

DISCUSSION PAPER 25-001

Peacemaking in Crisis: Amid More Wars, Fewer Peace Agreements

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USIP convened an expert panel of scholars and researchers over a four-month period in 2023–2024 to explore lessons learned from the management of conflicts in prior periods of global turbulence. This is the second paper in a three-part series from the convenings and discusses the state of peacemaking globally and for multilateral partnerships and institutions. The series was designed and managed by the Learning, Evaluation, and Research team at USIP's Center for Thematic Excellence.

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OVERVIEW

There is an abiding concern among those mandated to promote peacemaking and pursue negotiated settlements that end contemporary civil wars. In a turbulent era of increasing conflicts across the globe, there is a companion trend of resistance to making peace at the negotiating table, with actors fighting it out—often, futilely—on the battlefield. In the post–Cold War period, from roughly 1989 to 2001, peace agreements outnumbered the onset of new conflicts, and the world became a safer place.

However, with more wars and armed actors and fewer peace agreements, peacemaking has seen less success in ending conflicts during the last 15 years.¹ Contemporary conflicts are highly apt to be recurrences or renewed fighting. This is particularly the case when previous peace agreements or conflict outcomes have resulted in sharply divided political elites, weak institutions, and situations where armed nonstate actors retain the capacity to employ significant violence.

Increasingly, mediation in conflicts has been conducted by states, rather than international organizations. These dynamics buck the trend of the post–Cold War period in which, for example, special envoys of the United Nations secretary-general often steered peace processes and built coalitions of support with member states.

Experts concur that there is no shortage of efforts to forge peace in contemporary conflicts, but also that contemporary conflict complexities and regional and international entanglements prevent such efforts from being successful. This discussion paper concludes with potential ways to make peacebuilding efforts more successful.

¹ Mark Berlin, Sandra Poni Tombe, and Timothy D. Sisk, “The New Dynamics of Contemporary Conflicts” (Discussion Paper 24-003, United States Institute of Peace, 2024), www.usip.org/publications/2024/08/new-dynamics-contemporary-conflicts.

THE POST–COLD WAR PERIOD: WARS END THROUGH PEACEMAKING

During the Cold War period, very few conflicts (only eight percent) ended in peace agreements. The post–Cold War period, however, witnessed a dramatic rise of peace agreements in civil wars. In the early 1990s, researchers found that there were more mediation attempts during that decade than in the entire 1945–1990 era.² The shift to mediation in civil wars was associated with the growth of intrastate conflicts during that period. From 1991 to 1994, for example, at least seven major conflicts, in settings such as El Salvador and Cambodia, were concluded through comprehensive peace agreements.³ Many of these agreements were mediated by international organizations in concert with major states and regional organizations. Effective mediation also occurred during these years through informal actors, such as mediators from religious organizations (as in Mozambique’s 1993 comprehensive peace agreement). During this period, the capacity for mediation by international and regional organizations grew immensely, together with the expansion of civil society organizations engaged in buttressing peace processes.

Regional organizations began to play an increasing role in many instances.⁴ The United Nations (UN) faced a “crowded field” in mediation due to the increased involvement of regional organizations, such as the African Union⁵ and subregional organizations. The Horn of Africa’s Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), for instance, initially began its now more extensive mediation work in the late 1980s and 1990s during the civil war in Sudan.⁶

² Peter Wallensteen and Isak Svensson, “Talking Peace: International Mediation in Armed Conflicts,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 315–27.

³ Stina Högladh, “Peace Agreements in Armed Conflicts: Focusing on Finding a Solution to the Conflict Incompatibility,” *Pathways to Peace and Security* 2 (2021): 11–23.

⁴ Kathryn Nash, *African Peace: Regional Norms from the Organization of African Unity to the African Union* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

⁵ The African Union’s Mediation and Dialogue Division oversees the regional organizations’ mediation efforts, coordinates the work of its special envoys, other representatives, and the Panel of the Wise (a standing body of experienced mediators), and has developed guidance on mediation support and peace-process management; see www.peaceau.org/en/page/118-mediation-and-dialogue.

⁶ IGAD established a permanent mediation support capacity in 2012; see <https://mediation.igad.int/>.

The diverse range of tools in the UN “peacemaking” toolkit were also developed during this period, including the use of special envoys in diplomatic engagements, political missions, technical support missions, and in-country operations.⁷ So, too, did the practical guidance for UN officials working in these conflicts on how to address the on-the-ground challenges for the organization in defining and implementing “no-contact” and related policies with various actors.

Together with the securing of peace agreements, the 1990s saw the development of newly conceived mechanisms and capacities for UN mediation in intrastate conflicts, such as the Mediation Support Unit of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). Such mechanisms were particularly successful in conflicts, such as Guatemala or Tajikistan, where the global great powers were less engaged in proxy contention.⁸

TODAY: THE “PEACEMAKING” STANDARD OF CARE IS NO LONGER EFFECTIVE

The trends present in the 1990s no longer pertain. It is a common argument in policy analysis that UN efforts to secure peace agreements in conflicts have faltered in comparison to the post–Cold War era. Particularly, in the wake of the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s, the UN found itself unable to clinch peace agreements in Libya, Syria, and Yemen in the immediate aftermath of their escalations, and each of these has become a longstanding or protracted conflict.⁹

