Introduction

engaging armed groups in peace processes

Robert Ricigliano

For people living in the Darfur region of western Sudan, the jungles of Colombia, the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and for millions of others around the world, the presence of non-state armed groups and the conflicts that often surround them are all too familiar. Over the last two decades, whether in the context of a peace process or a humanitarian initiative, armed groups have come to be seen as key actors in efforts to ease suffering and rebuild conflict-torn societies. In a September 2004 report, the United States Air Force Institute for National Security Studies concluded that, “armed groups are no longer minor players in a world once dominated by states”.

However this increased awareness of the importance of armed groups has caused problems. In particular, since 11 September 2001, armed groups have been looked at in a different light – as potential terrorist organizations and possible new cells in an ever more menacing international terrorist network. Thus, engaging, or more accurately, not engaging with them has taken on a whole new meaning. The result has been a pronounced incoherence in policies of governmental and non-governmental actors toward whether and how to engage with armed groups. Pablo Policzer, of the Armed Groups Project and the University of Calgary, puts the challenge succinctly: “Armed groups are widely recognized to be of paramount political importance, but there is far less consensus over how to deal with them than there was even a decade ago.”

Meanwhile, the suffering of local populations continues unabated and gives urgency to sorting through this policy incoherence and increasing the successful engagement of armed groups in the cause of peace.

Of course, for internal or external third parties to a violent conflict, the behaviour of armed groups raises some very serious and sensitive questions, from concerns over criminal or terrorist activity to the...
imperative to condemn the killing of civilians and other human rights abuses. However, these concerns do not contradict, and nor should they forestall, efforts to develop a new, more nuanced understanding of armed groups and the opportunities and risks connected with their engagement in political dialogue.

The purpose of this Accord issue is to remedy the deficit in our understanding of what we have learned about the engagement of armed groups in peace processes, and the challenges to be addressed. At a minimum, we hope to focus attention on the topic and establish a norm of creating an inclusive conversation. In an effort to consider the broad and sometimes starkly contrasting views on this question, the volume contains voices of armed groups, state actors, academics and interveners (both governmental and non-governmental).

It is worth stressing the importance of including the perspectives of armed groups in this process. While this may be uncomfortable for some, and many will find pieces in this volume to be provocative at the least, it is important to understand, though not necessarily agree with, their perspectives. All too often armed groups’ voices are left out of the conversation on improving peacebuilding practice. One strong theme that has emerged over the course of this project is that the views of armed groups are necessary parts of the process of creating a more effective peacebuilding system.

More importantly, by identifying some important issues related to armed groups’ engagement in peace processes, we hope that this volume sets the stage for future dialogue and policy discussions. The publication is structured around five main thematic sections. Each of these begins with an analytical overview of the issues arising, followed by two to three case studies illustrating how these issues have played out in particular contexts. We hope that each reader – whether state actor, armed group or third party – will find insights or details in the articles that act as a catalyst for new ideas about opportunities for engagement. To start that process, what follows are some themes that cut across the various sections of this volume.
Definitions matter

Policzer argued in his 2005 essay 'Neither terrorists nor freedom fighters' that how you define what constitutes an armed group influences your decision on whether to engage. Terrorist groups, criminal organizations, informal militias and paramilitaries strain traditional definitions of armed groups as having effective leadership, control of territory, or a defined political agenda. For the purpose of this volume, our focus – similarly to Policzer’s – will be on armed groups with the following characteristics: (1) they challenge the state’s monopoly on coercive force; (2) they operate outside effective state control; and/or (3) they are capable of preventing, blocking or endangering humanitarian action or peace initiatives.

This relatively broad focus channels our attention primarily towards armed groups who struggle in relation to a particular state party. However, while international terrorist networks like Al Qaeda or criminal organizations are therefore beyond the immediate focus of our inquiry, it is possible that insights from this volume might be relevant to these groups.

Engagement is also a broad term that can have many different meanings, explored below. At this point, it is sufficient to adopt an inclusive definition of engagement, meaning generally to ‘interact with’ or ‘participate in’. As with other Accord publications, the term ‘peace process’ refers to myriad vehicles that are generally intended to advance the creation of a peacefully functioning society out of a situation of violent conflict. Most commonly, this includes negotiations and other forms of dialogue at various social and political levels.

Why engage?

