict, identifying and including all parties, centring work on communities and piecing together small initiatives to find intersection points between big powers and local interests.

In various parts of the world, people want more influence on political processes and decisions. They are more aware of inequalities and less willing to accept them. They are afraid of losing their identity. More inclusive approaches that focus on bigger issues are needed to secure long-term peace and stability. The key is to work with parties on their vision for the future and to create clarity. It is not just about getting to a deal.

But with the war in Ukraine and its far-reaching effects, there is not much clarity on the path to peace. The geopolitical landscape is shifting, international norms are being shaken and prospects for a negotiated settlement appear remote. The damage to trust and diplomacy could take generations to repair.

In several contexts, participants recognised that a piecemeal approach – focusing initially on small pieces of the puzzle in the hope of building momentum towards a more comprehensive solution – can be a trap.

But in times like this, as one speaker put it, there is still value for mediators in using back channels and planting seeds for smaller arrangements in specific areas to build trust and the conditions for dialogue.

“We often hear about big achievements,” he said. “But it’s often those small deals that make things happen and stick.”

What's on our mind?



Comfort Ero
President and CEO,
International Crisis Group

Q Looking back on the early stages of your career, what motivated you to focus on conflict and peacemaking?

A I grew up in a household where my relatives and their friends were talking about the civil war in Nigeria and its consequences. It was a turbulent era. My student years were defined by genocide in Rwanda and war in the former Yugoslavia, affecting both my African and European identities. I quickly concluded that telling the story of these tragic conflicts wasn't enough for me; I needed to know that I could help people act on them. I also wanted to understand the dilemmas facing policymakers – why they struggled to find the appropriate solutions to avoid the repeated mantra of 'never again'. The human cost of inaction is why I chose to work for Crisis Group.

What's the best advice you've ever been given?

When I was working in West Africa, some African officials pointed out that my double heritage as an African woman born and raised in the UK gave me an advantage. They advised me to use it wisely to better represent how Africa's leaders respond to conflicts. The message was: "Don't fall into the trap of easily criticising Africa's leaders. Portray our various views, and criticise our leaders when they fail. But be even-handed in your analysis, policies and assessment." The same group cautioned me to push back when confronted with simplistic views. At Crisis Group, my colleagues and I work to counter simplistic assessments, whether it's in Africa or elsewhere. We work in complex environments and spend a great deal of time thinking about the dilemmas and choices of conflict actors, but our ultimate goal is to find pathways to saving the lives of ordinary people caught in deadly conflicts.

The last couple of years have been immensely challenging, with violent conflicts in Ethiopia, Ukraine, Yemen, Myanmar and elsewhere. Looking at the state of the world today, what keeps you up at night?

Climate change. The speed at which weather patterns are changing, the interaction with drought, heat waves, floods and other extremes, make for some of the worst news coming out of 2021 and 2022. We've been clear at Crisis Group in saying that climate change rarely causes conflict in itself. Rather, increased competition for resources tends to exacerbate pre-existing political, economic and social tensions. Take a look at the situation in South Sudan, where three consecutive years of severe flooding along the White Nile have exacerbated widespread food and economic insecurity, displacing over half a million people, driving migration southwards into violence in the Equatoria region. This is a perfect storm, with larger political and humanitarian implications.



Rosemary DiCarlo

United Nations Under-Secretary-General
for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

Q Working on the mediation of armed conflicts is immensely challenging. In your work, how do you define success?

A Mediation is commonly considered successful when a peace agreement is signed. I find this definition too narrow, however. We have to think about success over a longer time frame and assess how our efforts contribute to more sustainable and inclusive peace. The United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs also works towards preventing violent conflict – and success in prevention is even harder to determine. In cases where we have helped prevent political tensions from escalating into conflict and reduced tensions through dialogue, we have almost always worked in close partnership with other actors. For example, alongside the African Union and sub-regional organisations in Africa, we worked recently to avert political tensions from escalating in Somalia and Côte d'Ivoire. In Latin America, we helped tamp down tensions after the 2019 elections in Bolivia. These preventive activities are no less important facets of our work and should count as successes on their own.

Looking back on your career to date, what is the most important lesson you have learned about mediation and peacemaking?

Even when peace efforts in a specific context seem futile, there is a lot we can do to work toward peace. We do this, for example, by engaging the parties and other stakeholders to build trust, creating space for civil society, women and youth to engage on peace, and by cultivating our relationships with regional organisations, Member States and other peacemaking organisations. Conflicts take place in complex and ever-changing local, regional and international environments. We must continuously update our analysis and check our assumptions, seizing opportunities as they arise.

If you hadn't become a diplomat, what would you have done instead?

I think I would have probably pursued an academic career. I enjoyed my time at Brown University tremendously. If I hadn't passed the Foreign Service exam and started a career as a US diplomat, I would have likely sought a university teaching position in Slavic languages and literature. Russia and Eastern Europe continue to be a key interest of mine and, today, expertise on their history, culture and foreign policy remain vital.



Khawla Mattar

Former Deputy Special Envoy
of the United Nations Secretary-
General for Syria

Q You began your career as a journalist. What motivated you to move into multilateral diplomacy and peacemaking?