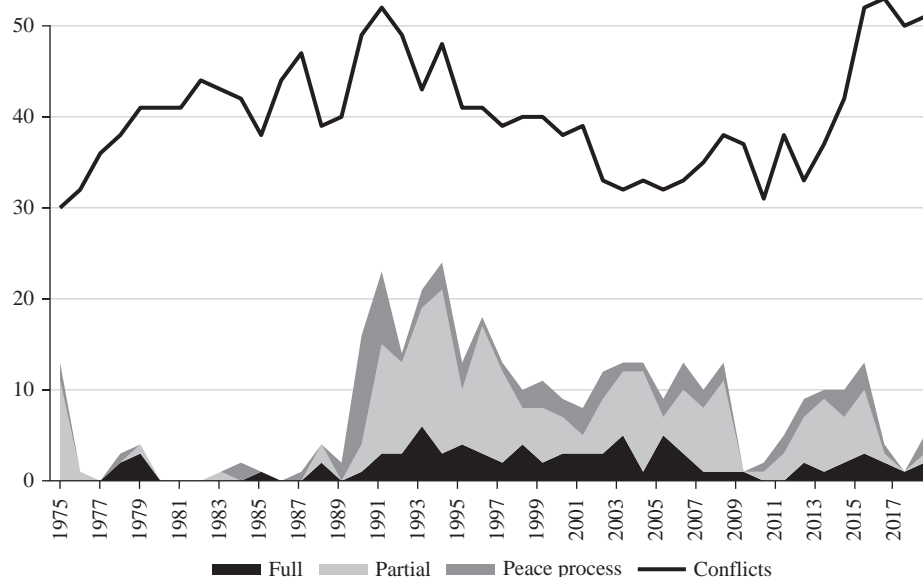
- Comprehensive peace agreements in intrastate conflicts appear to occur less frequently in the current period in contrast to the immediate post–Cold War era (see figure 1).

⁷ For analysis, see Han Dorussen, Tabias Böhmelt, and Govinda Clayton, “Sequencing United Nations Peacemaking: Political Initiatives and Peacekeeping Operations,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 1 (2022): 24–48.

⁸ Tetsuro Iji, “The UN as an International Mediator: From the Post-Cold War Era to the Twenty-First Century,” *Global Governance* 23, no. 1 (2017): 83–100.

⁹ Francesco Mancini and José Vericat, “Lost in Transition: United Nations Mediation in Libya, Syria, and Yemen” (report, International Peace Institute, November 2016).

Figure 1. Conflicts and Peace Agreements by Type, 1975–2018



Source: Reproduced with permission from Stina Högladh, “Peace Agreements in Armed Conflicts: Focusing on Finding a Solution to the Conflict Incompatibility,” *Pathways to Peace and Security* no. 2 (2021): 11–13; copyright 2021, Stina Högladh.

- Peacemaking in the 2010s and 2020s, especially, is deeply constrained by interactions among great powers, fragmented political elites, and underlying social dynamics that empower local actors. New complexity in conflicts has confounded efforts to coordinate and secure peace agreements.
- External actors wield asymmetrical power and contribute to prolonged tensions by preventing political settlements that could address territorial disputes or other incompatibilities.
- Interstate wars, as in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and highly internationalized intrastate conflicts have shown to be highly resistant to mediation and peacemaking efforts. Very early efforts in 2022 to mediate the Ukraine process through the Minsk agreement channels—as well as subsequent efforts in 2023 by African leaders—all foundered. In 2024, high-level diplomacy by Switzerland also failed to come up with a viable peace agreement that assures Ukraine’s prewar territorial integrity in a manner that appears negotiable by the recalcitrant Russian regime in Moscow. International conflicts that feature territorial disputes, such as Ukraine, may be more likely to feature these zero-sum outcome dynamics, especially in the post–Cold War era.

Negotiated settlements paired with international intervention (often peacekeeping) to backstop peace accords became the standard-treatment response during the 1990s. This approach was informed by the beliefs that mediation was effective in stopping wars, multilateral peace operations could support the deals with credible commitments, peacemaking was imperative to stop humanitarian suffering, and, in some instances, external use of force or coercive intervention was required.¹⁰

However, current conflicts have “mutated in a way that renders the standard treatment ineffective.”¹¹

- Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark conclude in their analysis of internal-conflict peacemaking that the “norm of negotiated settlement” that prevailed in the post–Cold War period “has been challenged by countervailing norms of appropriateness—namely, stabilization over democratization and non-negotiation with terrorist groups.” “As a result,” they report, “civil wars are ending less frequently, and less in negotiation.”¹² Similarly, scholars Isak Svensson, Desirée Nilsson, and Tim Gåsste find that involving Islamist-oriented protagonists are less likely to end in either a clear victory or negotiated settlement, and that in many instances, conflicts often transform into other forms of “organized violence,” such as engagement in terrorism and attacks on civilians, or movement across borders to engage in other conflict contexts.¹³

Other experts have examined the seemingly declining relevance of UN peacemaking efforts in protracted conflicts, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Such analyses reinforce the perspective that both global systemic factors and context-specific conditions interact in various cases, explaining in part the decline of successful efforts to achieve peace agreements that manage and resolve

¹⁰ Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, “The International Regime for Treating Civil War, 1988–2017,” *Dædalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 171–84.

¹¹ Gowan and Stedman, “International Regime,” 181.

¹² Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark, “How Civil Wars End: The International System, Norms, and the Role of External Actors,” *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018): 127–71.

¹³ Isak Svensson, Desirée Nilsson, and Tim Gåsste, “No End in Sight? Trajectories of War Termination in Islamist Armed Conflicts,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (September 29, 2024).

protracted conflicts.¹⁴ The decline of mediation successes may also be driven by regional and context variation: Conflicts with jihadist organizations that are likely designated as terrorist organizations have hampered negotiated settlement efforts.

Yet perhaps not all is lost. Despite these trends, research shows that protagonists continue to possess incentives to seek a negotiated outcome: Analysis of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program peace agreement dataset, for example, found that nearly half of rebel groups at some point engage in negotiations with the government (46.3 percent), and some 25 percent of rebel groups engage in negotiations with the government more than once.¹⁵

The expert panel's findings surrounding peacemaking in today's turbulent world are stark.

