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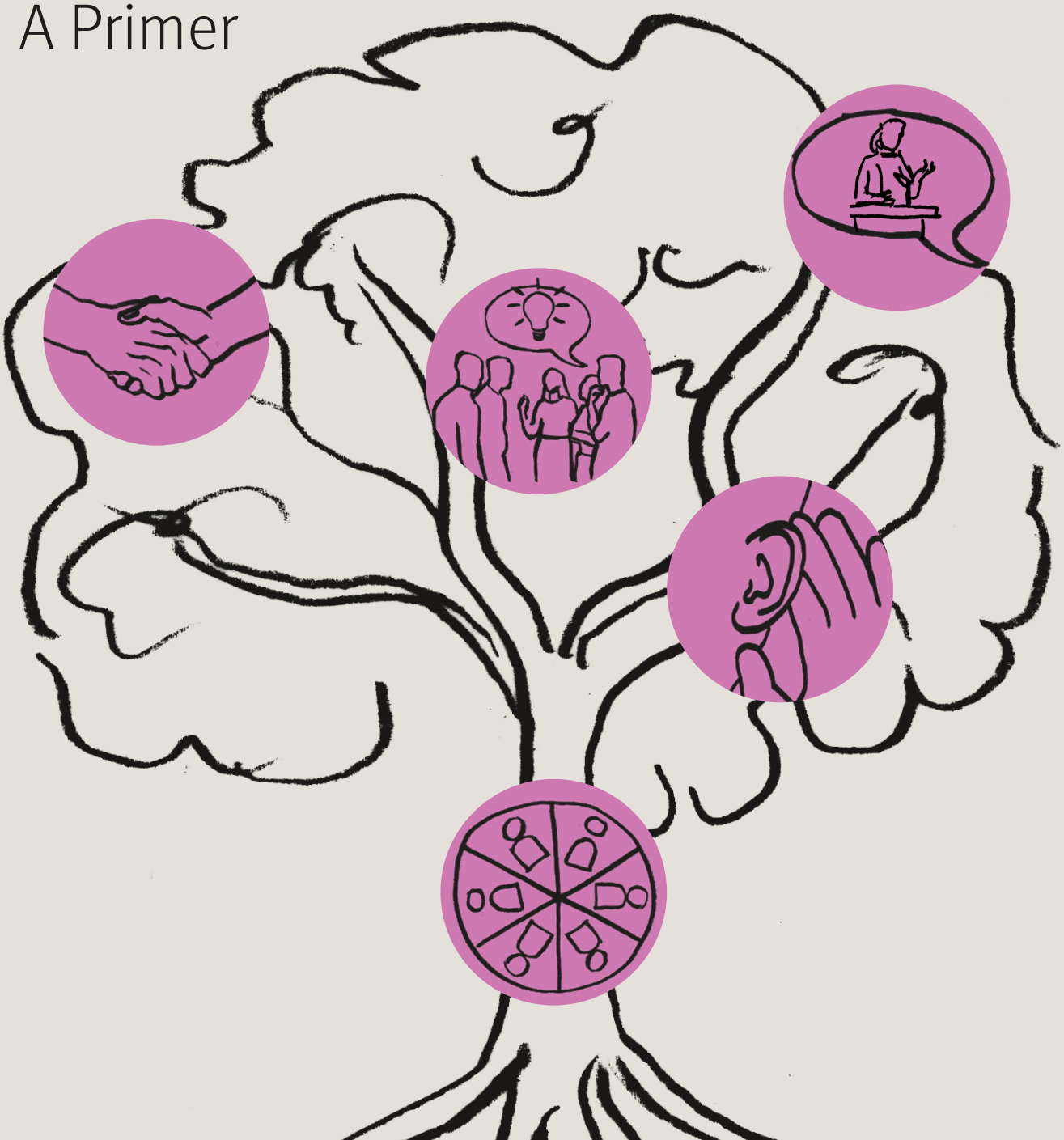
MEDIATING THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

Options for peace process support

A Primer



About this Primer

The purpose of this primer is to provide guidance to mediators and other peace support actors, including (when relevant) DDR practitioners, on enabling a successful political transformation of armed groups as part of peace processes. It addresses key questions which need to be considered in peace mediation and the resulting negotiated agreements, such as: Who can best support political transformation during peace processes? When to consider such involvement? How to ensure that the content and sequencing of peace accords are conducive to effective political transformation? It raises important questions on the applicability of best practices from recent and older processes to the present-day challenges faced by the mediation community. It concludes with a few practical takeaways for mediation support actors and some useful resources. The contents of this primer draw on various conversations and events organised in cooperation with Folke Bernadotte Academy, swisspeace and the Politics After War Network.

