

13–14 June 2023



OSLOFORUM

Power, Politics and Peacemaking



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Centre for
Humanitarian
Dialogue



Oslo Forum
20th anniversary
special edition

20 OSLOFORUM
2003-2023

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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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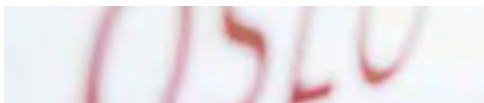
Participants

115



**The Oslo Forum
Team**

126



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The Oslo Forum: A 20-year journey

A platform for key actors in mediation

In 2023, the Oslo Forum, a prominent international arena for conflict mediators, celebrates its two-decade milestone. Since 2003, the Forum has expanded and evolved exponentially amid shifting global geopolitics and the growing complexity of conflicts around the world.

Hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Forum brings together world leaders, peace process actors and influential thinkers in a series of discreet retreats. It presents an opportunity for mediators and conflict parties to reflect on and debate the prospects of ongoing or potential negotiations.

The Forum offers insider knowledge and experience on a range of peace and mediation initiatives.

A safe environment for sharing insights

Sessions at the Oslo Forum are designed to stimulate informed and open exchanges among a wide range of speakers including peace negotiators, government representatives and academic experts.

The closed-door discussions under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution allow key actors in mediation and peacemaking to speak openly and put forward ideas that help achieve sustainable solutions to violent conflicts.

The Forum features an annual global event in Oslo, complemented by regional retreats as well as publications and The Mediator's Studio

podcast. Participation in the Forum is by invitation only. The Oslo Forum retreats refrain from making public recommendations, aiming instead to advance mediation practice behind the scenes.

A game-changer

In a world riven by conflict, the Oslo Forum offers innovative ideas, experience sharing, insider expertise and knowledge to mediation practitioners and peacemakers. By fostering new approaches it has transformed the way diplomats and experts go about trying to solve conflicts that shatter lives around the world. Frequently hosting opposing conflict parties, the Oslo Forum remains a conducive space to support peace negotiations.

Over the past two decades, the Oslo Forum has brought together hundreds of the world's leading peace negotiators, experts and conflict actors, including: delegates from the Philippines government and the Moro



Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); negotiators representing the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; and Taliban representatives and senior Afghan officials. Representatives from across political divides in Syria and Venezuela have also attended the Forum.

Prominent participants of the Oslo Forum have included António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations; Retno L.P. Marsudi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia; Monica Juma, National Security Advisor to the President of Kenya; Karim A. A. Khan KC, Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; Juan Manuel Santos, former President of Colombia; Catherine Ashton, former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States; Catherine Samba-Panza, former President of the Central African Republic; and Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations.

David Harland, Executive Director of Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and Lisa Golden, Director of Section for Peace and Reconciliation at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, marking the 20th anniversary of the Oslo Forum.





Agenda overview

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Tuesday
June 2023

09:00 – 09:30

Opening conversation

with Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre

09:30 – 10:30

Opening plenary: Power, politics and peacemaking

11:00 – 12:30

Two parallel
sessions:

Session 1

**Engagement for
the stabilisation
of Afghanistan**

Session 2

Sudan:
what's next?

12:30 – 14:30

Informal buffet lunch

14:30 – 15:45

Three parallel
sessions:

Session 1

Somalia:
what's next for
regions retaken
from Al Shabaab

Session 2

Facing the facts:
engaging with
de facto authorities

Session 3

**The Black Sea
Initiative
and beyond**

16:15 – 17:30

Two parallel
sessions:

Session 1

Once upon a crime:
a timely approach
in negotiating with
criminal actors

Session 2

Balancing act in Asia:
how to deal with
insurgency in a new
geopolitical reality?

18:15 – 19:30

The Mediator's Studio

with Martin Griffiths

14

Wednesday
June 2023

09:30 – 10:45
Two parallel
sessions:

Session 1

**African Peace
and Security
Architecture amid
new geopolitics**

Session 2

**State mediators:
state of play**

11:15 – 12:30
Two parallel
sessions:

Session 1

**Ethiopia:
pathways to peace**

Session 2

**Artificial Intelligence
in peacemaking and
on the battlefield:
what can
mediators do?**

12:30 – 14:45

Informal buffet lunch

13:30 – 14:30

Lunchtime lecture

with ICC Prosecutor, Karim A.A. Khan KC

14:45 – 16:00
Two parallel
sessions:

Session 1

**Yemen:
situation report**

Session 2

Too hot to handle?
Advancing climate
actions in areas
controlled by
armed groups

Oslo Forum 2023 report

HuongLy BuiDuong and Giles Pitts

with contributions from Sayyida Halima Al Busaidi,
Asaad Al Raeesi and Futoon Al Mahrouqi

More than 130 peacemakers, diplomats, experts and conflict parties from 50 countries gathered in Norway for the 20th anniversary of the Oslo Forum. Under the banner of **'Power, politics and peacemaking'**, the theme captured the risks and uncertainties of growing geopolitical rifts, renewed nuclear tensions and violent confrontation on various continents.

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 of non-attribution – discussions were candid and comprehensive.

“If the language of war is the only one spoken, where is that going to take us?” Støre said in his speech.

Although the growth of a peacemaking retreat could be

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Distinguished participants

Participants at the 2023 Oslo Forum included:

- **Retno L.P. Marsudi**, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia
- **Álvaro Leyva Durán**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Colombia
- **Karim A.A. Khan KC**, Prosecutor, International Criminal Court
- **Monica Juma**, National Security Advisor to the President of Kenya
- **Martin Griffiths**, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator
- **Ahmed Moallim Fiqi**, Minister of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation, Somalia
- **Abdalla Hamdok**, Former Prime Minister of Sudan
- **Mohammed Shahrir Alam**, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh
- **Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**, former Deputy President of South Africa
- **Liberata Rutageruka Mulamula**, Member of Parliament and former Foreign Minister, Tanzania

seen through pessimistic eyes as evidence of an increasingly unstable world, Støre took a more positive view.

“It’s a good sign that the hall is packed,” he said. “There’s still an interest in looking hard, together, at what it really takes to find the answers to intractable conflict.”

In terms of size, ambition and gender balance, the Oslo Forum is a very different place than it was 20 years ago. Starting out as a small meeting of mediators outside Norway’s capital in 2003, the Forum has grown into a much larger, more diverse and globally recognised gathering.



Considering crises such as the war in Ukraine and fighting between forces loyal to two military leaders in Sudan, participants at the 2023 retreat acknowledged that prospects for peace are far from ideal.

“The trend lines are going in the wrong direction,” one speaker noted in the opening plenary. Precisely for this reason, another argued, “the tools of mediation have never been more necessary and consequential”.

Against the backdrop of shifting geopolitics, questions arise about which actors are best placed to bring conflict parties to the table and facilitate urgently needed talks. In this challenging time for the international system



Ahmed Moallim Fiqi and Nazanine Moshiri

and crisis management, a new distribution of global and regional powers is making its presence felt in mediation.

Participants reflected on these issues and the concept of impartiality in sessions on engaging with de facto authorities, negotiating with criminal groups and the role of state mediators.

They also discussed lessons learned from the design of the July 2022 Black Sea Initiative to unlock the export of grain and fertiliser from Ukraine and Russia. Participants noted that the initiative, which lasted for about a year, was “a bright spot in an otherwise grim picture.”



Alongside sessions on the situations in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen (Boxes 2–6), participants explored regional approaches to peace and security in Africa and Asia, as well as the evolving peacemaking frontiers of artificial intelligence and climate change.

Throughout the retreat, participants emphasised that a recognition of complexity and interconnection, and an understanding of the drivers of conflict, are key steps to finding solutions in a multipolar world.

While “the environment is brittle and positions are entrenched”, speakers consistently underlined the importance of continuing dialogue, no matter how difficult the political context. “We have to invest, however hopeless it seems.”



Alexandre Liebeskind and Ram Manikkalingam



Mutlaq Al-Qahtani and Simona Foltyn

State mediators: state of play

In today's multipolar world, with power and influence in constant contestation, the prominence of individual states as mediators and peacemakers is on the rise. State mediators sometimes act under the umbrella of regional organisations and sometimes outside them; sometimes in cooperation and sometimes in competition with others.

Participants discussed whether the influence of Iraq and China in the deal to restore diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is symptomatic of a revival of the state mediator. Or is this a new world order slowly coming into definition, with non-Western actors taking an increasingly prominent role?

States have natural assets that can help them mediate, including financial resources, political leverage, technical capacity and links upward and outwards to regional and multilateral organisations. But as one participant pointed out, the word “mediation” can be deceptive – “facilitation” is favoured in many parts of the world. Terminology matters, especially when it overlaps with the tricky concept of impartiality and the degree of self-interest involved when states take on a peacemaking role.

2

Engagement for the stabilisation of Afghanistan

Afghanistan experienced a significant turning point in August 2021 as the Taliban took control, concluding a long and deadly conflict that had devastating consequences for the Afghan people. The country is now grappling with one of the world's most extensive humanitarian crises.

Once again, the Oslo Forum provided a safe space for difficult conversations on the future of Afghanistan with representatives of the *de facto* authorities, civil society and concerned members of the international community.

"We are at an impasse in Afghanistan," said one participant, with "a profound disconnect and misconceptions on both sides".

While the perceived imposition of external ideas on Afghan society remains a matter of concern for the Taliban, the discussion highlighted areas where pragmatic engagement – including on regional security, counter-narcotics and aid – could enable a new chapter of relations with the outside world.

The session included a frank exchange on the rights of women and girls to work and receive an education, with many participants challenging the Taliban's current stance. "What is happening to women in Afghanistan reflects on the rest of the Muslim world," said one participant, asking what civil society organisations based elsewhere can do to support the Afghan people in the name of solidarity.

