



Our War-Torn World Needs a New Mediating Body to Resolve Conflicts

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Does military intervention make a safer world? We seem to be trapped in a crude, bipolar choice, in which we either use military force or we do nothing.

Institutions do not decide to go to war or to make peace or decide who to destroy or kill; those actions are the responsibility of individuals. So to try to understand the root causes of conflict only in terms of power politics and resources, without also understanding human behaviour, undermines our effectiveness in preventing war and making peace.

It is now three years since the war in [Syria](#) started. So far, some 120,000 people have been killed, 2.5m people have become refugees and 6.5m people have been displaced internally within [Syria](#). Western governments are humiliated by their impotence to influence events and are now challenged again with how to de-escalate the crisis in [Ukraine](#). When [Kofi Annan](#) was sent in to mediate in Syria, 6,000 people had already been killed and by the time [Lakhdar Brahimi](#) arrived 30,000 people had been killed. At that stage, people were baying for blood and seeking retribution and were not in the mood for compromise, a necessary component for peacemaking.

The violence of war creates traumatised communities. Fear, rage and humiliation prevent any kind of rational judgment and dominate the mood. Such emotions affect the ability of those involved in conflicts to think rationally and to act in their best interests. With this in mind, governments need to

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commit to early intervention, *before* communities have been traumatised. In an attempt to emerge out of the current fog, what would it look like if we were to establish a comprehensive system of early warning and early mediation when it comes to international conflict, a system that addresses the complexity of both power politics and the human mind?

Such questions no longer seem relevant once a conflict has hardened. For instance, what started as a popular uprising against the Assad family was quickly stimulated by regional actors in a proxy war, the key players being Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Early mediation by skilled, credible interlocutors – possibly, in this case, non-westerners – would have eventually brought the proxy players to sit together. For this to be effective, strong working relationships are necessary and credible mediators would have shuttled between the parties, primarily Iran and Saudi Arabia, to address the differences between these guarantors of an emerging new architecture. Only after such informal negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia had taken place would negotiations between opposing Syrian warring parties have had a better chance of succeeding. Not least because the flow of money and weapons, both to the Syrian government and to the Syrian opposition, would have been addressed by the proxies.

For mediators to have legitimacy, they would need to be seen as credible independent parties, possibly nationals of the countries on whose behalf they were mediating, and they would need to be able to feed back to government at the levels where decisions are made. They would lack the political baggage of their state equivalents, and therefore warring parties may be more willing to talk to them. Also they should not be bogged down by official caution and bureaucracy, but instead able to move fast with the necessary agility.

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Parties involved in conflict are often motivated by small hurts and wounded pride and not big ideological beliefs. Historical memory cannot be erased.

In our new book, *The Fog of Peace*, former UN negotiator Gianni Picco, who was responsible for the release of the western hostages in Beirut, and I recommend the establishing of a credible mediating body that is slim, nimble, flexible and bureaucracy-free. The obvious home for this kind of intervention is the [United Nations](#) and, if effective, would do much to improve its reputation. But other homes may be worthy of consideration and the imprimatur of a wide cross-section of world defence organisations that might include [Nato](#), Warsaw Pact, GCC and others could provide an umbrella .

Traditional attempts at peacemaking have created complex bureaucracies, circuses of diplomats, frequent flyers around the global terrain with insufficient evidence of success in the resolution of conflict. Indeed, current structures have proved to be cumbersome and ill-attuned to the skills of mediation. A new form of mediation is now required that recognises the competing narratives of the parties involved in the conflict.

The interlocutors would need to work quietly behind the scenes outside the glare of any publicity before the conflict had polarised. A sort of universal ombudsman, where agility and early intervention would be essential qualities.

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