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# FORUM

## BACKGROUND PAPER

UN Envoys as conductors,  
not soloists

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## **Oslo Forum**

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

Co-hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and HD, the Oslo Forum, is a discreet and informal annual retreat which convenes conflict mediators, peacemakers, high-level decision-makers and key peace process actors.

This Background Paper was prepared for the Oslo Forum 2019 and reflects events until end-April 2019. It was intended to guide and inform discussions at the Forum, and does not represent the positions of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

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# UN Envoys as conductors, not soloists

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Jeffrey Feltman talks with Thomas Greminger (OSCE), Christina Horváth-Stenner (OSCE) and David Gorman (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue) at the Oslo Forum 2018. © Ilja C. Hendel

In *The lost art of peacemaking*, his background paper for the 2018 Oslo Forum, the Executive Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, David Harland, sketched out in narrative form a bell curve of UN-brokered peace agreements: few during the Cold War, then a high number of successes in the twenty-plus US-dominated “unipolar” years after 1990, and, finally, a dearth of UN-brokered peace agreements today. Harland points to several constraints that inhibited the UN’s mediation capacity, such as the return of geopolitics, the atomisation of conflict, and the spread of conflicts across borders. One could also add technological changes (with secrecy harder to maintain in our Twitter age), greater global polarisation diminishing the leverage of unified support, the role of non-state actors ranging from transnational terrorists

to businesses, and the demonstrable need for more inclusive processes that go beyond the previous approach of meeting (inevitably male) political or military leaders behind closed doors. After analysing such factors, Harland concludes: “non-UN actors have found ways to address some of these issues, but have not been able to entirely fill the gap left by the UN. Any further progress in the field would appear to require a better combination of the efforts of the UN and non-UN actors.”<sup>1</sup>

That last line deserves more reflection, and it coincides with something I felt after having the privilege of serving nearly six years as UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. In trying to support the UN Special Envoys and Special Representatives of the Secretary-General heading political missions

in some of the most challenging political and security environments in the world, as well as undertaking my own political engagements, I saw in practice, vividly, the constraints on the UN mentioned by Harland. At the same time, the growing number and expanding capacities of non-UN mediation actors changed the landscape in which the UN envoys operate. The African Union (AU), Africa's sub-regional organisations, the European Union (EU), the European Institute of Peace (EIP), the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), the Dialogue Advisory Group (DAG), the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Community of Sant'Egidio – that list just scratches the surface of a bewildering array of groups playing important mediation and facilitation roles today. Moreover, many of these groups offer valuable technical assistance and capacity-building training in mediation skills to local actors, further blurring the lines of who has the lead in a political process. Even if the UN mediator retains a lead role which has been given by the Security Council, and even if the UN's mandate is under Chapter VII authority, it is unrealistic to assume that other local, regional or international actors, with interests in, and increasingly sophisticated understanding of, mediation, will simply stay on the sidelines and cheer on the UN envoy.

My conclusion is that, in general, UN mediators and facilitators today need to view themselves less as the star soloists of yore – Lakhdar Brahimi at Taif in 1989 ending Lebanon's civil war is a classic example – and more as conductors of a coherent, co-ordinated orchestra of mediation actors who can reach more of the people who can influence the direction of a conflict and who are affected by the conflict. And if the UN does not happen to have the best profile, leverage or mandate, or the full consent of the parties to be the lead mediator, the conductor's baton should be held by another, with the UN as a supportive player (as in the recent agreement regarding the Central African Republic).

Without question, the UN has key assets, including the legitimacy of universal membership, the power of Security Council mandates, the profile and good

offices of the Secretary-General, relatively predictable funding streams, and organisational capacities and scale that dwarf other actors. But those assets do not mean that UN mediators have monopolies on wisdom, leverage or contacts. The 2012 *United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation* notes that diversity of actors can be an asset, as long as there is "clear division of labour based on comparative advantages among mediation actors operating at the different levels." What is not essential, in other words, is for the UN to always lead or insist on going it alone. What is essential is that a lead mediator works to ensure coherence and complementarity across peacemaking efforts.

Libya provides a good example. The UN Support Mission for Libya – UNSMIL – has a broad Security Council mandate that includes leading international efforts to facilitate a Libyan political process. Yet, the UN, HD, DAG, CMI, EIP, Sant'Egidio and surely others also engage politically on the ground in Libya, each focused on some specific aspect of the overall problem of instability in Libya. EIP, for example, has promoted stabilisation efforts in the Kufra district (bordering Egypt, Sudan and Chad) as well as around oil facilities, HD conducted similar work in Sabha, and DAG has established connections with competing militia leaders in Western Libya and promoted local ceasefires.