While the *de facto* authorities cited continued engagement and awareness-raising programmes to correct misconceptions, other speakers wondered whether they would be amenable to practical in-country support from other states, including the provision of teachers and school buses.

But if such support is promised, said one participant, it must be delivered, referring to past cases where words have not been followed up with action. "Start small but start somewhere. Deliver on the little things that you can."

The discussion also included a reflection on an inclusive system of governance for all Afghans.

One participant proposed a *loya jirga* (great council) process to create a new constitution "so we know our rights and duties", while a general election could ensure that the government is representative of all Afghan people. To ease relations with the Taliban, the speaker added, the international community could recognise the current government as legitimate until a new constitution is decided.

While the current situation is immensely challenging – including unmet humanitarian needs – there are some positives, including the unanimous renewal of the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and broad international consensus on the key areas for concern. Terrorism, human rights, migration, drugs and the economic situation all require further and continued engagement in the interests of Afghanistan and the wider world.

"The gap is huge but the fact we're discussing it openly gives us opportunities."

Where global powers cannot mediate because of a larger geopolitical agenda, one participant said, why not bring in state actors from other regions who can provide assurances and stability, though not necessarily act as guarantors?

It's wise to be cautious about taking on the role of guarantor, another said, adding it should not be done unless you really can provide those guarantees, including on security. And in some cases, there's a mismatch between the expectations of conflict parties looking to mediators as a guarantor and the willingness of the mediator to actually take on this role.

With multilateral actors struggling to prevent conflict and suffering from a "crisis of credibility", in the words of one participant, others wondered whether the UN's niche was becoming increasingly humanitarian, while states deal with security. Within the state apparatus, one added, it's often the intelligence services that have the real decision-making power and are therefore best placed to use their leverage. Another responded that the extent of overlap with diplomatic channels varies between contexts.

Still, there was wide agreement that external influence and involvement can create conditions for both success and failure. Where the right mix of facilitators is found – such as the roles of Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Norway and Venezuela as guarantors of talks between the government of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (ELN) – there is complementarity rather than competition.

In other cases, with non-state actors in the mix, it's about "trying to utilise the complementarities between informality, formality, openness, confidentiality, inclusion and discretion".

While this brings challenges of coordination and the risk of a "pile up" of mediation actors, it was clear that unofficial actors will continue to play an important role.

As one participant put it, they can "create coalitions in advance of state appetite opening for mediation" and help the process by brainstorming and back-channelling, providing a space to test ideas in a lower stakes setting. "You don't feel like you're taking a position when you're talking to an informal actor."

Anniken Huitfeldt (top left); Annette Weber (top centre); Retno L.P. Marsudi (top right); Aliyu Ibrahim Gebi (bottom right); Suhasini Haidar (bottom centre); Jonas Gahr Støre and Comfort Ero (bottom left)





3

Ethiopia: pathways to peace

The 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) ended a devastating two-year conflict. In this session, participants reflected on the implementation of the agreement and looked at possible pathways to long-term peace and stability in Ethiopia.

One speaker outlined several issues of immediate concern in the Tigray region, including administering the return of internally displaced people and the delivery of humanitarian assistance that was halted during the siege. As another participant put it, "we don't want people to survive shooting and then die of hunger".

Though there was widespread praise for both sides for coming to the negotiating table and reaching an agreement – with the facilitation of the AU and the support of Kenya and South Africa – participants also acknowledged that Ethiopia's political future is far from settled.

"There's still conflict going on in Oromia. There's huge instability in the Amhara region. This has not been settled yet. The whole issue is the issue of state building in Ethiopia," said one participant.

Both centralist and federalist models have been attempted and challenged at various points in Ethiopia's history, said one participant, so the fundamental question is: "How do we build a state that will accommodate diversity within Ethiopia?"

Participants agreed the process needs to have a regional dimension, with the involvement of neighbouring stakeholders such as Eritrea. But ultimately, the process must remain resolutely Ethiopian-owned and genuinely inclusive. "It cannot be an elite debate. It cannot be an elite consensus. It cannot be an elite deal."

The inclusion of women is a vital part of this, with participants recognising that, to date, opportunities have been missed. "Women are not coming in as victims, they are also coming in as leaders and they have a big contribution to make for the sustainability of the peace process."

Other issues included progress on disarmament, the proposed extension of the monitoring and verification mechanism and the contested question of accountability. While the federal government is aiming for an internally managed accountability process, the TPLF is calling for verification of atrocities by a credible international institution.

The scars will need time, and careful management, to heal.

Such informal channels are vital when official engagement is risky or impossible due to issues of state sovereignty, public opinion and legitimisation, a recurring theme in the discussion on engaging with de facto authorities.

Facing the facts: engaging with de facto authorities

The challenges mediators face when engaging with contested authorities are considerable – from dealing with legal and administrative obstacles such as sanctions to bringing about meaningful dialogue among state and non-state actors to prevent and manage conflicts.

In the Middle East and North Africa, some non-state armed groups have established themselves as powerful political actors. They control large territories and populations. While they are not recognised internationally, their military abilities have the potential to challenge regional security.

The speakers began by acknowledging there is no fully agreed definition of “de facto”. Despite this contested term, one offered a potential typology: de facto authorities that control some of a state’s territory, de facto states such as Somaliland and de facto governments that have taken effective control of a state, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan.

“I don’t pay a lot of attention to legal status,” one mediator said, referring to engagements with de facto authorities. “But what you need is the consent of the state, otherwise you violate sovereignty.”

State and multilateral actors face a similar dilemma – there is a risk of legitimising de facto authorities by engaging with them but, without engagement, there can be no discussion of potential governance arrangements.

As one speaker noted, recognition and a form of legitimacy can be positive if it means avoiding violent conflict. The best solution, participants agreed, is to seek to integrate de facto authorities into the state’s politics, transitioning armed groups into political actors.



David Harland (top left); Xu Manshu (top centre); Ye-Min Wu and Kerstin Vignard (top right); Danilo Rueda (right centre); Jeffrey Feltman and Monica Juma (bottom right); Hanna S. Tetteh (bottom centre); Roxaneh Bazergan and Scott S. Smith (bottom left)



In the case of the Taliban, one speaker argued, engagement is a necessity. External actors have a security interest in avoiding state collapse, they have economic reasons to maintain dialogue and they recognise that, as a country of 40 million people, Afghanistan is more than the Taliban.

The wide-ranging discussion also touched on sanctions and truces.

One speaker argued that the sanctions regime “doesn’t reflect reality” and is ineffective when groups have support and legitimacy from the population. There was debate about whether Western-imposed sanctions help to promote accountability or have an overly restrictive effect on engagement with de facto authorities.

“If you negotiate a truce with a de facto actor or armed group,” one participant warned, “you need to have a strong state that can ensure the implementation of the agreement.”

Ultimately, another concluded, “we don’t have a good alternative to dialogue. We have to keep talking in the interests of peace, stability and security, even if the public disagrees.”

Regional perspectives

In sessions on Africa’s peace and security architecture, and insurgencies in Asia, participants took a step back to consider the shared and interlocking challenges facing countries within these vast and diverse regions.

African peace and security architecture amid new geopolitics

Growing insecurity in Africa has raised questions of the nature of statehood and the best formula for African stability and development. Geopolitical interests by outside players and their rivalries add to the complexity. In this discussion, participants brought a range of cases to the table to reflect on the relevance and efficacy of African peace and security mechanisms.

One speaker pointed out that the typologies and actors in conflict on the African continent had changed considerably with the rapid expansion of

4

Somalia: what's next for regions retaken from Al Shabaab?

In 2022, Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud initiated a fresh offensive against Al Shabaab. Since then, substantial parts of central Somalia have been reclaimed by government troops, with the cooperation of local clans. But for the campaign's success to be sustainable, the retaken areas must be stabilised and local reconciliation efforts prioritised to prevent a relapse into a conflict.

During the session, participants heard about the federal government's vision for the retaken regions, including investment in police, basic services and livelihoods. Strengthening social integration, empowering women and youth and enhancing reconciliation through the justice system are also part of the strategy.

"The opportunity to engage and influence these newly accessible areas is very short," said one participant, calling for quick progress in service delivery to build on military successes.

Meanwhile, what are the prospects for dialogue with the remnants of Al Shabaab? It's not a monolithic group, said one participant. There may be elements that are willing to talk. "It's about time we see Al Shabaab as actors in Somali political life," said another, despite their lack of a clearly articulated national vision.

Colombia's "fighting while talking" approach could work in Somalia too, one speaker said, but the weakest link is always strategic communications. Governments need to amplify their successes and provide compelling counter-narratives to win the ideological battle.

Since Al Shabaab does not respect national borders, a regional approach to security and dialogue might be required, participants agreed, as well as support from neighbouring countries for the "institutional framework" required to deliver social services.

"The commitment to Somalia must be measured by the support for state building," said one speaker. Somalia's challenges must be seen in the context of the struggle to apply federalist principles and the relationship between the federal government and constituent states.

The government's "to do" list is long and more than can be achieved in a single presidential term. As such, "strategic patience" will be important, as well as partnering with civil society organisations to "rebuild transparency and credibility" in recovered and contested territories.

"Soft approaches like skills training, entrepreneurship, and investing in free education – all these elements are not cosmetic," said one speaker. "They create an entry point for bigger conversations around countering violent extremism, on community policing, on reconciliation."



Dimah G. Abdulkarim (top left); Martin Griffiths (top right); Murat Lütem (centre); Adina Kamarudin (right centre); Yemi Osinbajo and Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni (bottom right); Jalil Abbas Jilani (bottom centre); Nazanine Moshiri, Espen Barth Eide and Ashley Jackson (bottom left)



violent extremism, protracted military transitions, a recent uptick in military coups and growing geopolitical manoeuvring.