A Much of my career as a journalist was spent covering controversial and challenging stories. As a fresh graduate from journalism school, I traveled to cover the Lebanese civil war, and that was the start of my interest in peacebuilding and understanding war, especially the impact of crises on the most vulnerable. To cut a long story short, I was banned from practising journalism in my country, Bahrain, which led me to continue my studies in citizenship and the media, with a focus on the Gulf. I thought that I would be allowed to teach citizenship and the media in addition to women studies and peacebuilding. This was also rejected by the authorities, and I was left with no option but to move away. That is when I was offered a job with the International Labor Organization, where I negotiated deals between governments, employers and workers organisations, and discovered the importance of multilateral diplomacy and its role in peacebuilding. I went on to investigate human rights violations in Tunisia for the UN, and to monitor developments across the region during the 'Arab spring'.

When Special Envoy De Mistura asked me to join his office in Damascus, many observers laughed and expected a big failure. Their argument was 'how can an Arab Muslim woman negotiate with armed groups and extremists'? To their surprise and mine, I managed to build confidence among most of the parties, which led to negotiating for UN humanitarians to provide assistance and to the lifting of the siege on a number of towns and villages. My experience during my role as Head of Office has made me believe in the role of women in peacebuilding, something that many do not understand, especially among men in this business.

Looking at global politics today and the risk of increasing polarisation, where do you find sources of hope or optimism?

Young people who believe strongly in confronting hatred and war with more engagement, peaceful discussions and coexistence. I witnessed this in a group of young men and women in Salamiyah in Homs. They kept their faith and did not allow anyone from their community to carry arms, even when ISIL or Al-Nusra were a few kilometres from their town. I find it in people who fight hate speech on social media and who build campaigns against those who spread rumours and false information. And reporters who refuse to be part of the status quo and who struggle to share the truth, such as Shireen Abu Aqla who was killed while reporting from the West Bank.

Günther Baechler
Swiss diplomat
and mediator



Q Looking back on your career to date, what is the most important lesson you have learned about mediation?

A You can never be sure about anything until it is done. Mediation in reality is quite different from mediation in the text books or in mediation courses. I am struggling on how to bring the two worlds a little bit closer together. This would be beneficial in particular for young mediators who sometimes have quite idealistic notions of a successful mediation process. After having co-chaired the Geneva International Discussions for many years between the Russian Federation (with Abkhazia and South-Ossetia) and Georgia, I became quite pragmatic about both progress and process.

In your work, how do you define success?

In my work, success has two sides (of the same coin). If the parties to conflict perceive steps (even small ones) that have been facilitated by me as being successful, then I would talk of a success. And if I am satisfied that the process is changing or transforming the conflict system then I would also see it as a success. Of course, at the end of the day, the two sides of the success have to be channeled into a peace agreement and the implementation of it (for example in Nepal).

When was the last time you felt nervous?

I guess many colleagues and interlocutors would think of me as a quiet person. However, I get nervous when I have the impression that negotiators or parties to the conflict misuse or instrumentalise the mediation process in order to avoid being urged to agree on further steps or to reach an agreement. The last time I got really nervous was when I learnt that all the joint facilitation efforts of many engaged diplomats and facilitators in and outside the OSCE to avoid a further war in Europe had brutally failed.

If you hadn't worked in diplomacy and peacemaking, what would you have done instead?

I would have become a painter or architect. Actually, I studied art and the history of art before I became a peace researcher and mediator. In the last couple of years I re-launched my career as a painter, with growing fun I must say.



Fu Ying
Former Vice Foreign Minister
of China

Q Looking back on the early stages of your professional life, what motivated you to pursue a career in diplomacy?

A When studying international politics at university, I particularly admired China's former Premier Zhou Enlai, and was inspired by his wisdom and achievements that helped China earn the respect of the outside world. After graduating, I was assigned to work in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where I was able to read more extensively the historical documents from the archives and learnt more about how Premier Zhou engaged in international negotiations and dealt with major events. I came to understand that diplomacy serves the national interest and is closely tied to the destiny of the country and its political philosophy. A career in diplomacy requires a thirst for learning, self-discipline and a willingness to work hard, as well as the ability to make the right judgements.

Four decades ago when I entered foreign affairs, China was just starting the drive to reform and open up to the outside world. Since then, the country has rapidly developed its connections with other countries and integrated into the world economy. At the same time, the world has also shown great interest in learning about China. It was this atmosphere that inspired many young diplomats like myself to make great efforts to learn and improve our skills, in the hope of contributing to the building of China's international relations.

Looking at international relations today, what are your greatest sources of hope or optimism?

The current global political landscape, as far as I can see, is not at its best. The COVID pandemic has cast a huge shadow over what the world has achieved through economic globalisation in the past decades. Furthermore, the US's policy adjustment, containment and pressure towards China, along with the current Russia-Ukraine conflict have brought continued volatility and uncertainty to international relations. The picture is not as good as it was, and there is little reason to expect it to get better soon.

However, if viewed from a long-term historical perspective, the world today is unprecedentedly interconnected. Science and technology are advancing rapidly, news and information reach people in different countries at the same pace, especially among the young, and countries' economies are increasingly inter-dependent. The 21st century agenda is mainly about better lives for the people, continuous growth in all countries, and close cooperation with each other. This requires communication and cooperation among the international communities. This has been particularly true in Asia where countries have achieved robust growth

through economic globalisation. They appreciate and value the benefits of stable international and regional relations, and therefore strive for further cooperation and openness. These qualities will continue to help stabilise international ties and bring hope to the world.

How would you describe China's foreign policy priorities in relation to conflict resolution and peacemaking?

