



Strategic Security Analysis

Ending Armed Conflicts: Beyond Mediation

Mark Knight





The Geneva Centre for Security Policy

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Key points

- Commentators and practitioners recognise that the value of mediation as a tool to facilitate political solutions to armed conflict is under severe pressure. Innovation is necessary to meet the challenges presented by contemporary armed conflicts.
- Viable and sustainable transitions from war to peace require the provision of specific support to the security and political transitions of non-state armed actors prior to mediation, and during the implementation of a peace agreement. Equally, the provision of support to the state in question (as a belligerent actor in the armed conflict) is pivotal to a sustainable transition process.
- The approach known as “advising armed actors” is relevant to all non-state armed actors in contemporary conflicts, including those that lack cohesion (pre-political), are proscribed (listed as terrorists), and are sub-political (gangs/criminals), and is equally relevant to states as belligerents in an armed conflict.
- The overall purpose of this approach is to establish a conducive environment that supports a transition from war to peace in a way that establishes a trajectory towards an environment where human rights are protected by the rule of law.



Contemporary armed conflict

The past decade has witnessed a surge in the number of armed conflicts that are under way, reversing a 20-year decline.¹ The number of conflict-related deaths reached a 28-year high in 2022,² with one quarter of humankind living in conflict-affected areas.³ According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo, since 2014 the number of state-based armed conflicts has been at its highest level since 1946.⁴ The national security doctrines of many states anticipate that geostrategic competition will intensify in the decades to come, and military expenditures globally reached a high in 2022 of US\$2.24 trillion.⁵ The resurgence of interstate conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, together with persistent internal conflicts that draw in external powers, underscores a departure from the post-Cold War optimism for the establishment of a liberal peace through comprehensive agreements focused on democratisation and state-building.⁶

Most present-day armed conflicts – from Afghanistan to Colombia and Mali – take place in what can be called hybrid political orders or mediated states.

The nature of armed conflict has undergone significant transformations and is now characterised by fragmentation and the involvement of myriad actors with diverse motives. Most present-day armed conflicts – from Afghanistan to Colombia and Mali – take place in what can be called hybrid political orders or mediated states, i.e. in contexts where diverse and competing claims to power and logics of order coexist, overlap, and intertwine.⁷ Concurrently, non-state armed actors have proliferated,⁸ with intra-state conflicts constituting the vast majority of armed conflicts. Contemporary conflicts often involve complex webs of state and non-state actors, and are increasingly impacted and driven by global and regional factors, with roughly half of all conflicts becoming internationalised in some way.⁹ Armed actors engaged in armed conflicts are driven not only by traditional political or territorial disputes, but also by economic interests, identity politics, and cyber-related factors. The impact of transnational crime is becoming more pronounced, with data showing that between 2015 and 2021¹⁰ organised crime was responsible for as many deaths as all armed conflicts combined.¹¹ As a result:

The growing complexity of the conflict environment has made conflict resolution more difficult, as local and regional dynamics intersect in complex ways with the interests of external parties, and the presence of United Nations-designated terrorist groups operating across regions presents a host of challenges.¹²

Classifying armed conflicts by cause can be both complex and limiting; however, some degree of causation analysis can be illuminating. The majority of armed conflicts are primarily caused by the questioning of the political, economic, social, or ideological system of the state and/or disputes around the domestic or international policies of the governments in question.¹³

In the Lake Chad region, the Western Sahel region, Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Mozambique (in the north of the country), Libya, Afghanistan, the Philippines (Mindanao), Pakistan, Egypt (Sinai), Iraq, Syria, and Yemen armed conflicts are largely linked to the presence of Islamist and jihadist-affiliated armed actors, while in Colombia, the Philippines (which faces a New People's Army insurgency), and India (facing a Communist Party of India (Maoist) insurgency), armed conflicts are associated with other types of non-state armed actors and with other types of ideological confrontations.¹⁴ Additional notable drivers of armed conflict are disputes around demands for identity and self-government by a sub-group of the affected countries' population, e.g. in Ethiopia (Oromia and Tigray), Cameroon (Ambazonia), the Philippines (Mindanao), Pakistan (Balochistan), Thailand (the south of the country) and Turkey (in the Kurdish-populated south-east).¹⁵



Commentators and practitioners recognise that the value of mediation as a tool to facilitate political solutions to armed conflict is under severe pressure.