Contemplating success stories, speakers referred to the negotiations that led to Kenya's national peace accord in 2008, ending the country's post-election violence. They also reflected on the recent Multinational Joint Task Force established by neighbouring countries in the Lake Chad basin to deal with the threat of Boko Haram. It was an "indigenous" process, said one speaker, that did not suffer from accusations of foreign interference.

But a significant concern raised by participants is "the sneaking back of coups d'état", in West Africa in particular. There is a sense of hopelessness and of governments having failed their populations, especially young people, said one participant. They cited a chronic lack of healthcare and jobs as reasons why military takeovers in countries such as Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali have gained a certain measure of popularity.



“We’re seeing a battle to the death between three models of government,” said one person – liberal democracies, authoritarian military regimes and the community-based religious model with its separatist movements. Legitimacy will not come from the ballot box, they added, but rather through the ability to provide physical, legal and economic security.

In the pushback against coups, one participant argued, we have to ask what has gone wrong in democracy globally, not just in Africa. “Those who believe in the democratic process need to cast their net a little wider.”

Three of the countries undergoing military transitions in West Africa were also in post-coup transitions 10 years ago, one speaker noted, pointing to a clear need to improve the management of these periods. It does not mean that longer transitions are required but rather higher quality processes “so we don’t create the conditions for coups to happen again”.



Meanwhile, African Union and ECOWAS sanctions have been largely ineffective, participants agreed, with no real means of enforcement.

Participants also assessed the AU's record in creating and managing sustainable peace through state building. Look at the example of Somalia, said one participant, compared to NATO in Afghanistan with far greater resources. There have been several cycles of elections in Somalia, with the prospect of universal adult suffrage at the next election.

But the UN and the AU were built to manage relationships between states, not what happens within them, one speaker countered. Too often, states are subcontracting the job of state-building to these bodies. Beyond the African peace and security architecture, participants agreed, there is a need to keep working on African governance architecture and remember that they work in synergy.

“The failure of governance exacerbates the activities of interlopers,” said one participant. Governance vacuums are often filled by a counterproductive interplay of power. Though external involvement often comes with assurances of improved stability, participants agreed that the reality is more complicated.

For some, the competition for influence across the continent, combined with geopolitical polarisation, is a return to dynamics from the Cold War. But this is unmistakably a new era, rather than a replay of the past. China, for example, is becoming a significant force in terms of the fiscal policy and economies of African countries, not just as a mediator or peacemaker. And in cases such as Mali, there is a need to look with nuance at the efficacy of interventions over the past decade. “Just focusing on Russia misses an important part of the picture.”

While “African solutions to African problems” has long been a stock phrase and a frequently embraced guiding principle, participants added nuance to the debate. One described it as a potentially restrictive philosophy, limiting external help while disregarding the fact that problems on the African continent have implications beyond it.

“It’s abdication of the worst order,” another added. “We need to call out problems being shooed over to the Intergovernmental Authority on

Development without the appropriate international support. And then a blame game starts. We need to challenge this idea.”

Ultimately, participants agreed, the AU has done well to build a comprehensive normative framework but there are gaps between the framework and practice on the ground. “We have a huge toolkit but it’s not being deployed appropriately,” one speaker said, referring to preventive diplomacy and the use of Good Offices.

Problems will remain, in the words of one participant, as long as external powers continue to design their Africa policy “to fix their own existential problems” – from food security and migration to geostrategic rivalries and the demand for raw materials such as graphite, cobalt, uranium and lithium. “A new scramble for Africa is happening before our eyes.”

But there is a cause for optimism. Young people across the continent are increasingly well educated and able to mobilise globally. African states have more agency and influence on the world stage. The session concluded with a rallying cry “to envision the future of Africa, including fostering increased productivity, preserving dignity and enhancing participatory governance at all levels.”

“There’s a lot of mediation to come,” said one speaker. “We’ve got our work cut out!”

Balancing act in Asia: how to deal with insurgency in a new geopolitical reality?

Subnational conflicts in South and Southeast Asia, in which groups seek autonomy or independence from a larger state, are among the world’s longest-running armed struggles. Some of the earliest and most successful mediation efforts in Asia focused on these conflicts and helped to resolve them, such as in the Philippines and Indonesia’s Aceh region.

Nearly a decade on from the Bangsamoro peace agreement – signed by the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – participants heard about the ongoing implementation of the deal and looked across Asia to draw lessons from other peacemaking attempts with insurgent groups.



Heba Aly (top left); Isidro L. Purisima (top right); Comfort Ero (bottom right); Katia Papagianni (bottom centre); Maryna Domushkina (centre); Asif Durrani (bottom left); Jonathan Powell (left centre)



5

Sudan: what's next?

The war that broke out in April 2023 between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has aborted the political process and efforts to restore the transition to democracy after the 2021 coup d'état.

In this roundtable session, participants discussed the diplomatic efforts underway to seek a mediated solution to conflict and to launch a political process aimed at reaching an inclusive agreement between civilian actors.

Participants agreed that sustainable solutions for Sudan must be Sudanese-led and owned, with the unified support of regional and international actors.

While some participants argued that fundamental differences among civic and political actors have hindered the transition, others pushed back, pointing out that the war has led to more cohesion among civilians. A key question is how to begin assembling a Sudanese process to bring the fragmented pieces together.

The potential inclusion of the SAF and the RSF in a political process was also contentious. Both parties, as signatories of the Political Framework Agreement, agreed before the outbreak of hostilities that they would remove themselves from the political sphere, so civilians should decide the future of Sudan, one speaker said.

Another responded that a meaningful political process must address the role of the military as well as the security sector, making the point that one cannot take away everything a military leader has and expect that they would not fight to keep it.

With the military already showing signs that it would reject an IGAD-led process, participants also asked how to encourage military actors to engage with regional mediators and create the conditions for a sustainable regional process.

This prompted questions about the multiplicity of potential mediators and initiatives. Some participants argued in favour of a broad range of expertise and influence, while some called for a single lead actor in the region, supported by others.

We need the international community to speak with one voice, some said, and especially countries in the region, and there is a need to coordinate the efforts of IGAD and the AU.

While some were not optimistic about the future of the Jeddah process facilitated by the United States and Saudi Arabia, others predicted that it may continue in parallel to a regional one, with a focus on Sudanese civilians. Perhaps the Jeddah talks can continue to provide the ceasefires essential to the delivery of humanitarian aid, one participant said.

With the humanitarian situation deteriorating rapidly amid signs of state collapse, the session concluded with agreement on a fundamental point: "We do not have the luxury of time."

Inevitably, such a large and diverse region will be home to multiple subnational movements with their own cultural identities. As one speaker noted, subnational groups can become insurgencies when their socioeconomic aspirations are frustrated or denied.

In the Bangsamoro autonomous region, the focus has been on strengthening governance, applying the rule of law and developing democratic institutions, as well as transitional justice mechanisms to address the drivers of conflict such as historic land dispossession.

In the words of one participant, “it’s hard to transform from combatant to administering governance”. There was praise for the government’s role in helping prepare the MILF to govern an autonomous region.

One participant highlighted an element of the process that, in their view, is underappreciated: beyond the ceasefire and decommissioning, political will has been integral to the Philippine process. The key takeaway, they said, is successive presidents understood that a successful process could and should be part of their legacy, so they were willing to invest in it.

From Cambodia to Nepal to Timor Leste to Aceh, the region has seen success in addressing conflicts internally. However, one speaker raised concern about the complexity of conflicts in Myanmar that spread from one place to another.

Participants acknowledged the importance of strong ASEAN leadership on Myanmar, within a policy of non-interference. Though the Five Point Consensus on the conflict after the February 2021 coup in Myanmar is seen as an important foundation, participants recognised that its implementation has not been as effective as hoped.

The Five Point plan, reached at a regional summit of Southeast Asian leaders two months after the coup, included asking for an immediate stop to the violence and opening a dialogue between the military and civilian leaders. Participants called for a consistent and sustainable commitment to resolve the Myanmar crisis. The process in the Philippines started in the 1970s, said one speaker. “I just hope [Myanmar] won’t take that long.”

Amid the growth of populist and religious majoritarian movements, participants discussed where future conflict in the region might arise. One wondered whether discrimination against minority groups – not just deprivation or lack of governance – could engender the kind of grievances that lead to conflict.

As the session concluded, several topics were raised for further discussion, including how governments can find a balance between enabling freedom and access to communication technology on one hand and, on the other, “controlling spaces virtually” to deny access to militants and insurgents.

Participants also asked how states should engage with non-state actors based elsewhere that have a material impact on their own interests. “If you can’t deal with a central authority as such, you’re going to have to deal with a non-state actor in the interest of saving people’s lives.”

Ultimately, concluded one participant, “insurgencies in conflict are just like chapters in a book” – no sooner is one finished than the next comes



Ali Ashal

along. We need to keep investing in conflict management processes, they added, because if you start by ignoring one or two chapters, you'll soon be faced with 50.

There is a risk that Asia becomes, in the words of one participant, “a hotbed of insurgencies”.

Evolving frontiers

States now face unprecedented challenges as it becomes more difficult to shield themselves from instability and insecurity originating beyond their borders.

The impacts of climate change and criminal organisations are some of the intertwining transnational threats that surpass the capacity of any individual state to effectively address them. Besides, the rapid and converging advancements in technology hold the potential to completely reshape the dynamics of conflicts.



6

Yemen: situation report

There has been no large-scale fighting in Yemen since the UN-brokered truce in April 2022, which lasted formally for six months and has held informally ever since.

Though negotiations are ongoing – including between Saudi Arabia and Ansar Allah – the timeframe to reach a renewed truce or to move into an inter-Yemeni dialogue is difficult to determine. While there was widespread praise for the recent prisoner exchange with the release of nearly 900 detainees, there was also recognition that much more work remains.

