conciliation resources

Choosing to engage:
armed groups and peace processes

Strategic and principled engagement with non-state armed groups[1] is a key policy instrument to end violent conflict and save lives. Armed groups are central players in many of today's violent conflicts and, as such, are essential protagonists in peace processes. Talking to armed groups can improve understanding of the conflict and obstacles to settling it, can help build mutual confidence, and can pave the way towards sustainable conflict resolution.

Yet especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 'war on terror', international policy has been incoherent on how to talk to armed groups or whether to talk to them at all. Making direct contact can be difficult for governments or intergovernmental organizations. However, the range of engagement options and the potential benefits they can bring means that the issue should not be 'whether to engage' but 'how best to engage' armed groups in peace processes.

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"With whom are you going to discuss a conflict if you don't discuss it with the people who are involved in the conflict, who have caused the conflict from the beginning and who are still engaged in trying to kill each other?"

President Jimmy Carter

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The case for engagement

There are three main reasons why it can be valuable to develop constructive engagement with armed groups.

1. *Humanitarian protection* – the imperative to protect civilians means that every effort should be pursued to end armed conflict through peaceful means.

2. *Pragmatism* – in most cases, it is not feasible to end armed conflict without engaging the armed groups.

3. *Sustainability* – attempts at military-only solutions are rarely able to address the issues that gave rise to conflict and may exacerbate tensions.

Responsibility to protect

Local populations bear the brunt of fighting in most of today's armed conflicts and there is an agreed international responsibility to protect vulnerable civilians. Policymakers should presume engagement with armed groups is an effective and essential policy tool in the search for workable formulas to end violence and save lives.

Make peace by talking with your enemies

The military balance of power may shape the talks but experience suggests that exclusively military solutions to conflict are inadequate to make lasting peace. First, contemporary insurgency tactics make it possible for many groups to sustain armed struggle against extraordinary odds. Second, non-state armed groups are often an expression of political, social or economic exclusion or the result of poorly addressed historical grievances, even if the armed groups are not the exclusive representatives of these concerns. Strategies aimed primarily at military defeat do not adequately address these causes. Yet unresolved grievances can fuel antagonism and lead to future violence.

Terms of engagement

Engagement does not equate to appeasement or complicity in violence. Yet there is a concern that engagement may confer legitimacy to a group's tactics. Not all forms of engagement involve negotiation; simply making contact and opening lines of communication can be essential to assess whether other forms of engagement are warranted. As an engagement strategy moves toward more significant and substantive outcomes, the terms of engagement are likely to become more exacting. The threshold for establishing contact is likely to be far lower than the credible commitment needed to reach a ceasefire or a more comprehensive settlement. Engagement is likely, however, to be most effective when all the parties see it as potentially beneficial. Holding out engagement as an incentive or as a concession to an excluded group may well backfire into greater antagonism.

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"An armed group's confidence in political dialogue cannot be built overnight. It demands a significant investment of time and energy and constant follow-up."

Alastair Crooke, founder of Conflicts Forum

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Decision-making in armed groups

Effective strategies to address conflict require a sophisticated understanding of the groups in conflict. It is therefore crucial to understand armed groups and appreciate their political and economic agendas; leadership dynamics and constituency support; internal debates and decision-making processes; connections with allies, criminal networks, and other groups; as well as how their past experiences of the conflict and peace initiatives inform their current strategy and aspirations.

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1. Armed groups are considered as those that: 1) challenge the state monopoly on coercive force; 2) operate outside effective state control; and/or 3) are capable of preventing, blocking or endangering humanitarian action or peace initiatives.

Sustained engagement is key to developing an appreciation of a group's outlook. The nature, depth and quality of interaction with a group, both direct and indirect, all affect the quality of analysis. Equally, engagement can assist an armed group in developing a better understanding of its opponents and can encourage change by introducing alternative and nonviolent options to reach a settlement.

Strategic decision-making: talk or fight?

Like other belligerents, armed groups need to make strategic choices about whether to pursue political or military strategies to advance their goals. Many keep options open by simultaneously preparing for both. Strategic choices are informed by analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses, and of potential gains that may come from a particular approach at a given time. Their assessment of an adversary's intentions is also important: whether they are genuinely interested in negotiating or if they can actually deliver on commitments. Military weakness does not automatically equate with a decision to negotiate. Armed groups often bide their time or even adopt a more radical stance if they believe it may help them enter negotiations from a stronger position.