Mediation

Mediation, as the mainstay of international conflict resolution initiatives, requires continuous updating and evolution to meet the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts. Mediation is widely understood as third-party-assisted negotiations aimed at preventing, managing, or resolving armed conflicts in which the conflict parties consent to the mediator taking some degree of control over the process.¹⁶ In response to the evolving landscape of contemporary armed conflicts, mediation practice has evolved to include a broader range of actors and innovative approaches that emphasise local engagement, leverage technology for inclusivity, and address the socioeconomic factors driving armed conflicts.

The field of mediation has also undergone significant professionalisation.¹⁷ The recognition of the complexity of contemporary armed conflicts and the challenges mediators face has led to the establishment of dedicated mediation support structures providing technical expertise and hands-on operational support to mediation teams, and which promote learning from past initiatives. Notwithstanding these advances, it is increasingly common that the parties to an armed conflict, be they international, national or more localised armed groups, are often reluctant to engage in serious peace talks.¹⁸

Quantitative data analysis on mediation indicates that the proportion of armed conflicts that receive mediation attention has not increased, but decreased.¹⁹ The study in question notes that despite an increase in mediation capabilities worldwide, about two-thirds of all armed conflicts receive no international mediation attention in any given year. Armed conflicts that are characterised by “one-sided violence” or involve “Islamist armed actors” are shown to be the least likely to become the focus of international mediation efforts.

Commentators and practitioners recognise that the value of mediation as a tool to facilitate political solutions to armed conflict is under severe pressure.²⁰ Innovation is necessary to meet the challenges presented by contemporary armed conflicts and that responds to the armed actors that are integral to contemporary conflict environments. Innovations should aim to enhance the utility and integrity of existing mediation capacities and practices while supporting armed actors to initiate and sustain transitions from war to peace.

War-to-peace transition

The transition from war to peace requires that non-state armed actors, as belligerents to an armed conflict, transition their military capacities to civilian capabilities in pursuit of their founding objectives. This transition requires political and security-related processes of change that are intrinsically and mutually dependent, and hence need to be implemented in a parallel and reciprocal fashion.²¹

In Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) conducted intensive negotiations with its own base during the peace process and negotiated with the British government through the nationalist political party Sinn Féin. With the 1997 Good Friday Agreement, the IRA accepted a power-sharing model and Sinn Féin as the exclusive body representing the nationalist cause. The security transition was implemented reciprocally and in parallel to other commitments defined in the agreement, such as police reform, while Sinn Féin consolidated its political capacity by taking part in local and national elections and Northern Irish power-sharing institutions.²²



In order to ensure viable and sustainable war-to-peace transitions, specific support to the security and political transitions of armed actors is required.

The Basque armed group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) engaged in extensive internal debate and consensus-building on its political and security transition. After the collapse of the 2006-2007 peace negotiations, the group's internal cohesion was threatened by differing interpretations of why the negotiations had failed and which strategy should be pursued. ETA developed a new strategy to build a larger social alliance and engagement with international actors by promoting political engagement and military demobilisation. Active members voted in favour of formal demobilisation, and as a result ETA announced its complete dismantling in May 2018, and issued a statement of apology to all the civilian victims of past violence.²³