The reduction of violence has led to “a sense of normality” for some Yemenis. But participants said that more difficult steps, and considerable compromises on all sides, need to be made for long-term peace. As one speaker put it, “reaching truces will lead us nowhere if we can’t transition to a comprehensive political framework”.

During the session, participants heard about the UN envoy’s work with the conflict parties to develop an agreed structure for the process, including reaching out to military representatives to discuss a potential ceasefire mechanism.

There was also discussion of a potential multitrack approach to talks – as seen recently in Libya – that would allow for parallel negotiations on different issues.

With multiple national envoys working on Yemen, in addition to the UN special envoy, participants agreed on the need to avoid establishing rival strands that would create the possibility for confusion and forum shopping. We need “a unified level of messaging to the parties” that is “coherent with the approach of the UN”, said one participant.

Despite 14 months of de-escalation by the time of the Oslo Forum, there was scant economic improvement. Instead, economic cooperation has seemed to go into reverse, one participant said, with Yemeni citizens as the casualty.

Attacks on oil and gas installations, and the difficulty of collecting taxes, have caused a significant loss of revenue for the internationally recognised government, in turn hampering its ability to deliver basic services.

Though many other crises and conflicts vie for attention, participants urged the international community not to give up on the situation in Yemen. As one speaker put it, the need for support will not disappear even after a political agreement. After more than eight years of conflict, there are glimmers of light but also serious challenges ahead.

In sessions on negotiating with criminal actors, artificial intelligence and climate change, participants considered the threats and opportunities posed by rapidly evolving issues that peacemakers can no longer afford to ignore.

Once upon a crime: a timely approach to negotiating with criminal actors

Violent criminal organisations add further complexity to armed conflicts around the world. Initiating negotiations with these groups to reduce violence remains an issue of great sensitivity and contention. However, in different contexts peacemakers have taken steps to explore the potential as well as challenges of engaging with criminal actors.

“Dealing with criminal actors is not an option, it’s a reality.” That’s how one participant framed a wide-ranging discussion that included a reflection on the Colombian government’s approach to “Paz Total”: President Petro’s ambitious plan to negotiate in parallel with various armed and criminal groups, while shifting the focus of military strategy to the protection of civilians.

While public support can be hard to garner, one participant said, in fact governments negotiate with criminals all the time – think of plea bargains, for example. “There is no absolute principle.”

And indeed, the dividing line with other kinds of armed groups can be difficult to identify, as many organisations engage in criminal activities to fund their struggle.

Mediators and negotiators need to think about what the endgame looks like. In the case of negotiations with the IRA, ETA and the FARC, the peace process created an opportunity to transition into political life.

But what happens if a group’s goal is simply to maintain the status quo or to retain control of resources? For governments, this creates the dilemma of how to make the current situation uncomfortable for criminal groups and present alternatives that bring them to the negotiating table.





Tsadkan Gebretensae (top left); Asma Ahmed (top centre); Lisa Golden, Farhad Alaaldin, and Pierre Vimont (top right); Asif R. Khan (bottom right); Zhou Bo (bottom centre); Quhramanaa Kakar (bottom left)

By “fighting and talking at the same time” and maintaining clear red lines, states can find the balance – between applying pressure and offering a way out – that is essential to success.

It’s crucial, participants agreed, that engagement with criminal groups is part of a long-term vision, embedded in a broader state transformation process and with an appropriate legal framework. In Colombia, this means working with ministries of defence and security and building trust within local populations. As one participant put it, it’s useless to have model of security for each city if this does not come with measures to tackle social inequality.

Another participant made a link to violent extremist groups in Sahel. A major reason for joining is to protect one’s family, income and community, and to have access to basic social services. Are we “doing a disservice to our options for solutions”, they asked, by using overly simplified labels for different groups? Perhaps a “deconfliction of language” is a necessary first step.

On the issue of public opinion, participants agreed that it’s hard to shift the dial. Frequently, negotiations with gangs – deemed terrorists – are politically unpalatable.

In Haiti, said one participant, the middle classes demanded an alternative approach to dealing with gang violence only when they started operating in their neighbourhoods and carrying out kidnappings. In Bogota, there was widespread distrust of the negotiations with armed groups that controlled territory far from the capital.

“You have to have a strategic communications capacity,” said one participant. Keep negotiations confidential to begin with then come out with strong narrative when you’re ready. Political viability comes from having clear goals and the ability to demonstrate early wins to the public. One participant described this as “confidence building measures with the population”.

There is no easy solution. Transitional justice and addressing underlying social and economic drivers of gang activity have to be part of the equation. Still, participants agreed that dialogue remains central. “We need to listen. And to listen means to see reality as it is.”

Artificial intelligence in peacemaking and on the battlefield

Artificial intelligence can play a part in escalating and in reducing tensions – before, during and after conflict. Participants were urged to look beyond the narrow headline-grabbing image of “killer robots” and instead consider how existing AI technologies are already shaping war and peacemaking efforts.

Surveying the risks, the group imagined a range of scenarios – from fake peace agreements and endorsements made by generative AI circulated on social media to fully-autonomous naval vessels with auto-fire capacity and the attendant risks of accidents and escalation.

On the other hand, AI was cited as a tool for inclusion in digital dialogues and in geospatial reporting for ceasefire monitoring as examples of potentially positive deployments.

In the words of one speaker, we can make choices about how we use technology. “AI is not good or bad or neutral” but rather “a tool based on human, social and political choices and market-driven forces” that therefore reflects our biases and concerns.

Though regulatory mechanisms and multilateral processes are underway, there is a “structural problem of speed” as technological innovation outstrips political debate. Regulatory approaches can get caught in the gap between states that already have the technology and those that do not and favour an outright ban.

As one participant noted, it’s not just a case of access to technology, there are “haves and have nots in terms of access to the discourse”. In other words, what kind of knowledge and expertise is required to even make or vote on proposed new rules?

Many questions remain about who to bring into the conversation – and when. As one speaker put it, computer scientists, technologists, ethicists, social scientists, legal scholars, civil society organisations and public policy actors will all have their own perspectives. And any agreed high-level principles will need to be translated back into engineering requirements.





Rebecca Finlay (top left); Alissa Wahid (top centre); P.S. Raghavan (top right); Adrian Bergmann (bottom right); Mutte Dammaj (bottom centre); Sophea Eat and Rea Gehring (bottom left)

Meanwhile, it can feel like the world of mediation and peacemaking is playing catch up.

While multilateral conversations at the UN have been fraught with difficulty, quieter and informal efforts have brought the major powers (and industry front-runners) together bilaterally. In this highly competitive relationship, with limited forms of transparency, the conversations have focused on what potential guardrails might look like.

The goal is to translate dialogue into practical action, though this remains hostage to political forces. As one participant added, a big piece is missing without diplomatic processes that meaningfully engage other significant players, including places like Türkiye, India and the UAE.

While one speaker felt that “the discourse right now is all about negativity” and urged participants to consider how to reinforce messaging about positive applications of AI and shift public perception, another countered that widespread caution is an overdue correction. “We’re finally getting round to talking about the risks.”

The session underscored that peacemakers cannot afford to ignore how AI will change peacemaking. It concluded with a plea for open-mindedness and the need for humility, particularly in seeking solutions from experts beyond the mediation community. As one speaker put it, “It’s ok to feel like it’s daunting but not to think that it won’t impact you”.

Too hot to handle? Advancing climate action in areas controlled by armed groups

According to the ICRC, at least 175 million people live in areas controlled or contested by non-state armed groups. These territories are often those where climate change has the most severe and cascading consequences.

With multilateral institutions and development banks struggling to gain trusted access to local stakeholders and de facto authorities, people in these areas risk missing out on the lifelines of climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster risk reduction and environmental protection.

In this session, participants discussed opportunities for discreet peacemaking initiatives in hard-to-reach areas affected by climate change and how mediators can support effective climate action.

Non-state armed groups can shape and control the governance of natural resources. This does not necessarily mean destruction or over-exploitation. As participants noted, armed actors will at times protect the environment for their own financial benefit or to legitimise their status. This could present a valuable entry point for peacemakers and climate action.

State misuse of the same resources, or a lack of services, can also provide an opening for these groups. In the case of Al Shabaab in Somalia, community grievances about water scarcity have enabled the group to take on a kind of mediating role themselves, according to one speaker.

“For mediators, it’s really important to understand the internal structuring of armed groups and non-state actors in relation to the communities, whether they’re looking for international legitimacy, and what entry points we can use”, said one participant.

Sometimes this will mean engaging at leadership level. On other occasions, speaking directly to affected local communities will be more effective.

A greater focus on climate resilience was proposed during the session, rather than waiting until a humanitarian response is required. Expanding the mandates and technical capacity of mediation teams to deal with issues such as water management might help to address problems before they occur.

In the Horn of Africa, said one participant, there is too much emphasis on humanitarian funding and not enough on prevention, specifically water management. If the balance is corrected, they continued, “we will not be having as much of a conversation about dealing with armed groups because we would have been dealing with communities”.

But another speaker said there are lessons to be learned from the pace of humanitarian and peacemaking actors. “The way they take risks, the way they deliver services and aid – we need to put that sense of urgency into the climate action sector as well.”





Ghaith Abdul-Ahad (top left); Siri Borgen and Roza Otunbayeva (top centre); Álvaro Leyva Durán (top right); Kawun Kakar and Ashley Jackson (bottom right); Hans Grundberg (bottom centre); Ellie Geranmayeh (bottom left)

Meanwhile, other countries could learn from Africa's growing understanding of the climate and security nexus. "If climate change in the shape of rising temperatures really begins to affect mainland Southeast Asia in a chronic way", said one participant, "huge numbers of people are going to migrate northward to China, where there will be an immediate impact on transboundary issues."

Ultimately, another participant said, we should avoid becoming overly fixated on terminology. "Peacebuilding is conflict prevention." Where conflict dynamics are based on natural resources, you "work with competing stakeholder groups to grow resource availability, equitable access and resource governance, right? And peacebuilding is embedded within this resource governance mechanism".