- Peacemaking institutions and capacities that developed in the post–Cold War era to help end the intrastate conflicts of that period—such as in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, or South Africa—are ill-suited for contemporary challenges. Particularly, experts concur that UN-based peacemaking has faltered since the mid-2000s, despite initial postwar success and the extensive development of UN guidelines, capacities, and operational knowledge.
- The UN's decline as a peacemaker is not necessarily because of its own failures. Armed conflicts have become more intractable, internationalized, and fragmented. High-level international mediators have seen increasingly insurmountable obstacles to peacemaking. The UN and regional organizations, such as the African Union, have been stymied in peacemaking efforts in complex regionalized conflict environments, such as Myanmar, Yemen, and Sudan. Many experts argue that the crisis in peacemaking is also the result of the further spread of authoritarianism and the inability of regimes, autocratic or democratic, to successfully address the proliferation of armed political or criminal groups.
- Peacemaking professionals, such as those at the UN and in regional organizations, further cite an erosion of norms in international politics regarding peacemaking as a critical priority. For

¹⁴ Sara Hellmüller, “Peacemaking in a Shifting World Order: A Macro-Level Analysis of UN Mediation in Syria,” *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 3 (2022): 543–59.

¹⁵ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Katherine Sawyer, “Conflict Negotiations and Rebel Leader Selection,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (2019): 619–34.

example, mediators in Sudan have been exasperated that the parties in the civil war refused to participate in negotiations on a localized regime or set of rules for the protection of civilians, which they are obligated to do under the Geneva Conventions.¹⁶ In turn, experts argue, there has been a new diversity of mediation actors, including autocratic regimes, that are ostensibly less bound or guided by global Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) norms and guidance that inform UN efforts.¹⁷

- Peacemaking has become more dispersed. Pivotal state, civil society (local and transnational), and faith-based mediators have stepped in to fill the void when high-level, state-based authorities or official and diplomatic international mediation efforts run aground. In the run-up to Mexico's 2024 elections, for instance, Catholic church-based mediators have sought to quell cartel-driven violence that particularly threatens local elections. In Myanmar, state-based mediators, such as China, have seen some success in brokering agreements. In the Tigray-centered civil war in Ethiopia (2020–22), African Union-led mediation efforts followed prior attempts by the subregional IGAD.

WHY FIGHT RATHER THAN TALK? THERE'S NO WAY OUT

War recurrences have been pervasive in contexts such as the Horn of Africa, but these patterns have not held true for all regions—notably, many civil wars in the Americas have not recurred or renewed along the same lines. It is important to note that there has been confusion over civil war recurrence, caused in part by faulty research. In the early 2000s, scholars estimated that 50 percent of conflicts

¹⁶ Jamey Keaten and Edith M. Lederer, “Sudan’s Warring Parties Arrive in Geneva for U.N.-Hosted Talks on Possible Local Cease-Fires,” *Associated Press*, July 11, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/un-sudan-talks-geneva-1dcaca681d5c590df741b7c2a712a35d>.

¹⁷ RtoP is a commitment by United Nations member states to protect their populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The principle of RtoP articulates three pillars: it is the responsibility of states to protect their populations from these crimes; it is the responsibility of the international community to provide states assistance when needed; and it is the responsibility of the international community to provide protection if states fail in this obligation. See United Nations Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, “About the Responsibility to Protect,” accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/responsibility-protect/about>.

recurred within five years—a claim that was picked up and repeated by analysts and policymakers.¹⁸ The authors revised this figure significantly downward within a few years, and it was criticized by other researchers who pointed out that the figures were based on unreliable measures and a loose definition of “recurrence.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the idea has entered into the discourse over civil wars and persists today, with negative consequences for understanding the dynamics of postwar politics.

The pathway forward for protagonists is challenging to strategically imagine. Absent sufficient progress toward a durable political settlement, credible commitments are difficult to establish. Political settlements are critical as they can constrain (and reassure) critical power-wielding political elites and create the conditions for a functioning state to address, through inclusion and development, the grievances of ethnic groups or rebel organizations.²⁰ An extensive review of research and evidence by the World Bank and UN in 2018 found that peace agreements featuring inclusive governance provide an essential enabling environment for humanitarian delivery and address the deprivations that fuel violent challenges to the state.²¹

- The advent of peace negotiations can stimulate splintering and increase the potential for spoiling of talks. Cohesion and consistency of parties are critical to the ability to reach and implement peace agreements. The fact that many conflicts today are essentially livestreamed, and subject to considerable information and disinformation campaigns—by protagonists, transnational allies and networks, and a plethora of extreme political or criminal groups—drastically affects peacemaking. Such exposure leads to protagonists and publics more committed to

¹⁸ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “The Incidence of Civil War in Africa,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 13 (2002): 13–28.

¹⁹ Astri Suhrke and Ingrid Samset, “What’s in a Figure? Estimating Recurrence of Civil War,” *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 2 (2007): 195–203.

²⁰ Barbara F. Walter, “Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 7 (2015): 1242–72. She concludes at page 1264 that “it is political factors that strongly affect whether peace emerges or wars restart. If the international community wants to reduce the incidence of civil war around the world, it must address the institutional weaknesses that make it so attractive and so necessary for rebels to return to war.”

²¹ World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (World Bank, 2018), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/publication/pathways-for-peace-inclusive-approaches-to-preventing-violent-conflict>.

“total victory” rather than the complexities of compromise and conciliation that peace processes portend.