The examples of ETA's successful security and political transition in the Basque country also serves to highlights one key inherently challenging characteristic of war-to-peace transitions: the government's inevitable mistrust of the motives and actions of non-state armed actors when they are attempting to transition from military to political endeavours. The Spanish government steadfastly refused to engage in dialogue with ETA, even following its declaration of a unilateral and permanent ceasefire in 2011, followed by a declaration that its armed activity would cease. Government antipathy can lead to delays in the war-to-peace transition and even initiate renewed or intensified violence. In Turkey, for example, despite the Kurdish organisation Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) having announced its decision to dissolve and reorganise its work "using entirely peaceful and democratic methods" and suspend its military activities, it was placed on the EU terrorist list in May 2002. This may have fuelled the PKK's eventual return to violence.²⁴

The 2012-2016 Havana peace process between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was fully supported by the government and received significant international support. The agreement provided measures to support the FARC's political transformation and secure its political representation. However, the design of the transition process had some inherent weaknesses, including the failure to integrate a quid pro quo approach between the FARC and the government, with the bilateral ceasefire and disarmament process disconnected from a binding timeline for the government's fulfilment of its commitments. Subsequently, the government failed to comply with the agreed measures on political reintegration, delaying funding for the FARC party and not implementing the promised preventive protection measures.²⁵

The prevailing lessons from war-to-peace transitions²⁶ highlight the complexity and difficulty of the security and political transitions required of non-state armed actors prior to mediation and during the implementation of a peace agreement, while the perspective and actions of states as belligerent actors in an armed conflict are shown to be pivotal to a sustainable transition processes. In order to ensure viable and sustainable war-to-peace transitions, specific support to the security and political transitions of armed actors is required.

The problem

The precepts underpinning global peace and security are in flux: given the increasingly blurred lines between peace and conflict, the basic concepts of global peace and security and thus future approaches to war-to-peace transitions need to be reconceived.²⁷ Mediation – the mainstay of the international approach to conflict resolution – has evolved in response by diversifying, multiplying and professionalising. Despite these advances, parties to armed conflicts are often reluctant to engage in dialogue, resulting in the opportunities for negotiating peace agreements being significantly reduced and the proportion of armed conflicts that receive mediation being decreased.



Armed conflicts that exhibit “one-sided violence” or involve “Islamist armed actors”²⁸ are shown to be the least likely to become the focus of international mediation efforts.²⁹

In response to these new and evolving challenges, an approach to conflict transformation is required that meaningfully impacts contemporary armed conflicts and is responsive to armed actors that are integral to the conflict environment, including those that lack cohesion (pre-political), are proscribed (listed as terrorists), and are sub-political (gangs/criminals), and is equally relevant to states as belligerents in an armed conflict. The approach should be conceptually and operationally separate to mediation, while complementing mediation by supporting a process to a sustainable negotiated transition from war to peace.

For third-party advice to be valued by an armed actor it should, at a minimum, not be seen as antithetical to the armed actor’s goals.