In the modern world, national diplomacy serves the interest of a country's domestic social and economic progress. China's national interest is consistent with the Chinese people's demand for a better life, making it necessary for the country to continue with reforms and opening up, while ensuring a favourable international environment. In addition, as China's economic growth comes with an increase in its international standing, it also needs to take more international responsibilities and prepare itself to bring benefits to the global community. Chinese President Xi Jinping stated in his keynote speech at the Opening of the 2022 Boao Forum for Asia: "China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development, and always be a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of the international order."

In recent years, China has actively participated in UN peacekeeping operations, and played an essential role in the naval escort missions in the Gulf of Aden. Furthermore, China's Belt and Road Initiative includes many infrastructure projects that are part of the important public goods required for regional and global prosperity, even though there are serious destabilising factors in the international landscape, which are of concern to many people in China. The Global Security Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping clearly expresses China's attitude and policy on safeguarding world peace and security. China has proved to the world with its own actions that we hope to join efforts to build a community with shared security for mankind.

What advice would you give to younger diplomats and mediators at the start of their careers?

Diplomacy, as a form of international mediation and communication, is created as a tool to promote peace, stop wars, and to bolster trade and exchanges. Modern diplomacy has greatly expanded its scope, covering a wide array of economic, technological, and social aspects. But its core component of problem-solving remains unchanged. Being highly political, diplomacy harbours the thinking and behaviour that reflects the political philosophy and beliefs of the country concerned. Young diplomats who have just started their diplomatic careers need

to first establish an unshakable faith in their nation, which is acquired through a thorough understanding of the country's history, culture and politics. They also need to nurture their abilities and thirst for learning, which will help them when observing and judging complicated international affairs and events. It is also essential for them to have a sense of empathy, which will help develop their ability to analyse and understand the intentions of others and aid them in resolving conflicts. If I were to offer one suggestion, it would be: to cultivate the habit of lifelong learning. There are two excellent senior diplomats whom I revere, Vice Premier Qian Qichen from China and Dr Henry Kissinger from the US. Both are highly astute in understanding conflicting interests and superb at patiently finding solutions to problems. As such, they are great examples for young diplomats around the world.

Image credits

Background – Verena Müller / Unsplash

Comfort Ero – Julie David de Lossy / Crisis Group

Rosemary DiCarlo - United Nations / DPPA

Khawla Matar – Ilja Hendel / Oslo Forum

Günther Baechler – International Peace Institute / CC BY 2.0

Fu Ying – Office of Ambassador Fu Ying

What we're listening to this summer

As global podcast listener figures continue to grow, we asked members of the Oslo Forum network for their recommendations of interesting and original audio with a connection to the world of conflict mediation and peacemaking.

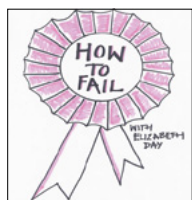


Heba Aly, CEO of The New Humanitarian, recommends **White Hot Hate** (CBC/Radio-Canada)

This six-part series dives into the world of white supremacists in North America who seek to spark a race war. It follows an undercover journalist who infiltrates a neo-Nazi group, allowing us to get into their heads and understand their motivations. As violent extremism takes hold in Canada, the United States and

beyond, the practice of mediation may need to expand to new contexts. An engaging listen for those interested in a dangerous ideology that may well be the forefront of future conflicts.

Heba Aly is the host of *Rethinking Humanitarianism*, a new podcast series exploring the future of aid.



Adam Cooper, Director, Digital Conflict at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, recommends **How to Fail** (Elizabeth Day)

We take it as a given that mediation fails more often than it succeeds. But how frankly do we talk about such failures? In 'How to Fail', guests talk about three failures in their life and what they learned from them. It's raw, honest, and a refreshing

counterpoint to the diplomatic language most of us are immersed in. Even if there are good reasons why mediators can't always be honest in public ('challenges' over 'failures'), at least behind closed doors let us dare to make ourselves vulnerable. The cost of pretending we haven't made a mistake can be high.

Adam Cooper is the host of *The Mediator's Studio* podcast.



Kholood Khair, Founding Director at Confluence Advisory, recommends **Hidden Brain** (Hidden Brain Media)

Within our work in mediation we often focus on process and mechanisms over human behaviour and emotion. Given that it's now clearer than ever that emotion guides political choices (see the spread of populism in many national contexts), I think it's

necessary to put the behavioural into mediation practice. This podcast gives a fantastic look into human behaviour and behavioural economics, helpfully presented in narrative format. The episodes are well researched and have included, rather uniquely, several insights from Sudan's experience with change and transition. Given the current political impasse in Sudan and other Greater Horn of Africa contexts, the podcast offers food for thought for mediation practice – whose many orthodoxies may not apply to shifting political landscapes, modes of political organisation, and possible motivations. Exposure of these ideas can open the door to innovative ways of looking at incentive structures during mediation processes.

Kholood Khair is the host and co-producer of *Spotlight 249*, Sudan's first English language political discussion radio programme aimed at young Sudanese.



Lisa Golden, Director of the Section for Peace and Reconciliation in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recommends **Desert Island Discs** (BBC)

It's like having coffee with a fascinating and insightful friend. I always enjoy hearing how guests explain their musical preferences, and how this unlocks personal reflections on their

lives and work. Over its long history, the radio program has featured many diplomats, politicians, negotiators and foreign affairs experts, and the back catalogue is well worth checking out. Recent highlights include interviews with Fiona Hill, former Senior Director for European and Russian Affairs on the US National Security Council, and the Oslo Forum's own Lyse Doucet, BBC Chief International Correspondent. Speaking of Lyse, her recent podcast 'A Wish for Afghanistan' is special too, highlighting the perspectives of individual Afghans on the situation after the Taliban took over.