- Among the conditions that lead to the perpetuation of conflicts (as repeated decisions to continue fighting), there are opportunity-driven accounts, in which insurgents engage in rent-seeking and exploit conflict as a lucrative business. Yet, other factors for conflict perpetuation are those that focus on the historically grounded subnational conflicts on the periphery of states in which insurgency is driven by secessionist or autonomy claims (as in the Philippines, Thailand, or Timor-Leste).²²
- The nature of global communication networks and how they may work toward or against conflict-escalation dynamics has been studied from coalition and radicalization perspectives.²³ *The first discussion paper in this series highlighted that these networks can fuel radicalization.* On the other hand, technological innovation has also become a tool for peacemaking. Among the technological innovations that have been seen to contribute to peacemaking in the contemporary period are those that increase information and knowledge (such as drone and geospatial observation), big data analysis, collection of evidence of war crimes, and remote monitoring of ceasefires.²⁴

One of the most critical questions in peacemaking is the concern with how engaging a party in negotiation, in essence, legitimizes them. Indeed, legitimation is a critical and powerful tool in a peacemaker’s toolkit, raising the need for critically assessing which rebels are invited to the negotiating table and why.²⁵ Expert opinion tends to affirm that fragmentation, particularly among

²² Lars-Erik Cederman and Manuel Vogt, “Dynamics and Logics of Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 9 (2017): 1992–2016.

²³ Asfandiyar Mir, Tamar Mitts, and Paul Staniland, “Political Coalitions and Social Media: Evidence from Pakistan,” *Perspective on Politics* 21, no. 4 (2023): 1337–56; and Tamar Mitts, Gregoire Phillips, and Barbara F. Walter, “Studying the Impact of ISIS Propaganda Campaigns,” *Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (2022): 1220–25.

²⁴ See ETH Zürich, “Innovative Peace Mediation: New Approaches and Strategies—A Policy Forum on Peace Mediation” (final report, MAS ETH Mediation in Peace Processes, 2022), <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/study-programme-websites/mas-mediation-dam/documents/MAS%20ETH%20MPP%20Policy%20Forum%20-%20Report.pdf>.

²⁵ Jennifer De Maio, “Coordination and Cooperation: Toward a Strategy of Successful Intervention,” in *Confronting Ethnic Conflict: The Role of Third Parties in Managing Africa’s Civil Wars*, ed. Jennifer De Maio (Lexington Books, 2009), 69–86.

opposition or rebel factions, within an internal conflict constrains efforts to reach a negotiation.²⁶ The impact of excluding different militant actors from peace negotiations remains a pressing question. Examining case studies from Chad and the Philippines, Suzanne Ghais finds that armed groups that were excluded from peace processes were more likely to renew violence following the conclusion of peace accords.²⁷

MEET THE MEDIATORS: THE TURN TO STATE-BASED PEACEMAKING

Although the United States was historically a lead mediator, for example, in the Bosnia and Herzegovina conflict (1992–95), there is an increasing trend toward greater power and middle-power state-based mediation in various settings. For example, Cuba, China, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Norway have at times engaged as third-party interlocutors in intrastate contexts. Many experts view the 2016 Havana Agreement for Colombia as the most significant peace agreement in recent years, and that the process of its negotiation highlights the new approaches, players, and patterns in contemporary peacemaking. Although there were many prior efforts to negotiate peace in Colombia, the Havana process began in 2010 and included sequenced negotiation efforts in secret preparatory talks, secret exploratory talks, and formal, public negotiations that ensued between 2012 and 2016.

- Of states involved in the mediation of intrastate conflicts, the United States stands apart as the most frequently involved state mediator.²⁸ Additionally, US support for peace processes evolved significantly during the 1990s and 2000s in contexts such as Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Serbia, and

²⁶ Such fragmentation generates information challenges, increases uncertainty, and contributes to credible commitment failures, which in turn lead to bargaining failures or the inability to secure or implement agreements. Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): 659–72.

²⁷ Suzanne Ghais, “Consequences of Excluding Armed Groups from Peace Negotiations: Chad and the Philippines,” *International Negotiation* 24, no. 1 (2019): 61–90.

²⁸ Princeton Lyman, *Partner to History: The U.S. Role in South Africa’s Transition to Democracy* (USIP Press, 2002).

Macedonia, with priority being placed on interagency cooperation between State Department diplomacy and the supportive development assistance provided by United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In turn, such work led to the development of the USAID guidance on supporting peace processes in 2009, as well as a subsequent technical brief in 2013.²⁹

- Active participation in mediation by “small” states has supplanted multilateral processes and dispersed channels for peacemaking.³⁰ Motivations for these states to engage in peacemaking relate to, for example, foreign policy values and goals (such as Switzerland’s humanitarian and human-security orientations), proximity and influence, or relationships and positions in a regional setting (such as Qatar in the Gulf Cooperation Council).³¹ In Afghanistan, Chad, Libya, and the Israeli-Hamas conflict, for example, Qatar has emerged as a mediator in light of its position and relationship with major powers, its acceptance by parties in these conflicts, and its foreign-policy ambitions for influence and status.³²
- China’s mediation appears to be driven in part by its strong national interest to secure the southern border and prevent transnational criminal cybercrime and other networks from operating in Myanmar’s north. China is also playing a quiet, yet critical, potential role in the Ukraine conflict.³³ Previously, China was a major power involved in the least amount of mediation. Authoritarian regimes with less direct accountability to their publics or other branches of government may have more leeway, options, and tools at the ready to leverage warring parties

²⁹ “Supporting Peace Processes: A Toolkit for Development Intervention,” USAID, June 2009, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadr502.pdf; and “Key Considerations when Supporting Peace Processes,” USAID, March 2013, <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Peace%20Processes%20Technical%20Brief%20FINAL.pdf>.