It is frequently argued that to engage with armed groups is to legitimize violence, or give credibility to unreasonable or non-negotiable demands. Moreover, we live in a time when engaging with armed groups, especially those that are branded as terrorists, is becoming less and less the norm. But, as President Carter and others note, the terrorist label is overused. In the name of security policy and the ‘war on terror’, the preferred course of action for dealing with many armed groups is to proscribe and shun them in the hopes that they will somehow wither away or be eradicated by military force. Several critical arguments are made throughout this volume that push for the opposite policy – one that takes as a given the critical importance of engaging with armed groups and making some form of engagement the norm rather than a concession. Mo Mowlam argues that, “you don’t fight terrorism with weapons and bullets. You fight it by talking to them.”

There are several lines of argument that emerge from the volume on why engagement, per se, is important:

The need to protect the local population

While engagement with armed groups by states can involve complex issues of international law, state sovereignty and national interest, the issue is fundamentally about improving the lives of the local populations who are the victims of conflict. As Steven Smith notes in his case study about ceasefire talks in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, notwithstanding the political tug of war between Congolese and international political actors over the peace process, the one certainty was that the local population would bear the brunt of continued fighting. Across the case studies, whether in Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Burma, Sudan, Colombia or elsewhere, the one constant is the peril faced by the local population and the humanitarian imperative to protect them. While this imperative does not provide a blanket justification for engagement in all cases, it does establish a default presumption that at least minimal levels of engagement are often warranted. Local communities’ attitudes to engagement – including their capacities to act as third-parties in their own conflicts – are a good barometer against which to test proposed interventions.

Armed groups hold the key to ending violence

President Carter raises the simple yet powerful question of whom you would engage with to stop a conflict or human rights abuse if not the people involved in the conflict or perpetrating the human rights violation. It is sometimes argued that armed groups should demonstrate adherence to international humanitarian law as a precondition for any kind of dialogue. However, reality on the ground may make this an unrealistic demand. Clem McCartney points out that some groups might see violence as a tactic while others may see it as a valid statement and possibly the only statement they can make. Indeed the responsibility to protect can provide a compelling argument to explore every option for ending the violence. Further, several case studies document the negative consequences of engaging with certain armed groups but not others. Lam Akol attributes shortcomings in one of the phases of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) to the failure to include all the affected armed groups in the negotiation process. Ilyas Akhmadov describes the negative impact of the international community working with the Russian-backed Chechen administrator over leaders of the Chechen resistance. Lastly, Alastair Crooke describes the negative consequences for the Middle East peace process of the international community’s reluctance to deal with Islamist as opposed to secular Palestinian groups.
Engagement increases the chance of a settlement process

Internal armed conflicts frequently end through dialogue and political negotiations. Even conflicts such as the Angolan civil war, which ended with the effective defeat of the armed group, had benefited from past peace negotiations on which the parties were able to build as they formalized the end of hostilities. However, much opponents or external actors may prefer military force to pacific engagement, there will always be a need to come to the table at some point.

As a metaphor for the constant choice before armed groups, McCartney uses the image of a scale that weighs the factors that favour militancy on one side, and those that favour conflict transformation on the other side. The Karen case study presented by Saw David Taw is a vivid illustration of the dynamic interplay of the forces that favour political dialogue versus those that favour continued armed struggle. As McCartney points out, engagement can alter the decision-making scales. For example, Joaquin Villalobos points out that in El Salvador the international community’s engagement with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) “facilitated the hegemony of moderate groups and leaders.” This in turn made the FMLN more willing and able to participate in political negotiations. Sandi and Fortune explain how civil society groups helped bring the Revolutionary United Front to the negotiating table in Sierra Leone. Akol describes how the engagement of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement in the OLS process was a “turning point” for the movement in terms of its involvement in political dialogue.

Lack of engagement can strengthen hardliners

Just as engagement can have a positive influence on the choice of an armed group to opt for political dialogue, isolation or sanctions can in some circumstances make an armed group less inclined or able to participate in a peace process. Liz Philipson argues that the listing of the Communist Party of Nepal (the Maoists) as a terrorist organization by the US has had little practical impact other than to strengthen those among the Maoists and the Nepalese army who favour fighting over negotiation. Visuvanathan Rudrakumaran provides a forceful account of the negative impacts of proscription from the perspective of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. Lastly, Akhmadov, speaking from a Chechen perspective, presents his analysis of the positive impacts of engagement versus the negative impacts of non-engagement. He explains that engagement in the sphere of interstate relations stimulated the Chechens to observe international standards, while the feeling that the international community was ignoring the moderate Chechen political leadership swelled the ranks of those who saw terrorism as the only way to advance their objectives.