From the Mediator's Studio



When the COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary halt to in-person convening, the Oslo Forum took to the airwaves. The Mediator's Studio is a podcast about peacemakers, inspired by the interview session of the same name at the Forum. Across its three seasons so far, mediators, diplomats, armed group representatives and other peace process actors have shared stories and insights from behind the scenes, and reflected on what it takes to end conflict. In the latest season, our guests included veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi: the following is an edited transcript of the episode.



UN Special Representative Brahimi briefs the media before Syria talks in 2013
(US Mission in Geneva / CC BY-ND 2.0)

Lakhdar Brahimi on hopes and failures in Afghanistan

After half a century of peacemaking in conflicts from Afghanistan to Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, South Africa and Haiti, Lakhdar Brahimi has earned a formidable reputation as one of the preeminent mediators of his generation. In the Mediator's Studio, he told host Adam Cooper about his roles with the UN in Iraq, Syria, and particularly in Afghanistan, where he had a front-row perspective on key moments in the country's recent troubled history.

Q In 1997, when you were appointed the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Kabul had fallen to the Taliban the previous year. The Northern Alliance, formed to resist the Taliban, was suffering heavy defeats. What were your expectations when you took on the job as UN envoy?

A My expectations were very low indeed. The Taliban were already controlling well over half of the country. And the Northern Alliance was not an alliance at all. The members of that alliance were bickering and sometimes even fighting with one another. So expectations were extremely low to keep the conflict as low as possible and allow the humanitarians and the UN agencies to work.

It was a learning period for me at the very beginning. But by the end of those two years, what I told the Security Council was that 'you are not really interested in Afghanistan'. We were still in that great illusion that the end of the Cold War had created a new situation that the world was all right, that everything was all right.

“If you want to make peace somewhere, you have got to talk to everybody. You cannot choose your interlocutors.”

You met three times with Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. As a mediator, what did you hope to achieve from those meetings with him?

One is something that I have been repeating throughout my career. If you want to make peace somewhere, you have got to talk to everybody. You cannot choose your interlocutors. Your interlocutors are the people who

are making war and, therefore, may want to make peace one day. So, you've got to talk to them.

In 2001 [following the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center in New York] the US invades Afghanistan, joins forces with the Northern Alliance, marches on Kabul, and overthrows the Taliban. An interim administration is formed as a result of the Bonn Agreement in 2001, and there is a Loya Jirga the year afterwards involving prominent Afghans, both of which you facilitated [as UN Special Representative for Afghanistan]. In 2003, you wrote a paper that asked 'where are the Taliban?' and 'should we not find out what they're thinking?' Did anyone answer those questions?

I'm afraid not amongst the internationals or the Northern Alliance. People have to remember that the Northern Alliance was actually revived by the United States and their allies. They were outside of the country, completely defeated and wiped out. They were revived, armed, given money, given tanks. I think that point is important to remember. But in Bonn, they were the strong party, not the only party, but the really strong party. Peace had to be made with them.

People are saying today that the Taliban should have been invited to Bonn. No, that's nonsense. The Taliban had been defeated, routed, killed, and thrown out of power in Afghanistan. They wouldn't have come to Bonn a few days later. That's not the question. The question is, once you have had Bonn you have a project, the plan for making peace – then you should have asked, 'OK, who's who in Afghanistan?' And if you ask who's who, you've got to ask 'how about the Taliban?' But we were told by everybody unanimously – the Northern Alliance, the Americans, the Russians, the Indians, and the Iranians – to 'forget about the Taliban. The Taliban don't exist anymore so don't waste your time wondering where they are.' That is, I think, a big mistake that we have made.

Let's fast-forward to 2018. The Taliban were in a much stronger position, and the US sat down to negotiate directly with them in Doha, without the Afghan government. This led to an agreement in February 2020 and paved the way for US withdrawal and talks between the government and the Taliban. Although you weren't formally involved in that process, how did you perceive those negotiations?

Of course the Afghan government, and practically everybody who is not close to the Taliban in Afghanistan, were very disturbed by the fact that the Americans were discussing with the Taliban alone. Nobody else on the Afghan side was associated with those negotiations. So, that was, if you like, the seeds of the problems that the people of Afghanistan are living through these days. The agreement really says 'we Americans are leaving. And we are leaving on 1st May next year, and now please negotiate with others in Afghanistan.' That was not the best beginning of the negotiation. They have given away a huge part of the leverage the government had.

In terms of your message to the international community, what do you make of the debate today on the conditions that some governments are insisting need to be fulfilled before they recognise the Taliban?

Recognition or not, you have got to keep talking to the Taliban. Anybody who wants to do something in or about Afghanistan wouldn't be serious if they didn't talk to the Taliban. They are the only force that exists now in the country. Whether you want to vaccinate kids or give food or shelter or water, how can you do it if you don't talk to the Taliban?

Let's move from Afghanistan to Syria. In 2012, Kofi Annan resigns as UN envoy in utter frustration and you accept the post of UN and Arab League Special Representative. You've called this 'Mission Nearly Impossible'. Why did you take it on?

The job was offered to Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General, by his successor, Ban Ki-Moon. Kofi is great for consulting very widely. I was one of the people he called and asked, 'I have been offered this job, what do you think I should do?' And I told Kofi 'you should accept'. And he said 'do you think that we can really get somewhere in this situation?' I told him 'I don't think you will be able to, but you can't say no. These are jobs that people like you cannot say no to.' So it was difficult, having given that advice, then to say 'no, not for me'.