³⁰ Kristian Berg Harpviken and Sultan Barakat, “Comparing Qatari and Norwegian Models of Small State Conflict Mediation” (paper, PRIO, 2018), <https://www.prio.org/publications/10988>.

³¹ On China’s mediation in northern Myanmar, see Joe Leahy, “China Brokers Ceasefire Between Myanmar Military and Rebel Alliance,” *Financial Times*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/b5f830f7-8aec-4862-832c-c68f81fac49f>.

³² Sultan Barakat, “Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement” (Analysis Paper No. 12, Brookings Doha Center, November 2014). See also Stephen Kalin, “Gaza Diplomacy Cements Qatar’s Global Mediator Role,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 25, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/gaza-diplomacy-cements-qatars-global-mediator-role-29e0ffb7>.

³³ Victoria Waldersee, “Russia’s Ally China Needed to End Ukraine War, Swiss Diplomat Says,” *Reuters*, January 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/top-diplomats-meet-davos-ukraine-peace-formula-2024-01-14/>.

into peace agreements. Some experts argue that a significant trend in recent years is the increasing role played by such “authoritarian mediators.”³⁴

- States are more resistant to the influence of global norms and rules that were built up during the post–Cold War era. The pursuit of justice for crimes against humanity is potentially countervailing norms that can work against the incentives of protagonists to credibly commit to peace agreements. The adoption of the RtoP norm, and its invocation in contexts such as Libya in 2012, have significantly shifted the calculus of parties that have or may well come into the crosshairs of the International Criminal Court (ICC) or extraterritorial pursuits of justice for crimes against humanity.³⁵

WHAT OUTCOMES END WARS AND SUSTAIN PEACE? POWER SHARING APPEARS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN PARTITION

Evidence-based findings on when peace agreements yield sustainable peace have advanced significantly. Research findings underscore that peace agreements featuring security and military professionalization guarantees and facilitating broadly “inclusive governance” over time create the conditions for sustaining peace after conflicts end. One of the most critical lessons learned for peacemaking and power sharing in 1990s-era processes was the need for carefully designed, cautiously monitored security sector and demobilization provisions. A common example cited by experts is the extensively developed and internationally monitored—albeit not problem-free—process of “decommissioning” paramilitary forces and building an inclusive security sector following Northern Ireland’s 1998 Belfast Agreement.³⁶

The PA-X database, introduced in 2019 by the University of Notre Dame, delves into the elements of settlement in peace agreements. In doing so, it evaluates 1,518 peace agreements from

³⁴ Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, “A Kantian System? Democracy and Third-Party Conflict Resolution,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2002): 749–59.

³⁵ For a viewpoint, see Kenneth A Rodman, “Why the ICC Should Operate Within Peace Processes,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2012): 25–71.

³⁶ Carolyn Gallaher, “Under the Gun: Northern Ireland’s Unique History with DDR,” in *Theories of International Relations and Northern Ireland*, ed. Timothy J. White (Oxford University Press, 2017), 55–73.

1990 to January 2016 along 225 substantive categories emanating from 146 various peace processes.³⁷ Utilizing this database, scholars find that “political power sharing agreements provide important security guarantees for state and opposition parties or rebel groups, offering them a place in the government.”³⁸ Additionally, Laurie Nathan finds that some 79 percent of comprehensive peace agreements from 1989 to 2012 featured pledges or related directly to postconflict constitutional reform. Such constitutions, when reached and implemented, are part and parcel of the peace process, drawing attention to the understanding that peace agreements are highly varied and not “homogenous.”³⁹

Research on the durability of peace agreements investigates factors such as the reduction of violence below prior thresholds or global measurement thresholds, the terms of settlements and their effects on peace duration, and the flexibility of peace processes.⁴⁰

- Power sharing outcomes have become more complex, and often reflect both a sharing of power horizontally in government and through territorial decentralization. Peace agreements often feature provisions for autonomous regional governance and for local autonomy at multiple layers (as in South Sudan and the Bangsamoro region of the Philippines).⁴¹
- Experts widely agree that there are few practical alternatives to solving certain political puzzles, such as the widespread partition of existing states when wars are territorialized, or allowing international aggression to claim new sovereign territory.⁴² Thus, to solve the lion’s share

³⁷ Christine Bell and Sanja Badanjak, “Introducing PA-X: A New Peace Agreement Database and Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 3 (2019): 452–66.

³⁸ Christine Bell, “Political Power-Sharing and Inclusion: Peace and Transition Processes” (PA-X Report: Power-Sharing Series, Political Settlements Research Program, University of Edinburgh, 2018), <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Political-Power-Sharing-Report-DIGITAL.pdf>.

³⁹ Laurie Nathan, “The Post-Conflict Constitution as a Peace Agreement,” in *Contemporary Peacemaking: Peace Processes, Peacebuilding, and Conflict*, 3rd ed., ed. Roger MacGinty and Anthony Wanis-St. John (Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

⁴⁰ Terrence Lyons, “Successful Peace Implementation: Plans and Processes,” *Peacebuilding* 4, no. 1 (2016): 71–82.

⁴¹ Steffan Wolff, “Resolving Self-Determination Conflicts: The Emerging Practice of Complex Power Sharing,” in *The World Divided: Self-Determination and Rights of People to Self Determination*, ed. Jörg Fisch (De Gruyter, 2011).

⁴² Nicholas Sambanis and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, “What’s in a Line?: Is Partition a Solution to Civil War?” *International Security* 34, no. 2 (2009): 83.

of conflicts, there are few governance system alternatives to power sharing that can equally address security sector reform, economic inequalities, and wealth distribution within a broader framework that advances social and individual human rights.