Engaging militants

Militants may feel threatened both by their adversaries – who want to undermine them – and by their allies, who may not share their level of commitment to a set of goals and who might be more willing to compromise on core issues. For a militant group to shift direction radically, it must be convinced of real opportunities for change. Those wanting to encourage negotiations typically have to signal their intent. The signs must be sufficient to trigger internal debate even if they are subtle, as happened in the Irish Republican movement after the British government declared that it had no 'selfish strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland and was prepared to accept a united Ireland by consent.

Sidelining 'hardliners'

The decision to negotiate can be divisive, as factions within groups assess options differently. Isolation can strengthen the position of those who see force as the only effective strategy. Their arguments tend to gain traction in the absence of credible alternatives. As experience in Chechnya and the Middle East indicates, there can be negative consequences from strategies of engaging with certain groups while systematically excluding others. Even in cases where negotiations are underway, maintaining momentum is crucial. Commitment to negotiations is sustained when parties believe more can be gained

through talks than from continued armed struggle. If there are few indications of progress, the position of the hardliners may be strengthened.

"That the international community and Russia ignore the moderate political leadership and its persistent efforts to find a political resolution contributes to the sense of futility on the ground and therefore to an enlargement of the ranks of those who see terrorism as the only way of stopping the war."

Ilyas Akhmadov, Foreign Minister of Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1999

Elements of anti-terrorist legislation, proscription polices in particular, risk impeding peace initiatives. In some contexts, intermediary engagement with proscribed groups is unlawful. In other cases, representatives of armed groups have been prevented from participating in talks. Such measures reinforce armed groups' perceptions that they only have military options. It is essential to develop more nuanced policy instruments, which condemn and discourage violence but keep the door open for peace talks.

Intermediary roles

Intermediaries can play a variety of important roles. They can help shape the way a group sees itself and the conflict, influence internal group dynamics, and make new strategies feasible. Inept or duplicitous engagement may make a conflict more intractable. To develop the most effective engagement strategy it is important to assess who is best placed to engage with which group or faction, on what terms and about which issues.

Political engagement with an armed group can include establishing communication and keeping communication open, gathering information, seeking to advise or influence, exploring negotiation options, or actual mediation. There is also a range of issues on which to engage including humanitarian matters, exploring processes or options addressing political and military concerns. A trusted intermediary can work exclusively with a group to help it consider engagement opportunities or to understand its adversaries and external actors. Intermediaries can also assist with the development of political and negotiation strategies.

Multiple types of intermediaries

Representatives of intergovernmental organizations and states often have clear mandates to serve as intermediaries in peace processes. But civil society actors can also be well placed to engage in unofficial diplomacy with non-state armed groups, potentially enjoying greater access to information and freedom of movement. Low-key strategies led by local community groups or other non-state actors, while involving their own risks, may keep dialogue alive and may address concerns about inappropriately conferring legitimacy. In Sierra Leone local civil society groups were significant in bringing the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to the negotiating table.

Even when movement seems impossible, a different intermediary using a different approach or engaging with a different interlocutor might find previously undiscovered openings. While there are important concerns about maintaining confidentiality, efforts are needed to off-set the risk created by numerous uncoordinated and contradictory engagement initiatives.

Humanitarian engagement

Humanitarian engagement can offer a less divisive entry point to talk to armed groups than potentially thornier security and political issues. Negotiations to channel aid supplies in Southern Sudan paved the way for subsequent and deeper dialogue. Armed groups can also derive political capital from being seen to uphold humanitarian norms or alleviate suffering. But caution is needed to ensure humanitarian engagement is not manipulated to postpone serious efforts to resolve the conflict. Inappropriate politicization of humanitarian issues risks undermining respect for humanitarian principles.

International conflict policy

While the outcomes of a peace process are the responsibility of the parties involved, external actors affect the context. Their policies and actions explicitly or inadvertently benefit some groups while disadvantaging others in ways that risk ultimately making it more difficult to resolve conflicts.

The state-based international system creates challenges for both states and intermediaries engaging with non-state armed groups and for armed groups wanting to engage in dialogue with states. Challenges range from certain interpretations of the principle of sovereignty to practical difficulties of communications and freedom of movement. Policymakers should aim to ensure that measures to promote security do not exacerbate systemic barriers to resolving internal armed conflict. Well-designed and resourced external political engagement can provide essential support to enable those in conflict to resolve disputes, make peace and develop a more inclusive and sustainable political settlement.