Let me put it this way, the United Nations cannot not be there. It has to be there. I believe in the United Nations. I respect the United Nations. I think I have a fair idea of their shortcomings. But still, they are the best organisation we have. We have no other. So that's why I went with my eyes open, knowing that it is extremely difficult. I knew a little bit of what kind of regime existed in Syria and I knew how difficult it was going to be.

What was your strategy in your first meeting with President Assad? What were you telling him at the time, witnessing what was happening on the streets?

'The country is in trouble and you need to talk to your people, to everybody. You have also got to take into consideration what is happening around you in the region. You've got to talk to your neighbours.' That is what I was saying to him and to his neighbours.

He reacted extremely politely. I think we had perhaps one difficult meeting, but otherwise it was civilised. But at no moment did I feel that we were getting anywhere close to the beginning of a process.

Let me say that President Bashar al-Assad has absolute power in Syria. I don't think he would object to me saying that. And as such, he's more used to giving orders than discussing what decisions he may or may not take. And I think this is a big problem for the mediator.



Lakhdar Brahimi at a press briefing of The Elders
(Mark Garten / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

“What you really need is to convince people that you are not talking on behalf of their enemies and you are not trying to take away from them something that they had refused to give to anybody else.”

I think what you really need is to convince people that you are not talking on behalf of their enemies and you are not trying to take away from them something that they had refused to give to anybody else. This is why you need to build confidence. And people have got to understand that they have something to gain. If they think that they are winning without you, why should they even listen to you? A mediator's work has possibilities when there is a stalemate in situations like this. And the parties understand that. So, they will be looking for what they can get that is not the maximum. I think Bashar al-Assad never stopped thinking that he can have the entire cake.

In 2003 you assumed your post as the Secretary-General's Special Representative in Iraq, following a grave attack on the UN when a truck bomb crashed into the mission's headquarters, killing 22 people, including your predecessor, Sérgio Vieira de Mello. There was a lot of sensitivity surrounding the mission from the start. Should the UN even have gone into Iraq?

In hindsight, probably not. Kofi Annan, when he was asked about the decision he regretted most, said it was sending Sérgio to Iraq in 2003. Now it's extremely clear that the UN had no business in 2003 in Iraq. The United States with Britain invaded the country against the wishes of the UN. So why did they want the UN there a few months later?

But in January 2004, it's a different situation. Then, the Americans had come to the UN in January, with the Iraqi government they had put together in place, and said the following: 'We now want to restore Iraqi sovereignty. And we cannot do it without the UN's help.' Again, I thought that, if the question is to try, even if you don't succeed, to help a country regain its sovereignty, the United Nations cannot say no. And mainly myself, I cannot say no. That's why I accepted to go.

Tell me about a moment when you felt hope and optimism in your work.

In Afghanistan. In September 1998, the Taliban swept over the north and conquered most of the country. And then, in Mazar-i-Sharif, they killed nine diplomats in the Iranian consulate and arrested about 120 Iranians, mostly truck drivers. Iran amassed 200,000 soldiers and was threatening to invade Afghanistan. And the President of Iran came to Kofi Annan and told him, 'Please help us avoid war'. And then we negotiated and got all the Iranians out, and the bodies of their people who were slain back to Iran, and we avoided a war. So the feeling of having participated a little bit in avoiding a war provides a lot of satisfaction. Much later I learned that actually the interpreter had a lot to do with that success. A young Afghan was translating for Mullah Omar. I learned later that he had changed some of the things I said. So, he is probably more responsible for that success than I was. This is why humility is terribly important to have when you are mediating.

“Respect the people you deal with. You don’t need to love them or agree with them, but you have got to genuinely respect them and make them feel that you are respecting them.”

What advice would you give to younger mediators who might feel daunted by wars that feel impossible to end?

One, no matter how much you think you know, you actually don't know enough. And no matter how much more you learn, it is still not enough. It is never enough. Therefore, you need to keep your eyes and ears open. And accept corrections to what you think are simple truths or complicated truths. The other thing is respect the people you deal with. You don't need to love them or agree with them, but you have got to genuinely respect them and make them feel that you are respecting them. You will not avoid all mistakes. You will make mistakes, but you will avoid a few traps that are avoidable.

To listen to the full episode and access the archive of past interviews, search for The Mediator's Studio wherever you get your podcasts or visit www.osloforum.org.

Background paper

Negotiating with jihadists in the Sahel: options, challenges, risks and opportunities

Alexandre Liebeskind

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States in the Sahel are in a deadlock with the two main jihadist militant groups in the region, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). As the prospect for military victory over jihadist insurgents remains elusive – with expensive containment strategies only managing to slow down their expansion – the option of a negotiated resolution to the conflict cannot be entirely dismissed.

Conflict parties' demands and red lines evolve as soon as negotiations begin. It is between the two that the parties' political objectives lie, and their compatibility is the strongest predictor of a negotiation's chances of success. The decision on whether or not to engage in negotiations with jihadist groups in the Sahel is fraught with consequences and provides no certainty as to the final outcome. The *momentum* for opening negotiations is often fleeting. An attack, the disappearance of a leader, a split within the parties or the emergence of new actors on the battlefield can jeopardise the momentum for negotiations in an instant. As the balance of power constantly evolves in the Sahel, there is a temptation to wait for better days to open talks. But Afghanistan reminds us that waiting any longer is a risky gamble.