IN COMPLEX CASES, TOUGH CHOICES ABOUND

Ethical dilemmas appear in relation to critical policy questions of engagement, legitimation, and recognition. In peacemaking, key questions arise: When is it in one's interest to engage with, legitimate, and recognize armed actors and potential "spoilers" to peace processes? This critical question speaks to a fundamental debate about the dilemmas of peacemaking, perhaps in contrast to efforts to pursue either a decisive military outcome or to prioritize justice-seeking over war-ending.

These complex ethical dilemmas inform many of the debates around critical norms of peacemaking and collective security for atrocity prevention, such as those relating to the RtoP. In this instance, an important perspective is that these dilemmas inform decisions around identifying and defining *total spoilers* (those fully unwilling to compromise in negotiation), *impermissible actors* (excluded along ideational lines), and the *unwilling or ideologically committed*. In practice, such decisions affect critical aspects of peacemaking such as contact policies, daily diplomacy, channels, and context-specific strategy and implementation.

- Operational dilemmas are seen in the initiation, sequencing, and outcome design of peace accords or settlements. On critical theories such as "ripeness," debates continue on important operational and tactical decisions in the initiation or onset, stepwise design, and outcome parameters of peace negotiations.

In Ukraine, ethical concerns of peacemaking abound. This includes, for example, whether any negotiated agreement might "reward the aggressor" (Russia) with seized territory, or whether the escalatory assistance of military weapon transfers to Ukraine to prevent a unilateral Russian military

victory is morally defensible given that the cost of “inducing a mutually hurting stalemate” is measured in Ukrainian (and Russian) lives. Operationally, the very act of negotiating with Russia at this juncture is itself a dilemma, given that it is a serial violator of negotiated agreements, such as the START Treaty.⁴³

The Sudan civil war presents the abovementioned ethical dilemmas of negotiating with those who have engaged in atrocities of genocidal magnitude and potentially recognizing the legitimacy of the armed forces that ousted Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in October 2021. Operationally, some observers have coined the phrase “mediation mayhem” to describe the disparate efforts and forums for a viable peace process to end the war.⁴⁴ During a conversation on March 17, 2024, the US Special Envoy, Tom Perriello, described the war as a “horrific humanitarian crisis,” and “we have these generals playing games with peoples’ lives . . . no one is going to win.”⁴⁵

Since 2019, Norway has been engaged as a mediator in Venezuela to prevent its slide into violent conflict—and arrest the worst peacetime economic decline ever seen—at a pivotal moment in its political crisis. While Norway’s interests as a mediator stem from its humanitarian-centric foreign policy, it also engages in peace diplomacy among regional actors, including the United States (which wields power in the form of financial sanctions against the Nicolas Maduro regime, among other levers of influence), regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, and interested neighboring countries like Colombia and Guyana. Operationally, Norway’s approach represents a “soft intervention” form of peacemaking, its efforts described as facilitation, not mediation.⁴⁶

⁴³ US Department of State, “Russian Noncompliance with and Invalid Suspension of the New START Treaty,” fact sheet, June 1, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/russian-noncompliance-with-and-invalid-suspension-of-the-new-start-treaty/#:~:text=Russia's%20noncompliance%20threatens%20the%20viability,to%20assess%20Russian%20nuclear%20deployments>.

⁴⁴ Ameer Chughtai and Theodore Murphy, “Conflict and Interests: Why Sudan’s External Mediation Is a Barrier to Peace,” European Council on Foreign Relations, September 8, 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/conflict-and-interests-why-sudans-external-mediation-is-a-barrier-to-peace/>.

⁴⁵ Tom Perriello, “U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan on the American Role in Sudan’s Civil War,” radio broadcast, Weekend Edition Sunday with Ayesha Roscoe, National Public Radio, March 17, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/17/1239035877/u-s-special-envoy-to-sudan-on-the-american-role-in-sudans-civil-war>.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Venezuela Negotiation Process,” Government of Norway, January 12, 2023, https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/peace-and-reconciliation-efforts/norways_engagement/venezuela_negotiations/id2674295/#:~:text=Norway%20has%20over%20time%20been,Guaid%C3%B3%20in%20Oslo%20and%20Barbados.

Nine years after the intervention of the Saudi-led military coalition in March 2015, the conflict in Yemen, which has killed an estimated 160,000 people, remains unresolved.⁴⁷ Recent years witnessed renewed promise for peacemaking between Saudi Arabia, Yemen’s internationally recognized government, and the Houthi movement. A mediated truce by the UN came into effect in April 2022. Accompanied by Omani officials, the first public Saudi delegation to Sanna’a and the first public Houthi delegation to Riyadh both occurred in 2023.⁴⁸ In September 2023, high-level peace talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis progressed, with the Saudi Foreign Ministry praising “the positive results of the serious discussions regarding reaching a road map to support the peace path in Yemen.”⁴⁹

Months later, Hans Grundberg, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, noted “the parties’ commitment to a set of measures to implement a nation-wide ceasefire, improve living conditions in Yemen, and engage in preparations for the resumption of an inclusive political process.”⁵⁰ However, the conflict has escalated over recent months, particularly in the Red Sea. This uptick in violence has led to debates among analysts surrounding the efficacy of diplomacy and US military force in preventing future Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.⁵¹ The Yemeni context underscores an important point: Even when it appears that peace agreements to end conflicts are close, such efforts can easily deteriorate into deeper violence and further internationalization, and quickly reset further from peace than ever before.

For the foreseeable future, there is despair that well-justified, coherent processes of negotiation can yield durable solutions to today’s deadly conflicts. This despair reinforces a deep vein of knowledge in the field of peacemaking around the range of dilemmas facing efforts to end complex

⁴⁷ Luca Nevola, “Yemen and the Red Sea: Rising Tensions Threaten Peace Process and International Security,” ACLED, January 17, 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/yemen/>.