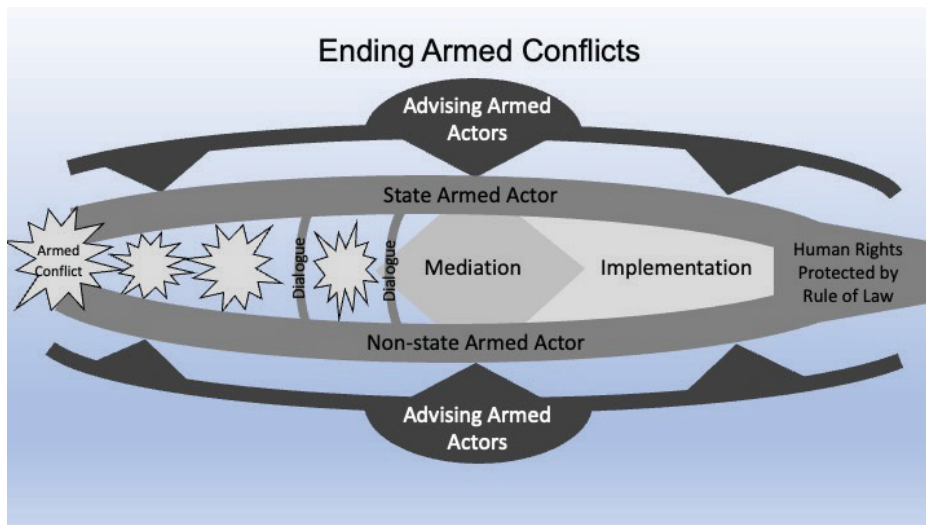
Advising armed actors: an approach

Engaging armed actors is not a new activity: international and national third-party actors routinely engage belligerents to support a peaceful solution to an armed conflict. These engagements predominantly see third-party actors figuratively positioning themselves in between the belligerent parties in order to be neutral and impartial regarding the armed conflict and balanced in their relations with all the parties to the conflict. In contrast, the “advising armed actors” approach requires separate third-party actors to engage solely with a single armed actor, and to deliver specific inputs reflecting the challenges unique to that armed actor’s political and security transition. Balance is achieved in the conflict context by ensuring equal but separate engagement with each armed actor. In this way, as an approach to ending armed conflict, “advising armed actors” is figuratively positioned behind each relevant armed actor, as opposed to on the neutral ground in between the parties to a conflict.

For their part, armed actors engaged in armed conflict rarely seek advice from third parties. For third-party advice to be valued by an armed actor it should, at a minimum, not be seen as antithetical to the armed actor’s goals, nor be seen to undermine that actor’s ability to achieve its goals. Consequently, for third-party advice to armed actors to be impactful, it should be premised on an affirmation of the armed actors’ respective founding objectives and be delivered in a way that builds trust. Trust in third-party advice will rest on transparency in relation to the third-party’s purposes and interests, and the quality and consistency of the advice offered.

These security and political transition processes are not linear, and require third-party engagements to be sustained during the armed conflict, during dialogue and mediation, and following the signing of peace agreements to support their implementation. This approach is relevant to all non-state armed actors in contemporary conflicts, including those that lack cohesion, are proscribed,³⁰ and are sub-political, and is equally relevant to states as belligerents in an armed conflict. The overall purpose of this approach is to create a conducive environment that supports a transition from war to peace in a way that establishes a trajectory towards an environment where human rights are protected by the rule of law.³¹

Figure 1: Ending armed conflicts: advising armed actors



The denial of human rights can drive armed conflict.

Human rights

The “advising armed actors” approach is founded on an understanding of human rights being an articulation of inherent human needs that are intrinsic to human survival, subsistence, development, and dignity, and that the denial of human rights can drive armed conflict.³² A human rights framework establishes the parameters and focus of the third-party’s advice as an ethical compass to guide the engagement; however, this engagement does not consist of human rights advocacy. Rather, it is the third party’s effectiveness that is measured through a human rights lens with the medium- and long-term effects being evaluated through impacts on human rights.

Advising non-state armed actors

The purpose of third-party advice to non-state armed actors is to support their attempts to identify, formulate and navigate pathways to achieve their founding objectives through non-violent strategies. Security and political transitions can follow many different pathways, and each option has to be specifically tailored to each case and circumstance. However, advice to non-state armed actors centres around the three arenas of (1) a human rights framework; (2) violence reduction, management and restraint (ceasefires); and (3) the security transition process.

1. Establishing a human rights framework³³ formalises the third-party’s engagement with and support to the non-state armed actor. It allows the third party to clearly communicate the purpose and parameters of its engagement and establishes an ethical barometer for that engagement. Human rights provide a common language for the articulation of grievances and objectives and the measurement of the armed actor’s methods and impacts, as well as the metric to measure the impacts of the third-party’s engagement.
2. Violence reduction, management and restraint (ceasefires)³⁴ constitute a central tenet of the third party’s advice. Framing such measures as initiatives to achieve a political objective and/or advantages requiring command and control, manoeuvre, and restraint from the non-state armed actor is a foundation for preparing for the security and political transition processes.
3. The security transition³⁵ process requires the non-state armed actor to navigate pathways to transition its capacities, personnel and hardware.