Obstacles and risks

Because peace talks are more often perceived as a surrender than as an olive branch, the biggest barriers to starting negotiations are, as always, within each camp.

“The biggest barriers to starting negotiations are, as always, within each camp.”

For **states and their allies**, it is not easy to engage in negotiations with an enemy demonised for decades. The practices of jihadist groups in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria or northern Mali bring us back to the dark hours of the worst totalitarian regimes and the vows of the ‘free world’ to never again compromise. The Sahelian states, however, are more pragmatic. They



Members of the Malian Armed Forces participate in Operation Koufra against Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (Pascal Maitre / Panos)

are turning away from the principled opposition of their Western allies, even if this means having to contend with their own liberal opposition. Admitting the need to negotiate with jihadists in the Sahel requires states to come to terms with the fact that they have limited military might in the region, that Islamist radical ideology has proven to be much more resilient than initially thought, and that there is no universal supremacy of the liberal democratic model.

The situation of **jihadist groups** in the Sahel mirrors that of states. Not only is it painful for them to give up the dream of a Salafist theocracy, but their fighters and their communities have suffered a litany of atrocities and humiliations. The JNIM's half-hearted willingness to compromise exacted a heavy toll; it became a mortal foe of the ISGS, whose rigour and spirit of vengeance seduced many JNIM fighters. By agreeing to negotiate with states, the JNIM leadership risks more dissent within its ranks, which the ISGS will not fail to exploit.

Hope ultimately comes from **communities** directly affected by conflict. Many rural communities have taken the lead, brokering local agreements with JNIM militants – with or without the facilitation of organisations like HD. These arrangements are limited to humanitarian provisions and preventing conflicts from metastasising into inter-community conflict. While they cannot replace a peace settlement, they can serve as pilot projects for a lasting compromise with JNIM.

What to negotiate?

In light of the mutual mistrust, building confidence through conflict management agreements that test the parties' goodwill and chain of command is always advisable prior to engaging in peace talks. Local agreements contain a wealth of conflict management deals such as ceasefires; the free movement of people, livestock and goods; access to humanitarian and state social services; the release of prisoners; the return of displaced persons; and the reopening of schools.

But in the absence of prospects for a comprehensive political settlement, measures to freeze the conflict carry the risk of making jihadist positions

more secure and solidifying the coexistence of two systems of governance. This choice could be made as a matter of pragmatism, however, and tacitly agreed upon by the parties, pending better conditions for political dialogue.

What do jihadists want?

There is neither a single nor a clear answer to this question. The political proposals of the ISGS and that of the JNIM, however, can be clearly differentiated: the former is revolutionary, internationalist and seeks to overthrow states in order to erect a new order; while the latter is moralist, Sahelian and seeks to regulate the exercise of power and the management of resources rather than to replace them.

Their demands fall into three main categories:

1. **The departure of international troops** is a generic demand of all jihadist groups. Until recently, it was directed at France as the leader of the international counterterrorism coalition and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as its auxiliary, but any other foreign troops taking over would be targeted as well. This demand is obviously a red line for the Sahelian states; a departure of all international forces would change the balance of power to a point where they would have no leverage at the negotiating table. A freeze on positions, possibly monitored by UN peacekeepers, with a promise of a substantial reduction in foreign forces following a peace agreement, could be an acceptable counter-proposal, at least for the JNIM. In addition, states could demand in return that local jihadist groups distance themselves from international jihadist movements.
2. **The application of Sharia law** is the key political demand of jihadist movements. This demand covers several areas of the management of public life:
 - **The management of society:** This is probably the most profound point of divergence between the supporters of a liberal and secular order and those of a conservative and

religious order. It touches on areas as diverse as dress code, leisure activities, and relationships, and fundamentally challenges the principle of gender equality. This is a problem for both states and jihadists, who encounter strong resistance from communities. In this area too, the practices of JNIM, even in traditionally conservative areas of the Sahel, have become more flexible, indicating some room for negotiation. An inclusive debate on the issue, involving scholars, could lead to a compromise that protects the rights of women, in particular. States could demand concessions from JNIM that would guarantee at the very least women's rights to education, work, consensual union and freedom of movement.

- **The administration of justice:** While the ISGS imposes an expeditious justice system, including corporal punishment, the JNIM has evolved towards a practice close to Sahelian customary law: *qadis* (judges) arbitrate disputes by referring to customs and practices and the general precepts of Islamic law. It should be noted that the cohabitation of two legal systems is included in the 2015 Algiers Agreement for peace in Mali, which demonstrates a certain margin for negotiation. Talks with the JNIM would make it possible to better shape its concept of justice and its potential to coexist with the body of republican laws in specific areas, while the discussions should reaffirm the very principle of the rule of law.
- **Public education:** HD-facilitated negotiations to reopen schools in JNIM-controlled areas indicate that, against all expectations, the group is not opposed to universal access to schooling. It does, however, demand separate classes for boys and girls, the teaching of Arabic in addition to French, and the teaching of religion. In addition, JNIM demands that teachers are recruited locally and teach in the local language, and the integration of Koranic schools into the public education system. This last claim may be an opportunity to negotiate the supervision of *madrasas* by public authorities and the integration of basic subjects into their curriculum in exchange for their official recognition.