⁴⁸ Ibrahim Jalal, “The War Next Door: Omani Foreign Policy Toward Yemen,” Middle East Institute, September 21, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/war-next-door-omani-foreign-policy-toward-yemen>.

⁴⁹ Jon Gambrell, “Saudi Arabia Praises ‘Positive Results’ After Yemen’s Houthi Rebels Visit Kingdom for Peace Talks,” *Associated Press*, September 20, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-yemen-war-peace-talks-d2a9ad9efelab0b4f5d51597098f46a2>.

⁵⁰ “Yemen Warring Parties Commit to Ceasefire, UN-Led Peace Process, Says Envoy,” *Al Jazeera*, December 23, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/23/yemen-warring-parties-commit-to-ceasefire-un-led-peace-process-says-envoy>.

⁵¹ Alexandra Stark, “Don’t Bomb the Houthis: Careful Diplomacy Can Stop the Attacks in the Red Sea,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 11, 2024.

internationalized intrastate conflicts, such as in Yemen, at the negotiating table or via interlocutors, rather than on the battlefield.

Thus, policymakers face dilemmas of action as they operate under conditions of high uncertainty. Moreover, putative “successful” engagements, sequencing, or settlements in other settings may well be ill-fitted to different contexts. Nonetheless, there is significant policy guidance at national and multilateral levels on peace processes, even as such guidance sits in the “nice to know” box on policymakers’ desks in a world where few conflicts see tangible progress in peacemaking. Experts encourage historical, comparative, and quantitative knowledge, as well as deep, evidence-informed discussion on the trade-offs that are involved in the delicate decisions that occur in mediation practice.

MOTIVATED AND MANDATED: IMPROVING PEACEMAKING PARTNERSHIPS

Peacemaking, in the 1990s and into today, is typically conducted in partnerships forged among those with the standing mandate for facilitating crisis prevention negotiation and pursuing peace agreements. Principally, this includes the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, and regional organizations. At the same time, successful peace processes in the 1990s and early 2000s were often and typically accompanied by complementary processes of private mediators, locally engaged organizations who work at the grassroots to bolster support, and a plethora of actors involved with facilitating the implementation of peace agreements.

- At a minimum, experts agree that peacemaking requires a set of complementary, prioritized, and focused action by a close coalition of both motivated *and* mandated mediators.

The turn to state-based mediation raises several important considerations. This includes questions regarding their acceptance as mediators by parties in conflict, mandate for engagement, capacity to facilitate and mediate, relationships with other peace processes, ties with protagonists, and

capacity to offer or provide credible commitments to peace agreements. One of the initial implications drawn is that there is a dearth of understanding on the role of motivated state-based mediators, and particularly in reference to both the institutional configuration and operational space of those in more or less open, democratic regimes (in contrast to the notion of “authoritarian” mediators). Among the most critical questions in this area are lessons learned with regard to legitimacy, resources, wielding of leverage, approach and capacities, and the implications for settlements of state-based mediation in contrast to other lead-actor approaches.

- The legitimacy of a mediator is often questioned; even states with a history of neutrality that aids in defining and enhancing their role are called into question in contexts today, such as Ukraine, where Switzerland sought to broker a settlement, but has also sanctioned some 106 individuals and 88 companies “in response to the ongoing aggression in Ukraine.”⁵² The Swiss experience in 2024 underscores the argument proffered by experts that even putatively impartial mediators struggle to achieve full neutrality in the face of atrocities committed in conflict.
- The resources of a mediator have long been a critical consideration, both in the ability of the state to provide direct support to the process and to potentially use financial or economic inducements; experts find a pattern in the role of petrodollar-rich states, such as Norway and Qatar, in international mediation, given their significant financial resources as oil-rich states, in contrast to a state-based mediation by Kenya, for example, which faces greater financial constraints and whose mediation capacity is at times augmented by development assistance.
- The mediator’s approach is also a critical component. While states such as Norway have engaged in highly light-touch “facilitation,” global powers such as China, the United States, and France have paired mediation efforts with “coercive diplomacy” and direct backing of protagonists to create the conditions for negotiations favorable to their understanding of a conflict’s most feasible or most just outcome.

⁵² “Switzerland Implements New Sanctions Against Russia,” *Swissinfo.ch*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/foreign-affairs/switzerland-implements-new-sanctions-against-russia/73214326>.

- Regional organizations can be effective mediators, experts contend, principally with the moral authority and symbolic leverage they bring to the negotiation table. In conflicts across Africa, some have found that mediation is more likely to be effective when it has legitimacy. At the same time, it is difficult to determine whether and when regional organizations may see more or less success in peacemaking, given that they may tend to mostly mediate in already highly intractable situations. That regional organizations in Africa, for example, have “failed” to successfully mediate peace agreements in contexts such as Sudan, which fell into a devastating civil war in 2023, is not for a lack of trying.

Despite its ostensible challenges of achieving “success” or progress in peacemaking in many contemporary contexts—in Yemen, for example—the UN is still seen as critical, given its potential (and historical) role as a security provider in conflicts backstopping incipient or advanced peace processes.

- In a remarkable reversal, processes that were led through the mechanisms of the special envoys (or, typically, the special representative of the secretary-general), which emerged as a common modality in the 1990s, are much less centric to peacemaking today. In broader trends, the UN system has shifted more toward special political missions or teams of civilian specialists with a range of expertise, as part of a holistic approach to “engage politically” at multiple levels and to facilitate partnerships with key local actors and with country-specific configurations of key external partners, such as development assistance providers. The 2023 Agenda for Peace and the UN’s 2023 report on special political missions⁵³ signal this trend toward UN engagement through such missions. This is likely to continue as geopolitical competition in the Security Council undermines the effectiveness of senior UN special envoys as principal mediators in the most internationalized conflicts, such as Sudan.