Choosing to talk: strategic factors in armed groups' decision-making

Factors conducive to negotiations	
Conducive context	Are changes in the wider conflict context conducive to a shift in strategy away from violence? Does the main adversary appear to be changing its strategy? For example, a new government committed to peace talks, or political reforms that suggest willingness to address grievances.
Realistic assessment of options	Does the group have a realistic understanding of the value of negotiating or not negotiating? Do its members think it is in their interest to talk? Does it feel sufficiently strong to enter into successful talks?
Workable political solutions	Do decision-makers in the group feel confident there are political solutions to the conflict? Do they have ideas for specific formulas to address contested issues?
Limits of military strategies	Is there recognition that a military strategy alone will not deliver all goals? Is the group concerned about the negative effects of the conflict on the civilian population or its support base? Are allies pressuring for a changed strategy or threatening to withdraw strategic support?
Pro-negotiation leadership	Do group leaders believe that they will ultimately need to negotiate with their adversaries? Are there faction leaders within the group who support a primarily political strategy to address the conflict? Are key people working on developing such a strategy?
Trust and confidence building	Does the group feel it is legitimate to talk to the other side(s)? Are there trusted communication channels to enable engagement? Is it willing to undertake confidence-building measures? Does it have sufficient trust in adversaries' sincerity and ability to deliver on commitments?
Unity	Do leaders feel confident in their status? Can they control internal divisions? Can they communicate a changed strategy effectively to their supporters and to other influential groups?
Capacities and skills	Does the group have the resources to negotiate: expertise, experience and finances? Does it have access to information, advice and training to support an effective political negotiation strategy? Do leaders have a nuanced understanding of their own group's needs, interests, hopes and fears, as well as those of the other side(s)?
Factors conducive to continued militancy	
Lack of alternatives	Have the group's offers to talk been rebuffed? Have adversaries indicated unwillingness to negotiate? Does the group have a vision of what it can achieve through violence that is better than any conceivable negotiated solution?
Militant mindset	Does the group believe that violent struggle is the only viable response to their situation? Does it believe its vision of justice is worth any sacrifice? Does it think that negotiation will only maintain the status quo?
No compromise	Does the group rule through discipline in which there can be no compromise; no retreat; no questioning goals, strategy or leadership? Do previous sacrifices make compromise seem impossible? Does it fear betrayal or pressure to compromise on core goals once inside the process?
Fear of splits	Is a change in strategy likely to be internally divisive? Would the leadership be severely challenged if it is seen to compromise or even to engage with 'the enemy'?
External support	Is external support strong: diplomatic, strategic, material or moral? Does this facilitate continued armed struggle and underpin perceived legitimacy?

Armed group's political engagement: indicators of opportunities and constraints

Negative indicators ←——————————————→ **Positive indicators**

Political power

• Disregard for rule of law and elections	• Experience of political power
• Political assassinations	• Respect for rule of law; service provision
• Intolerance of differences or change	• Political institutions, agenda, candidates

Territorial control

• Engage in ethnic cleansing or destruction	• Sets up governing systems within held territory
• Is viewed by local population as primarily a predatory force	• Allows freedom of movement

Social and economic support

• Isolated from wider society	• Enjoy public support
• Derived substantial profit from war economy	• Perceive economic benefits from settlement for region or constituency

Use of military force

• Indiscriminate; high civilian casualties	• Controlled capacity for force
• Weak command and control	• Observe humanitarian law and protect civilians
• Undisciplined troops	• Disciplined troops
• Force used to sustain illegal activities	

Key policy conclusions

Engagement as the norm. Dialogue with armed groups is key to peace processes that can end violent conflict, protect populations and address underlying conflict issues.

From whether to engage to 'who should engage and how?' Engagement can take many forms, from unofficial contact to substantive negotiations, involving various third parties. Practitioners and policymakers should focus on identifying appropriate tactics and strategies tailored to the situation.

Engagement tends to strengthen 'moderates'. Engagement tends to strengthen the pro-dialogue elements within armed groups, while lack of engagement tends to strengthen hardliners by removing viable alternatives to violence.

Proscription policies constrain potential for peace initiatives. Proscription of armed groups (for example, terrorist listing) is a blunt instrument and can be counterproductive. There is an urgent need to review such laws and to develop more sophisticated mechanisms to allow appropriate engagement and encourage peacemaking.

Coherence and complementarity. Improved interaction and cooperation between governmental and unofficial intermediaries would benefit all parties pursuing effective engagement strategies.