Understanding of the armed conflict as a struggle for legitimacy in a “contest for the people” establishes “legitimacy” as a prize to be sought and fought for by the state.

Such pathways and related processes will be unique to the armed actor and the conflict context, but the principles of the security transition remain constant; i.e. the process will be conceived and implemented in a way that is reciprocal, interrelated and concurrent in relation to the adversaries’ commitments agreed to during the dialogue process.

In all actions related to the armed conflict, the non-state armed actor is advised to act in accordance with applicable international laws and standards.

Advising states

States will invariably look to military success to effectively conclude an armed conflict, while third-party advice supports the state to concurrently establish a conducive environment for a security transition. The principle of third-party advice to belligerent states is to support them to identify and formulate pathways to achieve their objectives utilising the full array of the state’s capabilities, engagement, and dialogue, and subsequently how to sustain the security and political advances by facilitating non-state armed actors’ security and political transitions. Third-party advice will be tailored to the specific states and conflict context, with advice centred around the two arenas of (1) legitimacy and human rights; and (2) non-coercive capabilities.

1. Codifying an understanding of the armed conflict as a struggle for legitimacy in a “contest for the people”³⁶ establishes “legitimacy” as a prize to be sought and fought for by the state. Constructing a human rights framework for the state’s actions in relation to the armed conflict bridges the tactical and strategic domains and aligns the disparate capabilities of the state in pursuit of legitimacy, and creates a conducive environment that facilitates the belligerents’ security and political transitions within the wider transition from war to peace.
2. Violence management and restraint are central tenets of third-party engagements with a belligerent state. The focus of third-party advice is for the state to adopt an approach that engenders support among actors relevant to the armed conflict and creates a conducive environment for the belligerents’ security and political transitions. The state’s actions aim to influence relevant actors’ perceptions and behaviour by either capacitating or de-capacitating assets and/or legitimacy through consent, inducement or coercion.³⁷ While the approach is not predominantly a military undertaking, it is founded on an acknowledgement of the state’s right to utilise legitimate coercive force.

In all actions related to the armed conflict, the belligerent state is advised to act in accordance with applicable national and international laws and standards.

Challenges

The main challenges to the outlined “advising armed actors” approach are its viability in relation to the types of armed actors inherent in contemporary armed conflicts and the ability of those providing the advice to establish effective operational delivery capacities.

Viability

Non-state armed actors that operate in parallel with a political entity with shared objectives, such as the IRA and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, or that have an established political doctrine, such as the Maoists in Nepal, are the most receptive to third-party support aiming to identify, formulate, and navigate pathways to achieve objectives through non-violent strategies.



Engagements with armed actors that are inherent in contemporary armed conflicts, including those that lack cohesion, are proscribed and are sub-political, are well documented and confirm the viability of the approach.

Pre-political (non-cohesive) non-state armed actors that formed as a reflexive response, e.g. to injustice or in defence of communities, and which are lacking formal structures or politically articulated objectives, are the most apposite beneficiaries of “advising armed actors” support. Challenges to the utility and impact of the approach arise regarding proscribed groups (listed as terrorists) and sub-political non-state armed actors (gangs/criminals).