⁵³ “Special Political Missions 2023—Report of the Secretary General on Overall Policy Matters Pertaining to Special Political Missions,” UN DPPA, https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_spms_a-78-307.pdf.

- Many of the mechanisms supporting such initiatives, including the Mediation Support Unit of the UN, have been hobbled by the competitive geopolitical environment and the lack of clear support and mandates for field missions. Yet the UN DPPA remains critical for special political missions, including verification efforts in Colombia, sending special envoys or advisers to Cyprus, the Great Lakes Region in Africa, Yemen, and the longstanding special political mission in Iraq (United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq). Additionally, the DPPA is engaged in sanctions monitoring, with teams in key conflicts, such as Haiti, Libya, and Sudan, and it also operates 14 country-specific or regional offices in support of peace processes. At the same time, the DPPA struggled to hit its multiyear funding targets, seeing a 24 percent deficit in funding in 2023 for its core peacemaking initiatives, requiring the UN to dip into cash reserves to continue core operations.⁵⁴

In prior periods, regional and subregional organizations have been critical in intrastate-conflict peacemaking. These themes continue to resonate today with, for example, a very full agenda of the African Union in addressing both urgent conflicts, such as Sudan, and working diligently on conflict prevention in erstwhile stable contexts, such as Senegal. Moreover, the locus of peacemaking has shifted in some settings to regional, state-based, and private mediators. Given the context and geopolitical fallout of the Ukraine crisis, for example, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's effort to broker peace in a wide range of "frozen conflicts" in the Caucasus has been stymied, as has its work in conflict prevention in Central Asia.

There continues to be a wide range of less official and at times high-level engagements in mediating conflicts by those in private or eminent-person roles, and experts find the need for clarity on the benefits, and potential disadvantages, of engaging private individual or organizational mediators. This includes the need to share details on the ways that private actors, for example, may be critical in resolving dilemmas experienced by official governmental or multilateral actors. For example, as a strategic approach to mediation, UN mediators have increasingly turned to partnerships

⁵⁴ "2023 Multi-Year Appeal Annual Report," UN DPPA, https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/mya_annual_report_2023_0.pdf.

with religious actors and engaged in understanding the religious aspects of conflict and local peace-making networks.⁵⁵

For example, the HD Centre in Geneva, which conducts quiet diplomacy and supports multi-track peace processes, has seen significant success in bolstering peace processes in contexts such as the transition to independence in Timor-Leste, and was more recently involved in backstopping negotiations on the Black Sea grain export agreement in the context of Ukraine. Increasingly, transnational civil society actors—including the HD Centre, the Carter Center, the Crisis Management Initiative, and ACCORD—serve as conflict mediators and engage in a variety of efforts in support of country- and local-level peace processes.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION: MORE WARS AND FEWER PEACE AGREEMENTS

This discussion paper provides an overview of the expert panel’s assessment of the state of peace-making at a global scale, offering an integrated overview of the group’s evaluation of historical trends and the evolving landscape for international mediation, or peacemaking. The paper highlights a key insight: The international system is witnessing a changing peacemaking practice as a response to the rise in the number of conflicts, to their complexity, and to the multiplicity of actors attempting to address them.

As the post-2000s continue to experience a rise in conflict, it is simultaneously experiencing greater obstacles to peacemaking. Unlike the period preceding it, post-2000 conflicts are witnessing decreased UN involvement through the use of known mechanisms, such as UN peacekeeping and the special envoy diplomatic architecture. As the UN’s role in conflict management declines, mediation by regional multilateral organizations, great powers, middle powers, nondemocratic and

⁵⁵ Alejandro Posada-Téllez, “Making Peace with God: What Place for Religion in United Nations Mediation?,” *International Peacekeeping* 31, no. 4 (2024): 1–31.

⁵⁶ Andrea Bartoli, “NGOs and Conflict Resolution,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, ed. Jacob Bercovitch, William I. Zartman, and Victor Kremenyuk (Sage Publications, 2009), 392–411.

autocratic states, and civil society actors is on the rise, demonstrating the diversity of the contemporary peacemaking arena.

However, each actor encounters various ethical dilemmas when deciding to partake in or initiate mediation efforts. From when to engage to whom to engage, and therefore legitimize, these and a number of other questions are a critical starting point for a potential mediator, and oftentimes, answers to some of these questions cannot be known ahead of time (e.g., the Russia-Ukraine conflict arriving at a peace design that awards Russia's aggression), or they are weighed against significant negative humanitarian outcomes (e.g., negotiating with violators of international law perpetrating mass atrocities against civilians).

The changing nature of contemporary peacemaking, however, holds a potential promise for peace. Lessons from this paper demonstrate the necessity of:

1. Emphasizing a partnership-based approach to peacemaking that leverages the diversity of the landscape and brings together a coalition of UN-mandated action, state mediators, international organizations, regional multilateral organizations, and civil society actors.
2. Establishing channels for formalizing aspects of mediation by regional multilateral bodies and “minilateral” coalitions of state mediators in order to create mechanisms for sharing lessons learned and further developing regional-level mediation efforts.
3. Creating opportunities for policymakers and peacemaking actors of various kinds to exchange experiences on navigating ethical dilemmas experienced and encountered in other conflict cases in order to glean lessons learned and potential new navigation strategies.
4. Experts recommend maintaining and bolstering the UN's special political missions design in the wake of waning traditional UN peacekeeping presence.

This second discussion paper identifies challenges and opportunities facing contemporary peacemaking, offering directions for engaging with the drivers and dynamics of armed conflict as articulated in the first discussion paper. The third discussion paper will conclude with a look at the United States' role in peacemaking as a unilateral actor and as part of a multilateral body.