None of this is possible without the appropriate funding. Participants agreed that current climate financing mechanisms are not adapted to advancing action in areas controlled by armed groups. Designing a financing system focused disproportionately on states is potentially a missed opportunity to engage with other influential actors and affected communities.



“We need more investment in climate adaptation in conflict zones,” one speaker said. “Climate adaptation financing, stabilisation efforts and reconciliation efforts need to take into account conflict risks arising from armed groups, and we need to include climate language in UN mandates.”

Much work remains to be done.

Power of ideas

Throughout this year’s Oslo Forum, several sessions shone a spotlight on the tradecraft of mediation. Innovative approaches to the design of agreements and negotiations, and the mobilisation of actors with different kinds of influence, can achieve significant breakthroughs even in intricate geopolitical contexts. This was exemplified in the Black Sea Initiative.

The Black Sea Initiative and beyond

The Black Sea Initiative, which lasted from July 2022 to July 2023, was a set of parallel agreements to facilitate the export of grain, food and fertiliser from Ukraine via a maritime corridor. The aim was to help tackle the global food crisis. As a result of these agreements, 33 million tonnes of grain worth about USD10 billion left Ukraine’s ports, contributing to the stabilisation of global food prices.

In the words of one participant, this was “mediation at its most intellectually ambitious”. The deal was reached in a different way than conventional approaches. The idea behind the initiative and an international coalition to support that concept were created by third parties from the beginning. The conflict parties – Ukraine and Russia – did not initially seek it.

Participants heard about the origins of the initiative as a response to skyrocketing food prices after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A technical solution to prevent a food security crisis was identified by third parties as an entry point for negotiations and possible agreement between the conflict parties. The initial idea, the structure of the initiative and the steps to secure support from countries impacted by the food crisis were established before conflict parties became involved in the plan.

The final agreement was achieved in the form of three parallel agreements: two versions of the Black Sea agreement – one signed by Russia, the other signed by Ukraine – and a Memorandum of Understanding between Russia and the UN on facilitating Russia’s agricultural exports.

Though unique in its design, this was a classic case of trying to create a win-win solution. As one participant put it, there were “perceptions to be won” in the face of widespread fear of famine in the Global South.

The deal’s success stemmed from various factors, one of which was the presence of a well-supported idea championed by a coalition of nations significant to Russia and Ukraine. While the initiative needed to hold its own value for each country, the influence of a collective of potentially crucial third parties who wanted it to happen played a substantial role.

The initiative was described in the session as an innovative deal that “established the rules of the game for the first time”.


Participants discussed how a range of actors contributed, including Türkiye’s role as an “indispensable unlocker” of the agreement. Both of the conflict parties had high levels of confidence in Türkiye as a facilitator of the deal, and the Turkish government was willing to use its Good Offices to smooth disagreements that had the potential to derail the whole process if not managed quickly.

The technical expertise of UN agencies such as the World Food Programme, the UN Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance, and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) was also vital. The IMO had a key role in clarifying the legal precedent that gave a mandate for the operation, which in turn helped to secure shipping insurance and in implementing the agreement through the Joint Coordination Centre.

Participants also remarked on the engagement of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) in the process. From conceptualisation in March 2022 to implementation from late July 2022, HD staff helped to frame, research and pitch the concept and played a valuable role in the signing and implementation of the deals.

Participants heard about the “complex choreography” of the signing in Istanbul and the pressure of working in the Joint Coordination Centre in the first days after the agreement, where every second counted in the race to implement the agreements and demonstrate success.

Though there was recognition that ongoing cooperation remains subject to a higher political level, the session ended on forward-looking notes. “How do you take the rules of the game to craft something more sustainable in the long run?” And could it serve as a model for other negotiations in the future?



Throughout all the sessions at the Oslo Forum, a multitude of threads and themes surfaced, providing valuable guidance to mediators working to facilitate dialogue and peaceful solutions amid challenging contexts and an outlook that offers little reason for optimism.

Though multipolarity makes solutions harder, one participant said, we’ve always had to deal with different interested parties having their own ideas of what stability looks like. And while the major powers jostle for position, an opportunity emerges for actors across the rest of the world – non-aligned countries with growing spheres of influence – to stake their claim as the mediators of the future.

The war in Ukraine has exposed fault lines and shifting alliances in the international system. Add to this a range of humanitarian crises, the threat of climate change, the economic shock of the Covid-19 pandemic and the risks posed by disinformation and emerging technologies, and we are left with a complex and troubling picture – a “tsunami of challenges” as one speaker put it.

Though impartiality and discretion will remain essential to peacemaking, these discussions were a reminder that having leverage and a strong public narrative are key ingredients in the right context, while innovative tradecraft can be an antidote to both fatigue and deadlock in the international system.

Then, now and beyond

Mediators and peacemakers of different generations reflect on the role of the Oslo Forum in a changing world – and the past and future of peacemaking.



Álvaro de Soto



Laura Henao



Lisa Golden



Ameya Kilara



Ngozi Amu



Achaleke Christian
Leke

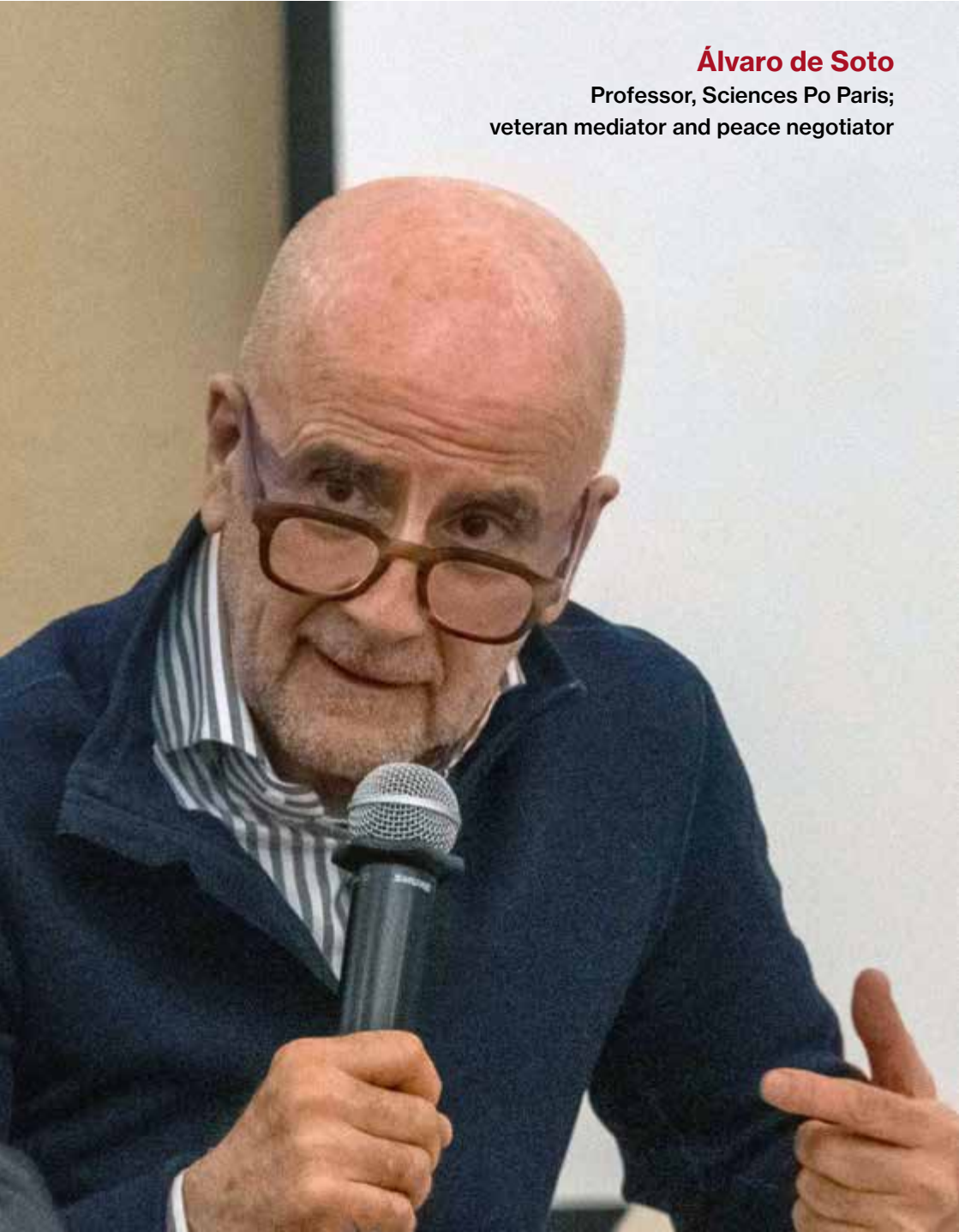
Photo credits

Carlos Hernández and Ilja C. Hendel

Courtesy of Laura Henao, Ameya Kilara and Achaleke Christian Leke

Álvaro de Soto

Professor, Sciences Po Paris;
veteran mediator and peace negotiator



Q You attended the very first Oslo Forum. What was it like?

A The first Oslo Forum was in a hotel above the city, next to a ski jump which is visible from anywhere in the fjord below. Though there must have been an agenda, I remember it as what we used to call 'BOGSAT' – Bunch Of Guys Sitting Around a Table. The idea that 'peacemakers' were becoming an epistemic community with an identity and imprint of their own had not yet gelled.

I have no doubts that the diplomats present unfurled great wisdom, but curiously what stands out in my recollection was the very earthbound and concrete



Roberto de León and Álvaro de Soto

comments of two army generals, Lazaro Sumbeiywo of Kenya and Anthony Zinni of the US. Lazaro was then a senior General of the Kenyan army who told us about the role he had played in imposing a halt to fighting between combatants in the Horn of Africa. A tried and true military leader, he awed us by forsaking our jargon, commanding the respect of the combatants.