Actors proscribed under the UN Security Council 1267 sanctions regime are overwhelmingly listed for their association with the al-Qaeda or Islamic State terrorist groups).³⁸ Some of these proscribed groups are not solely securitised theocracies, but political actors with distinct projects and a degree of popular support, including the former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has engaged in humanitarian negotiations and sought to gain international legitimacy.³⁹ Some proscribed groups hold sway over large populations, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and Islamic State West Africa Province in north-east Nigeria.⁴⁰ In areas in northern Mali controlled by Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin and in parts of Somalia controlled by al-Shabaab, communities under the authority of these proscribed armed actors have proved to be capable of engaging and negotiating with these groups in a way that impacts governance.⁴¹

Emerging research highlights the potential and utility of engaging with jihadi armed actors, e.g. in Syria field research has traced the emergence of jihadi groups in the conflict in that country, their dominance and their political transformation.⁴² Further research and engagements in Mali, Somalia, and Syria examined the factors influencing behavioural de-escalation trajectories of Salafi-jihadi armed groups, with particular emphasis on the role of third-party engagement,⁴³ concluding that “it is necessary to overturn policy myths and misconceptions about Salafi jihadi armed groups – particularly on their perceived homogeneity and on the lack of dialogue prospects”.⁴⁴

Similarly, experience of political engagements with sub-political non-state armed actors (gangs/criminals) in Latin American and Caribbean countries abound: “mediation and negotiation with such organisations is already widespread across the continent, from Los Angeles to São Paulo, though poorly understood and too frequently dismissed out of hand”.⁴⁵ Experience over the last 20 years highlights that it is an over-simplification to approach engagement with these organisations by distinguishing between “political” and “criminal” groups, and demonstrates that enabling negotiations requires the active support of the government, as well as legal frameworks to provide protection for third parties, individuals, and organisations.⁴⁶ Negotiating with these organisations has been shown to significantly reduce crime and violence.⁴⁷ Case-study examples of engagements with armed actors that are inherent in contemporary armed conflicts, including those that lack cohesion, are proscribed and are sub-political,⁴⁸ are well documented and confirm the viability of the approach.

Concept of operational delivery

The nature and character of the third party engaging with an armed actor will significantly impact access and the perceived value of the advice given. Delivering advice to armed actors engaged in armed conflict requires a third party with characteristics acceptable to the armed beneficiary that are often organic to the context. The uniqueness of each engagement with belligerent actors requires non-traditional platforms for delivery to achieve impact, including private companies, ad-hoc entities, conglomerates of organisations, and/or peer-to-peer initiatives, with states being the most valued purveyors of advice to states engaged in armed conflict. The “advising armed actors” approach calls for a fluid concept of delivery, with each engagement requiring a delivery platform specific to the conflict context and delivering advisory inputs unique to each armed beneficiary. Fluid delivery foresees delivery



platforms established to advise specific armed actors that evolve during the implementation of a peace agreement and dissolve on completion of that process. This concept of delivery will be supported by a centralised capacity acting as the repository of experiential knowledge to disseminate best practice, and that provides capacities and training support to delivery platforms and through them to armed beneficiaries, as well as acting as a conduit for resources.

Conclusion

In 2020 a Geneva Centre for Security Policy publication noted that “given the increasingly blurred lines between peace and conflict, the basic concepts of global peace and security and thus the future of peace mediation will need to be reconceived”.⁴⁹ Similarly, a major review of mediation practice in 2024 noted that “the policy and practice of mediation have struggled to keep pace with the changing realities of conflict and global politics. The value of mediation as a tool to facilitate political solutions to violent conflict is therefore under severe pressure”.⁵⁰ It is widely acknowledged that adaption and innovation in peace mediation are overdue.

Focused on support to the internal security and political transitions of armed actors, the “advising armed actors” approach spans the war-to-peace transition in a conflict context by advising armed actors during the armed conflict, in the period leading up to and during dialogue, and throughout post-agreement implementation. The approach is conceptually and operationally separate from mediation, while complementing it by supporting a process to achieve a sustainable negotiated transition from war to peace.

This approach is relevant to all non-state armed actors involved in contemporary conflicts, including those that lack cohesion, are proscribed, and are sub-political, and is equally relevant to states as belligerents in armed conflict. The overall purpose of the approach is to establish a conducive environment that supports a transition from war to peace in a way that establishes a trajectory towards an environment where human rights are protected by the rule of law.

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Building Peace Together

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