- **The management of taxation:** While it is more akin to extortion than a religious tax in the areas under the yoke of the ISGS, the collection and redistribution of *zakat* is closer to the principles of Muslim law in JNIM-controlled areas. In particular, this group ensures a redistribution of the tax that has earned it some recognition from the communities. Where *zakat* is levied, official taxes are cancelled, indicating the intention to establish a new fiscal order. This opens the way for discussions about a tax overhaul that could ultimately incorporate elements of *zakat* while preserving the rule of law. Including scholars and tax experts should help to depoliticise the talks and keep the focus on the common good.
3. **Political regime change** is the ultimate goal of any armed insurgency, and the jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel are no exception. In the case of the ISGS, the declared aim is to establish a theocracy in the form of a Salafist caliphate that would replace the Sahelian states. This is a demand that offers no room for negotiation and contravenes the fundamental principles of democracy. The JNIM's position on governance is, in fact, rather undeveloped. The group is essentially organised as a fighting formation with relatively primitive and largely decentralised structures. In the areas it controls, the group does not seek to replace established local governance structures, whether traditional or those of the state.

What compromise is possible?

The red lines of Sahelian states on governance essentially revolve around the 'republican' nature of the state with its key components of French-style secularism, unity and indivisibility. Yet successive governments in the region have demonstrated an openness to negotiation and to reforms of the post-colonial governance model. However, it will be up to the states concerned to carefully define their demands, objectives and red lines ahead of a negotiation.

In 2012, Iyad Ag Ghali, then leader of the Salafi jihadist group Ansar Dine, and the Tuareg armed group Mouvement National pour la Libération de

l'Azawad (MNLA) agreed on a model for regional governance of northern Mali. It emphasised decentralisation, local governance, specific measures for regional economic development and job creation, and the formation of integrated local security forces. This agreement never came to be, since the jihadist groups were excluded from the Algiers negotiations, but it provides an indication of compromises that may be acceptable to the JNIM.

“The very act of engaging in talks with the enemy is a risky exercise, and the consequences are difficult to predict.”

The cohabitation of different governance models in the same space could be the most viable compromise for Mali. This compromise would be in line with the Algiers Agreement and the continuity of the national process of regional and local decentralisation. Conceding an element of plurality in applicable law and the involvement of traditional and religious authorities in the management of public affairs and justice do not seem excessive trade-offs either. Above all, such an accord would address the roots of the conflict.

Conclusion

A political negotiation with JNIM, whether or not followed by an inclusive national dialogue, would inevitably lead to a reconsideration of the governance models of current republican regimes in the Sahel. Bearing this in mind, states concerned with the rise of jihadism, and their allies, could study alternative forms of governance in terms of the relationship between religion, society and the state. There are examples of compromises between democracy and secularism, and of more successful resistance to the rise of Salafist doctrine, such as in Mauritania; Algeria, where Islam is mentioned as a source of law; or Senegal, with its institution of brotherhoods. It is possible to imagine the coexistence of partially different systems of governance within states through the delegation of certain responsibilities from the central authority to regional and local levels, making it possible to manage differences between communities while preserving national unity.

If the opening of political negotiations is not feasible given the current power balance, exploring possible compromises with scholars, constitutionalists, intellectuals, representatives of civil society, authorities, and communities could allow states to develop a hypothetical negotiation strategy. It would also send a signal to jihadists that they are ready for dialogue while standing firm on their values. A good starting point could be talks on the integration of Koranic schools into the public education system, which represents a concrete potential win/win agreement and responds to a priority development need.

Negotiation is only one of the tools available to states to resolve conflicts. It can be used alongside other options such as development policies and political, diplomatic and military pressure. But the very act of engaging in talks with the enemy is a risky exercise, and the consequences are difficult to predict. The opening of negotiations inevitably provokes sabotage attempts on both sides. Nevertheless, given the cost and uncertain outcome of a war of attrition, and the threat of fragmentation of the Sahel states, it is a risk that should be seriously considered.

Background paper

Humanitarian access needs are growing ever more urgent. How can mediators and negotiators respond?

Michael Vatikiotis

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Never in recent history have global humanitarian needs been more severe. Never has the access governments and international aid agencies require to meet those needs been more challenged.

As parts of the world face the biggest humanitarian crises in living memory, the system of global security and the array of principles designed to underpin the basic instinct to support humanity in need over the past seven decades is gravely threatened. The international system is becoming more and more fragmented and contested. There is an urgent need to revise and reform the current framework.

For some years now sovereign interests and divergent global polarities have increasingly eclipsed the power of collective norms and values. At the same time, the roots of these norms in European and North American ideals are being contested by emerging big powers. In this multipolar and more pluralistic context, humanitarian aid more easily becomes hostage to political and geopolitical trends that are less conducive to shaping a common understanding on issues which should be purely humanitarian.

Just consider the needs today. Almost a decade of armed conflict in Yemen has caused tens of thousands of civilian casualties and displaced over

4 million people, making Yemen one of the world's largest humanitarian crises and aid operations. This year, as many as 24 million people in Yemen require humanitarian assistance, half of whom are in acute need.¹ In Afghanistan over 24 million people – more than half of the Afghan population – need humanitarian assistance to survive.² Across Myanmar, over 900,000 people are displaced, most of them since the military takeover in February last year.³ The UN estimates that 90 percent of the conflict-beset Tigray region's 5.5 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance as war coupled with chronic drought and economic crisis create a perfect storm.⁴ And now the war in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest refugee crises on record, with over 5 million people fleeing the country within 8 weeks. At the time of writing, some 7.1 million people have been displaced internally.⁵



Irpin, a suburb of Kyiv, in ruins
(David Guttenfelder / New York Times / CC BY-NC 2.0)

In addition to the trauma of displacement, these contexts – mostly conflict zones with little hope of imminent peaceful resolution – are facing severe public health challenges and acute economic crisis, compounded by the prospect of a global shortage of grain due to climate change and the war in Ukraine. This means that even people with homes and some sources of nutrition are facing mounting challenges to survival.