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Mediating the political transformation of non-state armed groups: Options for peace process support

The political transformation of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) is a conducive factor for sustainable peace in conflicts rooted in political grievances and governance claims. Therefore, it is also an integral feature of many peace processes. More than one-third of all NSAGs which signed peace agreements between 1975 and 2018 have subsequently participated in formal party politics.[1] During peace negotiations, the political integration of belligerent forces into the structure of the (reformed) state often constitutes a core component of the bargain between the parties, alongside provisions on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of combatants. The content of the resulting agreements, as well as the timing and sequencing of security and political reforms, including both DDR and the 'demilitarisation of politics', influence the strategies and trajectories taken by former combatants after war and the wider implications for the post-war political order.

As stated in the UN IDDRS on the Politics of DDR, "if armed groups have political aspirations, the chances of the successful implementation of a [peace agreement] can be improved if DDR processes are sensitively designed to support the transformation of these groups into political entities."[2] Therefore, it is important for DDR and peace mediation practitioners to work hand in hand during peace processes, by seeking complementary ways to address the political drivers of violence, and to incentivise armed groups to opt for non-violent strategies, including through their political transformation. At the same time, they need to be mindful of the possible risks and caveats, and the broader implications for peace and stability after armed conflict.

1 Söderberg Kovacs, Mimmi and Martínez Lorenzo, Luís (2022). Peace Agreements and the Political Integration of Armed Groups. Folke Bernadotte Academy: https://fba.se/globalassets/publikationer/peace-agreements-and-the-political-integration-of-armed-groups.pdf

2 See Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) Module 2.20: www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR_19-Nov-2019.pdf

Peace mediation

Peace mediation is a structured process aimed at ending armed conflict and fostering sustainable peace through security and political negotiation. Peace processes typically unfold in a series of stages, beginning with preliminary discussions – often referred to as 'talks about talks' – to establish an agenda and framework for negotiation. These efforts culminate in formal talks and the signing of partial or comprehensive peace agreements between a national government – or sometimes a regional or local administration – and one or more non-state armed groups.

In many cases, peace negotiations are facilitated by third-party mediators, whose involvement is contingent on the consent of the conflicting parties. Various approaches to mediation may be adopted. *Power mediation* involves leverage or pressure to influence outcomes, while *facilitation* focuses on structuring dialogue without imposing solutions. *Shuttle diplomacy* enables indirect negotiation through a mediator's bilateral engagement with each party, and *mediation support* actors provide technical assistance to strengthen peace efforts.

Strategies for mediating political reintegration

WHO?

This primer is relevant to a broad range of actors who are involved in peace processes. It specifically addresses (i) mediation actors who are entrusted by the parties to facilitate the resolution of the armed conflict through a negotiated peace agreement, and (ii) DDR actors who may wish to align strategic planning for DDR with the mediation process.

Mediators vary widely in their nature and mandate, ranging from intergovernmental organisations such as United Nations Secretariat (e.g. DPPA Mediation Support Unit) and special envoys (e.g. the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen) or regional organisations (e.g. the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in Sudan), to individual states (e.g. mediation by Norway in Sri Lanka and Algeria in Mali), distinguished individuals (e.g. former South African President Nelson Mandela in Burundi), and non-governmental actors (e.g. local or international NGOs such as Nepal Transition to Peace in Nepal or the Crisis Management Initiative in Aceh, Indonesia). So-called 'emerging mediation players' have come to the fore in recent years, especially from Gulf states or the BRICS group.

A broader constellation of actors is involved in the provision of mediation support resources, including diplomats, INGO practitioners and thematic experts called in by negotiation teams to advise them on topics such as ceasefire arrangements, DDR, transitional justice, elections, questions of inclusion, or process design. Furthermore, at the societal level, a variety of individuals such as traditional and faith-based leaders often have trusted access and entry-points to leaders or proxies of armed groups through kinship ties or community proximity, and are hence entrusted with the role of 'insider mediator'. In comparison to UN or western governmental envoys, other mediation support actors might face fewer restrictions on engaging politically with armed groups that others consider 'radical' or 'terrorist', which brings up opportunities for complementary approaches.