Think creatively about engagement options

For state actors, armed groups or third parties, the decision about whether to engage in the context of a peace process is not a fixed or static choice. While there are several important considerations that weigh in favour of engagement as a general concept, the decision to engage is different in each situation and for each party.

How you combine several variables – type of group, purpose of engagement, substance of engagement, type of interlocutor – changes the calculus of the decision of whether to engage or not. It also raises lots of options for combining these different variables in ways that might be more appropriate for specific situations. For any actor, the decision to engage is never as simple as ‘should I engage or not?’. The question is more accurately framed as who should engage, with what group and about what issues. While it may not be appropriate for a given intervener to engage in every situation, the diversity of engagement options raises the potential that there may always be some combination of intervener, armed group and engagement type that is appropriate.

Identifying who should engage

For external actors, the choice to engage is critically influenced by who would do the engaging. Julian Hottinger outlines some important distinctions between track one (governmental) and track two (non-governmental) actors and the distinct advantages and disadvantages each has when engaging with armed groups. Further, Hottinger points out that there is really a plethora of potential interveners across what is, in fact, a multi-track system – from business leaders to educators to religious figures.

Identifying engagement options

There are two important dimensions along which engagement can be defined: the purpose of the engagement and the issues to be addressed while engaging. Engagement can have rather modest purposes such as simply establishing communication or gathering basic information. Hottinger argues for the importance of engagement that simply keeps the lines of communication open and lets an armed group know that when “they do want to sit down and talk there are organizations…that are willing to help.” A step beyond simple communication is to seek a fuller understanding of an armed group as described by Williams and Ricigliano or what President Carter terms “pre-mediation.”
work to see whether a group is committed to participating in political dialogue. A more ambitious purpose is to engage in order to persuade or influence the behaviour of a group, such as Smith’s work to persuade leaders in eastern DRC of the value of a ceasefire. Lastly, the purpose of engagement could be to negotiate with a group, as was the case with Mowlam’s experience in Northern Ireland. As you work toward more significant outcomes, the criteria for engaging become more exacting. For example, the threshold for whether to engage for the purposes of understanding a group might be quite low, but the threshold for negotiations might entail a credible commitment on the armed group’s part to reach a peaceful settlement, the group’s adherence to respecting humanitarian principles, etc. Ideally, the process of engagement will generate greater interest in these options on all sides, in turn making the case for dialogue and negotiations more compelling.

The subject matter of the engagement also affects third parties’ choices about whether to engage. David Petrasek makes the distinction between humanitarian and political engagement. Engagement on humanitarian issues can positively affect political negotiations, and it is often easier for state actors and armed groups to engage around these questions even when they would not engage in political negotiations. Elizabeth Reusse-

Decrey’s description of Geneva Call’s work in Colombia is a good example of when a state actor (the Colombian government) expressed some willingness to engage with an armed group on a humanitarian issue when they were not willing to engage on political issues. Further, engagement that addresses purely process issues, like defining process ground rules or providing training as detailed in Fink Haysom’s article, is qualitatively different from engagement on substantive political issues like a ceasefire, confidence-building measures or a formal peace accord.

**Contact with armed groups as the norm**

As noted above, there are clearly cases where non-engagement or disengagement makes sense. However, the case for engagement generally, and the myriad of engagement choices in any specific context, make the argument that at least minimal engagement with armed groups, or basic contact with them, should be the default norm rather than the exception. Contact, as opposed to negotiations or other more involved forms of engagement, is essential if for no other reason than to determine if these other forms of engagement are warranted. Rather than erecting more barriers to even basic contact with armed groups, we should be making it easier so that making contact does not entail the cost of granting the armed group some privilege that it would otherwise not be entitled to.