In addition, the African Union is protective of its perceived role in Libya, with AU Peace and Security Commissioner Smaïl Chergui joining UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on a joint trip to Libya in March this year. Similarly, UN Secretary-General Guterres and Chairperson of the AU Commission Moussa Faki regularly compare notes on Libya. While one could argue that there's plenty of work to go around to keep everyone busy, the multiplicity of actors could easily lead to chaos, confusion and the much-dreaded 'forum shopping'.

In my view, the Special Representative of the Secretary General to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, has dealt effectively with this crowded mediation facilitation landscape by pursuing what I – but probably not the

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SRSR himself – would call an ‘orchestra conductor’ approach. He, of course, has no mandate to dictate to other organisations what they should do, and the other organisations retain their independence, reporting to their own governing authorities and not to the SRSR or the Security Council. But, by making sure that UNSMIL maintains contact with DAG, for example, Salamé’s team has broader insights into the various militias in the Tripoli area and thus what is needed to maintain and consolidate ceasefires in the capital. DAG is able to reinforce UNSMIL’s security efforts and augment UNSMIL’s reach.

Waving his conductor baton more directly, Salamé specifically asked HD to conduct a series of public consultations in 43 locations across Libya from April to July last year in which thousands of Libyans were able to share their views about Libya’s future. Logistically, and from a security angle, this type of broad consultations would have been nearly impossible for the UN to do directly. Moreover, as Salamé surely realised from his own travels across Libya, had the UN itself been leading these town hall-type consultations, the Libyans would have naturally focused not on their vision for their country but rather their critiques and demands of the UN. By incorporating the results of this unprecedented consultative process into his thinking, Salamé can better align UN engagement with Libyans’ own aspirations, enhancing the chance of popular support for an eventual political settlement. Whether it is UNSMIL’s co-ordination with DAG, its request to HD to organise public consultations across Libya, or its co-ordination with other non-UN actors, Salamé has essentially broadened UNSMIL’s reach and understanding of Libya.<sup>2</sup>

Salamé’s choice to work closely with non-UN actors in Libya also illustrates the need for the UN to sometimes collaborate with peacemaking actors who enjoy more flexibility on the ground. While the UN’s ‘brand’ is impartial, and UN envoys retain the theoretical right to talk to anyone as needed in a political process, Security Council mandates, fear of Security Council scrutiny, or the political interests of powerful member states mean that, sometimes, a lower-profile non-UN actor can get better or easier access to some actors. The issue of how to engage both Turkey and Syrian Kurds constructively has bedevilled multiple UN Syria envoys, and the UN’s Yemen envoys have struggled to overcome Houthi suspicions about a mandate based on an

April 2015 Security Council resolution that essentially calls first for a Houthi surrender and only then for political talks. In both cases, non-UN mediation actors may be willing and able, with UN guidance, to help the UN envoys implement their mandates successfully. Certainly, by working closely with non-UN mediation actors who reach different segments of the local population, UN envoys can enhance the inclusivity that should characterise modern peace processes. In Yemen, for example, CMI’s Women’s Forum for Dialogue and Peace helps lessen the gender imbalance of most political engagements.

Without question, there are times when old-style UN mediation and facilitation behind closed doors still work, as demonstrated by the Hodeidah agreement brokered in Stockholm in December by UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths. But the Hodeidah agreement, while important, is more tactical than the strategic agreement of Taif or the UN-facilitated agreements that ended civil wars in Central America, Africa and Asia in previous decades. Given the rise in numbers and capacities of non-UN mediation actors, UN envoys would be wise to see these actors as force-multipliers and influence-extenders as they try to implement increasingly complex mandates and broker successful peace agreements. My guess is that the non-UN actors, while careful to maintain their own independence, will by and large welcome closer engagement, consultation and co-ordination with UN efforts. I hope this is a topic that can be explored in more depth at this year’s Oslo Forum.



**Jeffrey Feltman** was the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs between 2012 and 2018. Currently, he is the John C. Whitehead Visiting Fellow in International Diplomacy – Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution and a Senior Fellow at the United Nations Foundation.

## Endnotes

- 1 David Harland, “The lost art of peacemaking”, Oslo Forum Background Paper, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, June 2018.
- 2 As I write this in early April 2019, Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army is threatening Tripoli, in belligerence which is timed, I believe, to forestall the National Conference facilitated by the UN that grew out of the HD-organised consultations. Haftar’s paranoia about the National Conference inadvertently reveals the Conference’s potential to transcend Libya’s divisions – but without Haftar anointed as leader through peaceful, political means.

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