WHEN?

- **During early negotiations**
  Early engagement with NSAGs by facilitating spaces for their members to envision a non-armed political future can act as a powerful incentive to enter into a formal peace process, and is critical for a successful political transformation.

- **During a formal peace process**
  Peace processes are decisive moments for the configuration and distribution of political power in a society, and especially for the establishment of inclusive political systems, providing NSAGs with a concrete civilian alternative and increasing the incentives to put weapons beyond use. The peace accords resulting from this bargaining process form the legal basis of the post-war order.

- **During peace implementation**
  Following the signature or partial or comprehensive agreements, and their validation through legislative measures or public referendums, mediation actors play a crucial role in accompanying signatory parties throughout the design and implementation of security and political reforms. Peace agreements need to define and prescribe detailed mechanisms for sustained dialogue and negotiation in the post-agreement stage, to ensure that the signatory parties remain meaningfully engaged to address unresolved issues and unforeseen challenges while building and consolidating peace. These include formal oversight mechanisms such as joint verification commissions or independent third-party bodies.

HOW?

- **Peace accord provisions: Incentives for political transformation**
  Peace accords offer strong incentives, opportunities, conditions and red lines for political participation in electoral processes, executive and legislative powers, or national and local state administration. The terms of the peace settlement – including the political rights and benefits granted or guaranteed to NSAGs – create path dependencies that shape the signatory parties' long-term post-war trajectories.
  One of the most common forms of formal political incentives is the inclusion of dedicated provisions specifically aimed at allowing and supporting formerly illegal or banned armed groups to establish themselves as political contenders and participate in legal politics. The phrasing may of course vary depending on context-specific sensitivities and the parties' preferences.

Examples: Party registration or legalisation

In Sudan, the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement stipulates that armed movements are eligible to register as political parties provided that they are signatories to the peace agreement (Chapter 1, Article 6).

In Ethiopia, the 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement states that the national government will facilitate the removal of the TPLF's designation as a terrorist organisation in the legislative chamber (Article 7.2.c).

Given the uncertainties of electoral competition in the immediate post-war period, interim power-sharing arrangements can also serve as a guarantee of political influence and prevent or reduce the risk of recidivism during the transition. Such arrangements may take the form of reserved seats in government or the legislature, or other administrative positions. Alternately, peace accords may include more permanent arrangements for power-sharing in ethnically diverse societies, which influence the political leverage of former NSAGs in legislative or executive branches of government.

Other provisions include political or constitutional reforms to strengthen the rights of the political opposition or to devolve power from the centre to the periphery. When the armed group's political claims and social legitimacy are rooted in the sub-national level, entering the national level political space does not necessarily address these claims and underlying grievances. Power devolution mechanisms may be better suited for such scenarios.

Examples: Interim or permanent power-sharing

In the Central African Republic (CAR), the 2019 Peace Agreement between the government and fourteen 'politico-military armed groups' calls for an 'inclusive government' (Article 21). The President subsequently formed a government that included thirteen ministerial posts for the armed group leaders in addition to several advisory and regional level positions.

In Northern Ireland, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement established a cross-community power-sharing system, which includes joint government leadership, and a multi-party executive made up of unionist and nationalist parties, including those representing former paramilitary groups (Stand 1. 4 and 5).

Examples: Electoral and institutional reform

In Mozambique, the 2019 Maputo Accord includes measures for decentralisation that enhance the inclusivity of the political system by providing more power to the RENAMO opposition at local and regional levels (Preamble).

In Mali, the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord includes various provisions "enabling the populations of the North [where rebel movements stem from] to manage their own affairs in a spirit of participative citizenship, based on the principle of free administration and enabling wider representation of these populations within national institutions" (Chapter 3, Article 6).

Finally, provisions for resource mobilisation to support the successful implementation of the transitional process may involve engaging the international community to secure financial and technical assistance, including the establishment of trust funds and capacity-building programmes. Such measures help to ensure the sustainability of peace by facilitating political transformation and improving the governance capacity of political newcomers, hence contributing to long-term stability.

Example: Financial support for political transformation

In Sierra Leone, the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement between the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) stipulates that "The Parties shall approach the International Community with a view to mobilizing resources for the purpose of enabling the RUF/SL to function as a political party. These resources may include … (i) Setting up a trust fund; (ii) Training for RUF/SL membership in party organization and functions…" (Article III).