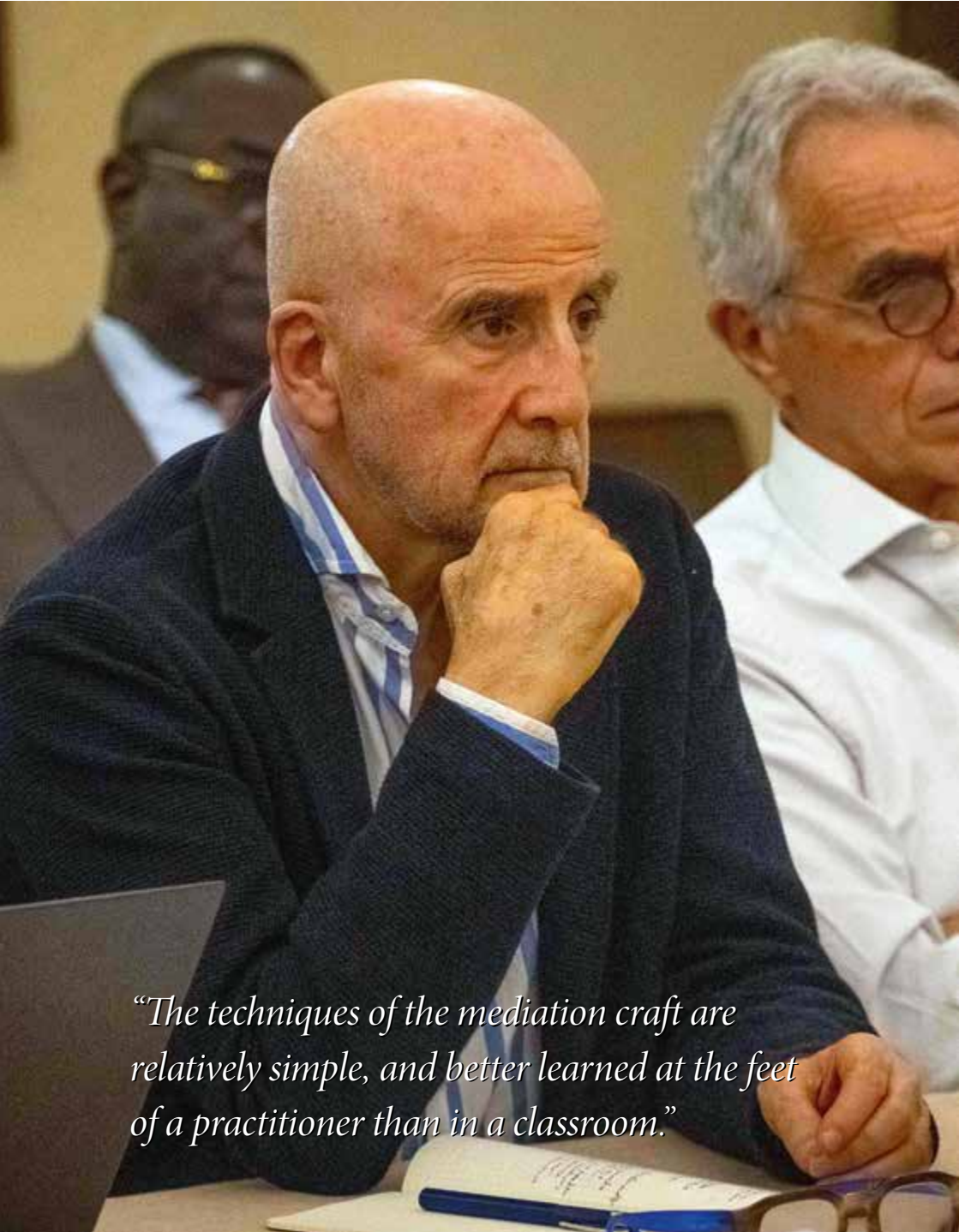
I recall Anthony's observations about the terminology of UN Security Council resolutions, the inevitable result of compromise, and the befuddlement they produced among military men playing the diplomatic role expected of them with the UN Peacekeeper's blue beret.

Q How has the mediation of armed conflicts changed in the past two decades?

A To speak of 'change' is to understate: peacemaking has been transformed, starting in the early 90s when the UN began to get involved in the resolution of internal conflicts, dealing with non-state actors on the same plane as states in an international system where states remain the central players. The Rome Statute – a giant, justly celebrated step – nevertheless enshrines flaws which, together with some of the International Criminal Court's decisions, hampered the search for negotiated solutions to armed conflict. The global 'War on Terror' has enormously complicated the task of peacemakers by compromising their ability merely to talk to potential interlocutors; by putting in the same basket nihilists for whom extreme political violence is intrinsic with others whose political violence is merely tactical; and – in the absence of an internationally agreed definition – allowing some governments to adopt exclusionary policies by mislabeling opponents.

Q What advice would you give to those entering the field of mediation today?

A The techniques of the mediation craft are relatively simple, and better learned at the feet of a practitioner than in a classroom. Learning them is the least of your worries. More important than knowledge is whether you have the right temperament and know how to listen. Be attentive to changes in conditions and the evolution of the international climate.



“The techniques of the mediation craft are relatively simple, and better learned at the feet of a practitioner than in a classroom.”

Laura Henao

Former Senior Project Officer at the United States
Institute of Peace (USIP) and Researcher at Centro de
Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP)



Q What is your perspective on the current practice of mediation and peacemaking?

A I've learned that mediation is not about being 'neutral' and having nothing to say in the face of human rights violations. On the contrary, getting all parties to perceive the process as fair requires an understanding of multi-partiality. By committing to human rights protection, mediation can support those who are at disadvantage and help to balance the process. As mediators, we need to adapt tools and methodologies to the local context. The real challenge for me is to practise these methods with rural communities and indigenous people with a less western view.



Negotiation training in Chocó, Colombia

Q What challenges are peacemakers in Latin America facing?

A I see a deterioration in the conditions for mediation due to challenges from 'non-political actors' such as criminal groups. Through their influence and coercive methods, criminal groups compete with local leaders to 'mediate' disputes in the territories they control. Threats are used as a quick way to solve local conflicts, instead of initiating dialogues. In Colombia, legal limitations also restrict the possibilities to engage with illegal actors, as mediators need permission from the government to invite these actors to the table. So changes in the existing legal framework and mediation guidance are necessary.

Q What improvements would you like to see in the field of mediation 20 years from now?

A I hope to see more diversity in the field, with mediators from the Global South and at local levels gaining more visibility. They are already doing a lot and their work should be better recognised. We must acknowledge the contribution that local leaders have offered. Those women, youth and elders might not have had training in peacemaking but they have lived through conflict for years and are natural mediators. I would like to see them having a more decisive and visible role in international mediation. I hope to see that in less than 20 years.

Q What do you consider your most successful professional achievement?

A For me, success is measured by transforming the mentality of conflict stakeholders. I can give you a personal example of a limited success that has given me hope. In Colombia, the police often see rural leaders as sympathisers of armed groups because they live in the same areas, limiting security provisions. Together with USIP, we organised a dialogue between police commanders and rural communities. Through this dialogue, residents managed to convince police officers of the importance of recognising indigenous leaders as partners in their work to improve security.

“I hope to see more diversity in the field, with mediators from the Global South and at local levels gaining more visibility.”



Lisa Golden

Director, Section for Peace and Reconciliation,
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Q What do you remember from the first Oslo Forum?

A It was small and intimate. I remember sitting around a long, heavy wood dining table. I was working on Norway's third party facilitation of the peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The negotiations had stopped and we were looking into possible ways forward. During a session on Sri Lanka, other mediators gave frank, concrete and practical advice. Of course, the first Oslo Forum was not a peer review of the Sri Lanka peace process, but it was a chance to put the challenges out there in a confidential setting and get other mediators' perspectives on how to improve the process. It was highly valuable to us.

Q How has the Oslo Forum contributed to mediation, the prevention of armed conflict and Norway's peacemaking policy?

A The Oslo Forum has helped us to build more competence and professionalism – to be exposed to the latest thinking in the field and comparative cases from elsewhere, as well as to share our experiences. Operationally, the Forum has been able to advance the work of facilitators or parties at a number of crossroads. In



Lisa Golden and Mahbouba Seraj

2015, the Forum brought together officials from the Afghan government, people from the Taliban political office and some of the special representatives from other countries. The informal safe space allowed actors to have contact when they were not interested in meeting formally at that stage in the conflict. At that time it was an important step. Parties have often made use of those kinds of opportunities at Oslo Forum, including the Venezuelan parties in 2022. The space allowed them to explore the possibility of relaunching formal talks.

Q How has the mediation of armed conflicts changed in the last two decades?

A It's a more crowded field, with more actors from NGOs and different countries investing in mediation, which is great. It means there are more resources going into conflict resolution globally and more reasons to share experiences in places like the Oslo Forum. It's always hard to coordinate in this field, not least given the fact that discretion is important, but I hope the Forum contributes a little bit to that as well, and to a kind of common spirit in the mediation field among actors with different strengths.

Q What main challenges are peacemakers currently facing?

A Peacemaking has always been complicated, but multi-polarity creates more awareness of the different factors and stakeholders. It's not just about bringing two parties to the table, but also how major powers, regional powers and neighbours interact with a process. Greater polarisation means that keeping channels of communication open is more important than ever. Diplomacy and mediation are important tools. Their use should not be limited to situations where parties already agree. Another challenge is handling information in the digital age. The communication between a peace process and the public happens in real time and makes it hard for parties to get together in a discreet way and do the preliminary work. Discretion is often essential to starting a peace process. Of course, digital developments have also made it easier for some peace processes to be inclusive and reach out to people in hard-to-access areas, or during the pandemic. So there are positive aspects as well.