While information about armed groups can be gathered without direct contact, or through proxies, there is some critical information that requires direct and tactful engagement. McCartney stresses the importance of understanding how armed groups view violence – whether as a tactic or a statement unto itself. Williams and Ricigliano argue that critical to understanding a group is to know how the group accounts for the fact that it is armed. Understanding how leaders of an armed group see such sensitive questions cannot be learned from a book or by watching the BBC. It takes engagement. Moreover, an armed group’s words and actions have to be understood in light of their cultural context, as demonstrated by Mowlam’s experience of meeting inmates at the Maze prison in Northern Ireland.

Terry Waite makes a strong statement about the importance of personal contact and sensitivity:

what really counts is your ability on the ground to have a degree of sensitivity to people in situations, to be able to get yourself onto the wavelengths of the people with whom you’re working or discussing…what is it you’re saying, and why is it you’re doing what you’re doing?
Both Waite and Mowlam confirm that all information has its slant, and the best you can do is to recognize that, keep an open mind and talk to as many of the involved actors as possible.

Lastly, face-to-face contact with an armed group can change the narrative of the conflict. Williams and Ricigliano point out that an intervener can influence the way the group sees itself, can affect internal dynamics, and can change how the group relates to the conflict. Of course, this kind of contact can have positive or negative consequences, but without it a potential lever to affect the course of a conflict is lost.

Creating an environment conducive to engagement
The success of a peace process is the responsibility of the parties involved – state actors, armed groups and the local population. Nevertheless, the international community, consciously or not, affects the environment in which a peace process takes place. As many authors have pointed out, the international community can strengthen the constituencies for war or strengthen the forces in favour of political dialogue. Rudrakumaran argues that the international system needs to play a decisive role in creating a commitment by state actors and armed groups to reach a negotiated settlement.

While one might challenge this expectation, it raises questions about the international community’s obligations vis-à-vis a particular peace process. As an ideal, there may be an argument that international actors should “do no harm,” as understood in the humanitarian field in the sense of not making the engagement of armed groups and state actors in peace processes more difficult. Certainly this norm would run squarely against the reality of often conflicting state interests in the success of a particular peace process. However, the collective arguments of Philipson, Crooke, Rudrakumaran and Akhmadov document the ways in which international proscription and other asymmetries built into the state system make it more difficult for armed groups to engage in peace processes (and for interveners to engage with armed groups). Mitigating the negative effects of anti-terrorist legislation specifically and the systemic bias in favour of states more generally is an urgent question for future governmental and non-governmental work on peace processes.

International instruments such as sanctions and proscription are rather blunt tools and it is time to consider more subtle, nuanced approaches. Rene Sarmiento’s description of the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG) provides a compelling example of a creative instrument that establishes “the equal terms under which the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front enter into peace negotiations.” The JASIG itself did not deliver a peace agreement to the Philippines, but it did manage to overcome a central obstacle to the peace process – the asymmetrical status of a state actor and an armed group. The “deed of commitment” pioneered by Geneva Call for engagement with armed groups on humanitarian issues also stands out as a modality that makes engagement more possible and productive. Both these examples provide inspiration that other such modalities can be found to make engagement with armed groups easier.

Another avenue for facilitating engagement is to create greater cooperation or at least consultation between various actors engaged with armed groups. Several authors note the importance of boundaries between humanitarian and political engagement (Petrasek), and between track one and track two actors (Sandi and Fortune). However, this should not obstruct appropriate communication between track one and track two, and it is essential to prevent conflicts between the tracks from negatively impacting the engagement of armed groups in political dialogue (see Smith). Another area for future work is to engage actors from the different tracks to develop a code of conduct or ‘rules of the road’ to minimize the damage of conflicts and increase the chances of productive cooperation.

Conclusion: engagement for learning
If this volume stands for anything, it is that we can learn from our collective experiences of engagement, and through continued engagement with each other bring new clarity to the nettled questions of whether and how to engage. Haysom’s article on effective practice in engaging armed groups provides a rich example of this, containing advice from managing the decision about whether to engage, to the finer points of structuring a successful peace process. It is a testament to the proposition that there is a science to the endeavour of engaging successfully with armed groups. The various articles in this volume each in their own way provide insights into how to foster armed groups’ effective engagement in peace processes. Whether you agree or disagree with their perspectives, our hope is that they spur on additional thinking and conversation. Even though difficult policy choices remain, there is one form of engagement that we hope is settled: the need for continued engagement by all concerned stakeholders – including armed groups – for the purpose of learning how to make the system work better for all, especially those millions of people affected by violent conflict.