- **A balancing act**
  The political transformation of NSAGs, allowing them to trade military power for political leverage, can be a risky business. Incumbent governments are unlikely to willingly share power with their armed challengers, without strong guarantees of security and stability. Inversely, armed combatants will not easily undergo DDR without the promise of attractive peace dividends. The timing and sequencing of political and security arrangements, with regard to both their negotiation and their implementation, is crucial to incentivise successful political transformation during and after peace processes. This may include:

  Right-timing elections: Holding elections without adequate preparation and internal restructuring can leave rebels-turned-politicians ill-equipped for governance. Likewise, failing to implement key provisions of a peace agreement before elections can jeopardise the stability of the process. Failures of peace accord signatories to deliver promised peace dividends to their constituencies in a timely manner can turn the electorate, including their own support base, against the peace process. This in turn may contribute to splintering and recidivism. In Mindanao/Philippines, the first direct provincial elections were postponed several times following the 2014 peace accord to minimise the risk of conflict relapse and enhance the prospects of lasting peace.

Balancing disarmament and security guarantees: Armed actors undergoing political transformation amid conflict must navigate a highly polarised and volatile environment. Political participation poses security risks, particularly when other armed groups remain active. In multi-actor conflicts and fragmented peace processes, the disarmament of signatory groups may be seen as an existential threat, hindering the shift to peaceful politics. Security guarantees are crucial to protect ex-combatants entering political life. The timing of DDR is critical to this transition, as poorly sequenced processes can lead to instability even after a peace agreement.

Balancing incentives and accountability through transitional justice: The balance between political pragmatism for peace and principles of justice is a recurring challenge, especially in the political integration of armed groups. Government concessions, such as releasing political prisoners and granting amnesties, are crucial for building confidence during peace talks and encouraging armed groups to pursue nonviolent alternatives. However, they may also lead to public backlash, potentially eroding trust in institutions. One approach to addressing this dilemma during peace processes is an explicit emphasis on elevating the voices of conflict victims. In Colombia, victims' delegations were formally invited to the Havana negotiations to shape the content of the agreement, victim-perpetrator relationships, and the legitimacy of the peace deal among the public at large, aiming to contribute to a more durable post-accord peace.

Challenges ahead: Contemporary conflict and peacemaking trends

Today's peace mediators navigate a shifting conflict landscape that complicates prospects for political transformation in negotiated settlements. The following caveats should be further explored and given due consideration:

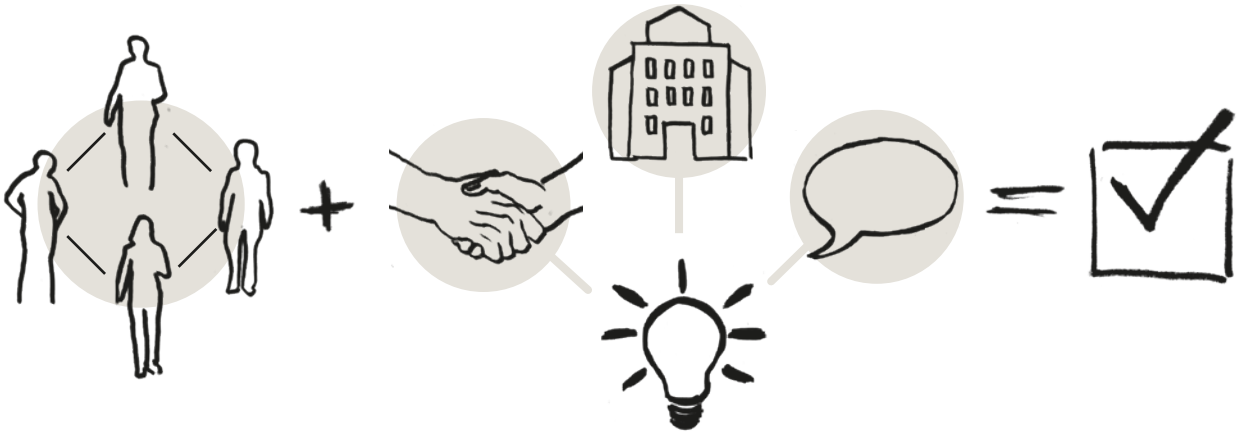
The **rise of armed actors with maximalist Islamist agendas**, often operating beyond the confines of national boundaries, makes political integration difficult, as their grievances and demands challenge traditional conflict resolution frameworks. However, the political transformation and ideological pragmatism of Syria's new powerholders under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) shows that even NSAGs considered 'beyond the pale' for peacebuilding engagement by many outside actors may offer a new perspective for peace mediation.