Q What advice would you give to those entering the field of mediation and peacemaking today?

A Get practical experience as close to a process as possible. Even though so much has been written and so much good thinking has been done over the last 20 years, the basic essence of the work is still to sit there with the conflict parties and listen to their interests, their existential fears, their ambitions and hopes. And see if you can offer a way to communicate across whatever the gap that divides them.

“The basic essence of the work is still to sit there with the conflict parties and listen to their interests, their existential fears, their ambitions and hopes.”





Ameya Kilara

Senior Projects Director, Inter Mediate

Q What was the focus of the first peace initiative you were involved in?

A At 16, I led a youth movement for peace in Kashmir from my grandmother's kitchen in Bangalore! India and Pakistan had fought over Kashmir for almost six decades at that point and it was common to read reports of people being killed by the conflict almost every day. Our aim was to mobilise young people across India to demand that the violence ends. We were trying to challenge the idea that violence is normal. To me, violence is never inevitable. Running a movement taught me that you can always mobilise people in favour of a different possibility.

Q What is your perspective on how mediation is practised today? What would you like to see improved over the next 20 years?

A I feel lucky to belong to mediation field and have a community of practice to rely on today. This simply didn't exist a few generations ago. The challenge is to



Ameya Kilara won the Women of the Future's Community Spirits Award 2019

make sure that as the field gets professionalised, we don't become bureaucratic, risk-averse, divided and politically impotent. Countries like China, India, Turkey, and Indonesia are positioning themselves as mediators and are challenging the predominance of the Global North. This rebalancing is important and organisations must adapt to partner with them as equals. But new actors need to also bring a new vision for peacebuilding, otherwise it will be more of the same. In 20 years, I would like to see the field of mediation move beyond being the exclusive preserve of Western elites and to see leadership emerge from all corners of the world.

Q What would you consider your most successful achievement in mediation and peacemaking?

A Together with a network of colleagues in London, Kashmir, India, and Pakistan, we have sustained a peacebuilding process across the Line of Control in Kashmir for more than a decade. We have convened former army and spy chiefs from India and Pakistan. Two of them wrote a book together setting out a joint vision for peace. We worked with former militants who came together to facilitate barter trade across the Line of Control. We ran a leadership programme for young political leaders across party lines who have gone on to forge collaborations despite major trust deficits.

Q How optimistic are you about the field of mediation in the next two decades?

A Being an optimist is an occupational hazards of mediation work – I can't help but be one. But I am less optimistic today than I was when I entered the field a decade ago. It's because I am not confident of the quality of leadership in the most powerful institutions that could get us to a different place. Leaders with the power to change things seem too scared of what they will lose if they champion real changes. Many of us thought that the Covid-19 pandemic was the shock that could force leaders to do things differently. Early in the pandemic, the UN managed to negotiate Covid ceasefires and create common ground around a larger existential threat. But it was sad to see the momentum slip away as leaders returned to business as usual: playing on the same divides, the same polarisation. As mediators, we will need to find creative ways of overcoming this challenge.



“The challenge is to make sure that as the field gets professionalised, we don’t become bureaucratic, risk-averse, divided and politically impotent.”

Ngozi Amu

Team Leader and Head of Research and Analysis,
United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)



Q When you first took part in the Oslo Forum, in 2006, you were among very few women attending. What is your reflection on the efforts of the mediation community to become more inclusive?

A I remember in 2006 there was a separate session devoted to women and mediation and how to foster inclusion. Fast-forward to now and one can see a huge change in terms of gender balance. Last year when I attended the Oslo Forum, it seemed half of the participants were women. And what's interesting about that is that I didn't really reflect much on it. It felt very normal. There are more women appointed as peacemakers today, that's true, but there are also many women who've worked in this field for a long time, but whose achievements have been under the radar. Seeking out these women is essential, and to push further to ensure diversity within this group.



Ngozi Amu and Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini

Q How has the mediation of armed conflicts changed in the last two decades?

A I worked at the UN's Mediation Support Unit (MSU) during the early years, when it was being operationalised in 2007. The focus was almost exclusively on providing support to Track 1 mediation processes. Today, MSU's portfolio is much broader. It's a reflection of the changing realities on the ground. On the one hand, you have conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war, where the parties to the conflict are more clear-cut and mediation could take a more classic form. On the other hand, you have conflicts like the ones playing out in the Sahel region, where there are so many different armed groups and factions and it's not always clear how they relate to one another. In that context, the traditional high-level mediation between a few parties doesn't really work.

Q What challenges are peacemakers facing today?

A One trend, among many, that really worries me is the impact of fake news on peace processes. There was an MIT study in 2018 that said falsehoods spread six times faster than truth on Twitter. That really stuck with me. False narratives have the power to sway conflict parties and reduce the trust that mediators have taken a long time to build up.

Q Are you optimistic about the next 20 years? What are your greatest concerns?

A Nuclear war, global warming, the AI race, pandemics. It's really heavy to think about these threats. But I look at the possibility of solidarity and common purpose, since all of us face the same threats. Take climate change, for example. Climate-induced resource competition leads to conflict in some places. It's also likely to lead to major migration flows across borders. This has to be managed well to avoid tensions. In West Africa and the Sahel, there's been a real spike in farmer-herder conflicts in recent years. Political, economic and security factors are involved, but climate change is a key driver in reducing the availability of the water and land these groups are dependent on. We need investments in policies and practice that promote a combination of climate change adaptation and peacemaking, with a strong focus on resource sharing, job creation and justice. There's a lot of great work happening already to address this, but it needs much more support.

Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah and Ngozi Amu



“There are more women appointed as peacemakers today but there are also many women who’ve worked in this field for a long time, but whose achievements have been under the radar.”

Achaleke Christian Leke

Executive Director, Local Youth Corner Cameroon;
African Union Youth Ambassador for Peace



Q How did you start in the peacemaking and mediation field?

What has inspired you?

A I was born and raised in one of the most violent communities. I saw my peers being stabbed or put in jail. I saw houses burned, and we could never play football without it ending in fighting. By the time I was a teenager, I started noticing that the price for this was even bigger challenges. And that was how I found the passion to use theatre to talk about these issues. My wish was to prevent young people from getting involving in crime and violence, because I had seen the realities of it.

Q What are the main obstacles you have identified for the participation of youth in peace processes?

A Cameroon has two forms of conflict currently going on. One in the far north of the country with the Boko Haram insurgency, and one in the northwest and southwest regions with secessionist movements. A major barrier that we are



A campaign to raise community awareness on peace and social cohesion in Cameroon

seeing is the patriarchal perspective on young people. Institutions and individuals see young people only as troublemakers, or not wise enough to be able to speak to these issues. Another challenge is the lack of investment in youth efforts. It is a very risky job that we are doing. I cannot count the number of times I've had threats from text messages or calls. Unfortunately, the financing to do this work is limited; donors and governments do not see the added value of investing in young people and their peacebuilding efforts. So we have no choice but to change this stereotype by continuing to work and letting our evidence speak for us.

Q Could you tell us about a project you've led that has made a difference?

A It's the work that we've been doing in terms of rehabilitating and reintegrating former offenders, perpetrators of violence and extremism. We developed a model called 'prison-preneurship'. We started it in 2016, and focused on working within the prison system because we realised that our prison system is failing: when people are incarcerated, they come back more violent. And with the complex situation we have in the country, they are the first line of recruits for violent extremist groups. So we provide entrepreneurship, vocational skills, civic education, peacebuilding and leadership training to young people in eight prisons. One of them, Michael, was sentenced to 136 years in prison. He was released after 16 years, and today he owns a fashion design shop where he produces arts and crafts that he learned in prison.

Q Are you optimistic about the next 20 years? What are your greatest sources of hope?

A I've been fortunate to be part of this conversation for the last 15 years. With my work for the African Union, I see young people mobilising themselves into networks across countries, forgetting about borders because they want to solve common problems. There is a need for the elders to pass the relay baton to us – to ensure that in 20 years, when I'll be an elder, I will also be able to pass on the baton. If we invest, if we amplify our efforts in the next 20 years, we'll be talking about the end of conflict in other parts of the world.

“There is a need for the elders to pass the relay baton to us – to ensure that in 20 years, when I'll be an elder, I will also be able to pass on the baton.”

The Oslo Forum: A visual chronicle



2003–2005

The first retreat in Oslo was small and intimate. I remember sitting around a long, heavy wood dining table. I was working on Norway's third party facilitation of the peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The negotiations had stopped and we were looking into possible ways forward. During a session on Sri Lanka, other mediators gave frank, concrete and practical advice. It was highly valuable to us.

— **Lisa Golden**, Director, Section for Peace and Reconciliation,
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs





Participants at the 2005 Oslo Forum



Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, Lisa Golden and Swaraj Kaushal

Though there must have been an agenda, I remember it as what we used to call BOGSAT, Bunch Of Guys Sitting Around a Table. The idea that ‘peacemakers’ were becoming an epistemic community with an identity and imprint of their own had not yet gelled. Recently I attended a Oslo Forum retreat in Mexico which dealt candidly with a number of contemporary issues in the region. I was impressed with the diverse and plural participation. The Oslo Forum has become the conflict resolution equivalent of Davos or Munich.

— **Álvaro de Soto**, Professor, Sciences Po Paris;
veteran mediator and peace negotiator



Álvaro de Soto, Francesc Vendrell, James LeMoyné and Rupert Smith

2006



Lyse Doucet

There's something special about The Mediator's Studio. This gathering in the elegant intimacy of the Losby Gods library, at that special hour in the sun's slow descent in a Norwegian summer's sky, is a moment for mediators to immerse themselves in all the extraordinary woes and wonders of their world. We laughed with Kofi Annan over mistaken identities, at Jeff Feltman's missing speech in Iran. We felt the pain of Ghassan Salame's memories of friends lost to war, were fascinated by Jimmy Carter's fierce feminism, by Bill Richardson's Cuban baseball diplomacy. Cathy Ashton held our attention with anecdotes from breathtaking nuclear negotiations. And we all felt the weight of wise words from Lakhdar Brahimi and Martti Ahtisaari. All that and more in the marvel that is The Mediator's Studio.