How has the world responded to this particularly acute level of humanitarian need across all regions? Not at all adequately. The multiplicity of crises in parallel makes it hard for donors to keep up – and introduces elements of choice and selection, depending on which crisis dominates the headlines. Conflicting interests increasingly figure more prominently in decisions to offer help. Many donors fear that aid will legitimise authoritarian or illegal regimes which control some of the worst affected areas. Where violent conflict rages, hard power calculations and ideological contestation have made it harder to negotiate humanitarian corridors.

“ Conflict zones with the most urgent needs are increasingly caught in a web of proxy interests and intransigent geopolitical polarity. ”

Above all, conflict zones with the most urgent needs are increasingly caught in a web of proxy interests and intransigent geopolitical polarity. In Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Ethiopia, a focus on human suffering risks being lost amid the competition between neighbouring states that lend support to conflict parties, or higher level geopolitical posturing that prevents collective action. When larger powers find a crisis inconvenient, they leave the task of providing humanitarian support to regional groupings which lack the mandates and the collective political will to intervene.

Chronic deadlock at the UN Security Council reflects the divergent trajectories of the major powers – Russia, China and the United States. Increasing tensions between the United States and China over global primacy and hegemony rules out effective coordination and consensus. Witness the appeals European states made to China to intervene on the

issue of Ukraine, while the United States insisted that China was enabling and abetting Russia's aggression.

Much of the humanitarian machinery we use today was built and calibrated for a different world; as recently as the first decade of the 21st century it was possible, seemingly effortlessly, to rally global support for concerted efforts to alleviate suffering in response to the 2004 Asian tsunami, for example. In today's more polarised context, humanitarian aid is regarded with suspicion as a Western-dominated instrument and as a tool of regime change. Europe's reflexive mobilisation of aid to Ukraine is viewed critically by other regions where similarly tragic situations have garnered little attention. Accusations of hypocrisy and double standards distract humanitarians from the basic task of addressing needs.

Finally, the global COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequality of humanitarian support. Two thirds of the world's richest countries have vaccinated more than 70 percent of their populations against the disease; only very few of the poorest countries have attained that level of protection. By March of this year, just 15% of the adult population of the African continent had been fully vaccinated.⁶ A humanitarian buffer facility established by GAVI/COVAX to extend vaccine reach into conflict-affected and hard to reach areas has not worked – not because of a lack of supplies, but because of donor reluctance to provide vaccines in sensitive areas that are often in the most acute need.

“The role of mediation and negotiation by neutral third parties could be reinforced as a tool of facilitating access in contested areas.”

Given these stark realities, what could be done to improve access? Is there a need for a new global political agreement to reinforce the principles of humanitarian assistance, one that accommodates the new structural faultlines in global politics? Dealing with accusations of double standards could be a starting point for such a discussion. The role of mediation and negotiation by neutral third parties could be reinforced as a tool of

facilitating access in contested areas, with more states accepting the role of guarantors.

Against the backdrop of intensifying geopolitical contestation and the risk that humanitarian issues are treated as a zero-sum game by conflict parties, how should mediators and negotiators respond? Should the humanitarian/political divide be treated as a false dichotomy, and focus instead be placed on more effective collaboration between humanitarians and more politically-oriented actors? How can we develop a more sophisticated approach to humanitarian access using confidence-



A worker at a UNICEF Ethiopia warehouse prepares supplies to be transported to the Tigray region (Nahom Tesfaye / UNICEF Ethiopia / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

building measures negotiated at the political level, such as agreed principles of engagement and humanitarian ceasefires?

More sophisticated methods of early warning and assessing needs at the multilateral level could be devised to generate a detailed heat map of areas in need of attention, which would help focus donor attention and support. There could be more investment in logistics and supply lines, involving the pre-positioning and maintenance of food stocks and public health supplies in the most vulnerable areas.

“Where possible, more effort could be made to work at the community level in conflict zones to facilitate socio-economic resilience and recovery using local agreements and arrangements.”

Where possible, more effort could be made to work at the community level in conflict zones to facilitate socio-economic resilience and recovery using local agreements and arrangements, instead of top down aid delivery dependent on the state. The plethora of private and local humanitarian initiatives must be better integrated and supported by well-funded and supplied international organisations. Privatised, localised approaches to humanitarian access may fall short in terms of scale and capacity, yet the superagencies lack the agility and flexibility needed to surmount the more complex political environment in which humanitarians must operate.

The way the world is going, with more frequent conflicts, the impacts of climate change and its effects on food security and public health, we can be certain that growing numbers of people will need to be fed and sheltered in the second half of the 21st century. As much as the threat of climate change has captured the attention of the younger generation worried about their future, so the inability to reach and help the world's most vulnerable people should generate a rallying cry for the more effective channelling of human kindness.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-april-2022>
- 2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-january-2022>
- 3 <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-17-19-april-2022>
- 4 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/04/18/ethiopia-launches-national-dialogue-divisions-run-deep>
- 5 <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/regional-inter-agency-operational-update-ukraine-refugee-situation-19-april-2022>
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