At the same time, the **declining credibility of multi-party democracy** has made formal politics a less attractive post-war pathway for NSAGs, particularly in contexts where political space is restricted or saturated. Some groups, especially those with strong local ties, may instead prefer to transform into social movements or to transition from 'rebel governance' to alternative governance structures. These may be considered as attractive options for the various armed groups which are still active in Colombia and Myanmar, for example.

Additionally, **comprehensive peace accords, once common, have become rarer**, with contemporary peacemaking favouring more transactional, localised, partial, informal, and often asymmetric agreements. While these agreements may lack detailed political transformation provisions, they can still create openings for participation, as seen in conflicts like those in Syria, Libya, Mali, and Myanmar.

Acknowledging both past practices and emerging challenges, the following checklist provides key reference points that remain relevant for fostering political transformation in peace processes at the national, regional or local levels.

Checklist for mediation support actors



Careful analysis: Using tools such as actor/network mapping or political economy analysis, explore NSAGs' self-proclaimed goals, underlying grievances, organisational model, business model, and support system. A comprehensive picture of the landscape of armed actors and the broader opportunity structures shaping their political environment (e.g. state actors' legitimacy and political will for change, absorption capacity of the political system, potential 'spoilers') will be helpful when assessing realistic options for political transformation.

Preparation is key: Prepare armed movements for future political engagement by supporting peer-learning spaces before and during negotiations to explore future scenarios and envision effective pathways to politics. Encourage strategic dialogue between leadership, negotiation teams, commanders, combatants, and constituencies to foster inclusive decision-making and sustainability. Similar support could be offered to incumbent government actors to elicit their interest in the political transformation of NSAGs while anticipating related challenges and necessary safeguards against abuses of power by political newcomers.

Mediation support systems: Joint forces with other mediation support actors, based on their added value, access, trust and leverage visa a vis the various conflict parties. Identify facilitators, bridge-builders and advisers – including DDR experts – who can best complement mediation teams in engaging with NSAGs to promote the demilitarisation of politics.

Expanding the political toolbox: Suggest tailor-made provisions in peace agreements that recognise both parties' rights and obligations in political transformation. Innovate by exploring models for political transformation beyond national electoral democracy. If a group's claims and social legitimacy are rooted regionally or locally, processes geared towards their political inclusion at the national level will create asymmetry and not provide a sustainable solution. If a group rejects the country's political system, becoming a political party may not be an expedient pathway for them.

Inclusive mindset: Ensure a gender, intersectional and intergenerational lens by meaningfully involving women combatants and youth leaders in peace negotiations, promoting their participation in post-war transitions, and recognising their needs, interests, and capacities in peace agreements, DDR, and political reform processes.

Open-ended dialogue: Establish horizontal (inter-party) and vertical (multi-track) mechanisms for continued dialogue, negotiation and trust-building between the parties to resolve unforeseen problems and deadlocks during implementation.

Useful resources

Repositories of peace agreement provisions:

PA-X Peace Agreements Database, University of Edinburgh
www.peaceagreements.org

Language of Peace, University of Cambridge
https://www.languageofpeace.org/#/

Peace Accords Matrix, University of Notre Dame
https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/

Peacemaker, United Nations
http://peacemaker.un.org/

Studies on peace processes and political transformation:

Peace Agreements and the Political Integration of Armed Groups
(Folke Bernadotte Academy)

Mediating the political transformation of armed groups
(Workshop report – Berghof Foundation and UNDPO)

This publication is part of a series of Primers offering brief insights and practical guidance on the political transformation of non-state armed groups as a core element of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), and as a contribution to sustainable peace. These Primers are produced in the context of a project that aims to operationalise Module 2.20 of the United Nations Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS): "The Politics of DDR" (https://www.unddr.org/). It is based on the collaboration between the United Nations Department of Peace Operations DDR Section (UNDPO DDR) and the Berghof Foundation. Through first-hand experience and on-site support, the project generates and disseminates concrete guidance on planning, designing and implementing politically sensitive DDR processes. It further develops training resources for DDR practitioners and other stakeholders involved in peace processes and post-war peacebuilding, with a focus on practical support for political transformation.

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