— **Lyse Doucet,**
BBC's Chief International Correspondent

2007

OSLO forum07

Dialogue in the

A photograph of Kofi Annan, an elderly man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and blue tie. He is seated in a dark blue armchair, smiling slightly with his hands clasped in his lap. He is wearing a gold watch on his left wrist and a gold ring on his left hand. In the foreground, there are several blue water bottles and glasses. The background is a white wall with the text 'OSLO forum07' and 'Dialogue in the' visible.

Kofi Annan

2008

LO FORUM NETWORK OF MEDIA



Mohammad Khatami and Raymond Johansen

The Asia regional retreat in Beijing, China



2009

The Africa regional retreat in Zanzibar, Tanzania



Olusegun Obasanjo



Thabo Mbeki



Jonathan Powell

I came to the 2007 Oslo Forum on the day the Tony Blair government came to an end in June 2007. I had spent a decade as his chief of staff in No 10 Downing Street and as the chief negotiator in Northern Ireland. I was already working with Martin Griffiths of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue on the Basque issue. It was a revelation to me to find so many other people wrestling with the same problems I had faced in making peace – and ever since I have drawn ideas and inspiration from the Forum for my work on conflicts around the world.

— **Jonathan Powell,**
CEO, Inter Mediate



2011

The magic of the Forum is that it brings the parties themselves: working with the Philippines negotiators as they iron out the issue of off-shore waters; listening to the Colombian foreign minister and the FARC commanders as they explain their plans for the post-agreement work.

— **David Harland,**

Executive Director, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD)





Geir Otto Pedersen and Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini



Priscilla Hayner and Leymah Roberta Gbowee

2012



Torgeir Larsen, Teresita Quintos Deles and Louise Arbour



Bono, Jonas Gahr Store and Aung San Suu Kyi

2013



Espen Barth Eide and Lakhdar Brahimi



Said Djinnit and David Lambo

2014



US President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Jimmy Carter, and the President of the Central African Republic, Catherine Samba-Panza



Jeffrey Feltman, Visiting Fellow at Brookings Institution, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Tawakol Karman

2015



Betty Bigombe, Advisor to the Government of Uganda on South Sudan



President of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos



Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda

oslo
FORUM



Afghan government representatives at the opening session

In 2015, the Forum brought together officials from the Afghan government, people from the Taliban political office and some of the special representatives from other countries. The informal safe space allowed actors to have contact when they were not interested in meeting formally at that stage in the conflict. At that time it was an important step.

— **Lisa Golden**, Director, Section for Peace and Reconciliation,
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs



2016

The Oslo Forum has been an anchor institution for mediators and conflict resolution practitioners over the past two decades, the decades in which mediation has evolved from a dark art to a staple tool of peacemaking diplomacy. Mediation is a high-risk activity practiced with a degree of experimental uncertainty and mostly in isolation. The Oslo Forum has not just provided a platform for discussion and debate, it has also served as a platform to create a ‘community’ of colleagues and peers for those involved, in ever more diverse ways, in a fragmented and increasingly challenged activity.

— **Nicholas Haysom**, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan



Sahar Ghanem and Katia Papagianni



Shivshankar Menon and Hardeep Singh Puri

2017



Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Retno L.P. Marsudi



Foreign Minister of Colombia, María Ángela Holguín, and FARC leader Timochenko



Amina Mohamed

2018



Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, and Foreign Minister of Norway, Ine Eriksen Søreide



Former FARC fighter Victoria Sandino and ex-IRA politician Gerry Kelly

The first time I attended the Oslo Forum, it was intimidating to meet so many high-level diplomats. I remember thinking ‘I don’t belong here!’ Over the years, as I have been invited back, this feeling has changed. One of the strengths of the Oslo Forum is the ability to bring together professionals of different levels and experience, without all the protocols of formal settings.

— **Ngozi Amu**, Head of Research and Analysis,
United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)





Hanna S. Tetteh



Koiti Emmily



Dino Patti Djalal, Michael Vatikiotis, Ine Eriksen Søreide and Dag Nylander



2019



South Korea's President Moon Jae-in

Participants in a session on the Sahel



The Oslo Forum is, par excellence, when mediation's ethics, levels and techniques are scrutinised, assessed and compared. It is an irreplaceable moment in June of every year. You contribute and learn from people engaged in conflicts, as well as from those trying to end them. A mixture of professionalism and friendliness leads you, at the end of every edition, to start looking forward to the next.

— Ghassan Salamé, Professor Emeritus, Sciences Po



Orzala A. Nemat, Maha Yahya and Ghassan Salamé



Donald E. Booth, Comfort Ero and Haile Menkerios

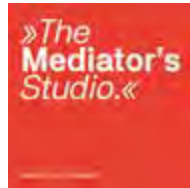
The Oslo Forum has been a platform I have looked forward to participating in to gain understanding of critical conflict issues and situations rather than to hear of positions vis-à-vis those issues, and I have never been disappointed!

— **Haile Menkerios**, Former Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and Head of the UN Office to the African Union

2020-2021

*When the Covid-19 pandemic stopped the Forum from happening in person, we tried to find another way to share mediation lessons. The result was four seasons of *The Mediator's Studio* podcast. A personal highlight for me was interviewing President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, reflecting on his life's journey from rebel leader to negotiator to head of state.*

— Adam Cooper, host of *The Mediator's Studio*



Podcast team and guests at the 2022 Forum

2022

At a time when many protracted conflicts and geopolitical tensions dominated the UN Security Council's agenda, the January 2022 Oslo Forum retreat in New York was a chance to engage in refreshing dialogue outside of the typical Council cycle. At an important moment in time, it was a privilege hearing about the Secretary-General's vision for preventive diplomacy and how we as a community can encourage international cooperation.

— **Mona Juul**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations in New York



Renata Dwan



Fatima Gailani



At a delicate stage in the Venezuela process, it was a privilege to be able to moderate an informal conversation between the lead negotiators, Jorge Rodríguez and Gerardo Blyde Pérez, and the Norwegian facilitator of the political talks, Dag Nylander.

— **Teresa Whitfield**, former Director of the Policy and Mediation Division at UN DPPA

2023



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, Anniken Huitfeldt, opened the first regional Oslo Forum in Latin America and the Caribbean in Mexico





Nina Pacari



Carla Barnett



Raquel Zelaya



Jean Arnault

In mediation, it is often the people behind the scenes that really make a difference. It has been a privilege to host and learn from so many unsung heroes. The Oslo Forum's achievements over the years also owe much to the team efforts invisible to the world. The team organising this event weaves together dedication, collaboration, and expertise, ensuring a strong outcome every year. A big thank you and congratulations to all of you!

— **Christina Buchhold**, Oslo Forum Project Manager,
Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD)



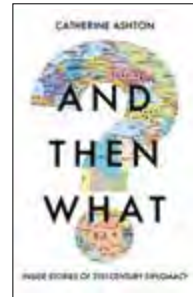
Weekend reads

A selection of recent publications from members of the Oslo Forum network

Catherine Ashton

And Then What? Inside Stories of 21st Century Diplomacy
(Elliott & Thompson, 2023)

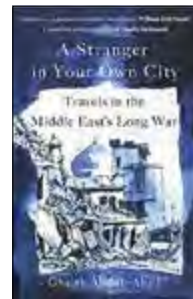
Baroness Ashton's gripping memoir of her time as the EU's chief envoy takes us behind the scenes of a series of high stakes and finely poised negotiations. Memorable moments include a visit to the imprisoned former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, and the atmosphere of revolution and apprehension she encountered during the Maidan Uprising in Kyiv.



Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

A Stranger in Your Own City: Travels in the Middle East's Long War
(Cornerstone, 2023)

20 years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad recounts the war and its aftermath through the eyes of Iraqis. Illustrated with the author's own pencil and watercolour sketches, this is an unflinching account of the impact of sectarianism, with ordinary people at its heart.



Teresa Whitfield

ETA: el desenlace
(Bellaterra Edicions, 2023)

Just out in Spanish, a new and updated edition of Teresa Whitfield's widely praised account of the complex process that led to the end of the violent Basque separatist group ETA. It was first published in English as *Endgame for ETA* (Hurst, 2014).



Pierre Hazan

Négociier avec le diable :

La médiation dans les conflits armés

(Editions Textuel, 2022)

Negotiating with the Devil, forthcoming in English, sees experienced journalist and mediator Pierre Hazan wrestling with the moral trade-offs of peacemaking. Drawing on examples including Bosnia, Mali and Syria, he exposes the dilemmas of mediators, torn between the need to stop the killing and the unintended harms that pragmatic deals can entail.



Collection of works

My Pen Is the Wing of a Bird:

New Fiction by Afghan Women

(MacLehose Press, 2022)

This poignantly-timed anthology of short stories showcases the voices of women writers from Afghanistan, with an introduction by BBC Chief International Correspondent Lyse Doucet. Tonally and topically varied, it draws on personal experiences while remaining universal in its themes.



Cynthia E. Smith (ed.)

Designing Peace: Building a Better Future Now

(Cooper Hewitt, 2022)

Published to coincide with an exhibition at Cooper Hewitt, the Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, this edited collection asks how creativity and design could be put in the service of peace. Featuring reflections from thinkers such as John Paul Lederach, as well as architects, designers and activists, the book offers a refreshingly multidisciplinary perspective on how peaceful societies might be actively constructed.



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IMPROVING THE MEDIATION OF ARMED CONFLICT

