Reforming UN mediation through inclusion of traditional peacemakers

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The New York Review of Books recently published an article suggesting that the spread of the Islamic State (IS), also known as ISIS, is as irreversible as the expansion of the Roman Empire[1]. At the same time the refugee crisis seems to have taken European decision-makers by surprise. The desperation of millions of people in the European neighbourhood continues to be largely unaddressed.

The interlinkage of migration, conflicts and extremism may create a vicious cycle that spins off to destabilise Europe along with the rest of the world. It is likely that decision-makers in the European Union and the United States have not yet fully realised the extent of the challenges that the European region is now facing and the magnitude of responses required.

Relatively recent events highlight the urgency. Perhaps the greatest opportunity for the Mediterranean and Middle East regions was the Arab Spring. Few, however, were able to predict the disasters that would ensue. Certainly, the inability of decision-makers to react to the situation and provide appropriate economic and political frameworks for dialogue, inclusion and peaceful reform exacerbated the disastrous situation.

During this time, the United Nations has been struggling to find solutions to many of the current conflicts on its agenda. Besides the Security Council's inability to reach agreements, the entire UN approach to mediation and national dialogue has been failing.

Previously applied tools are not working

Peace mediation and national dialogue efforts have entered a new and complex era. The situation is particularly challenging in fragile states, where aid and development tools are not enabling rapid enough progress in legitimate governance for newly developed and weak institutions. The challenge from radical groups is particularly strong in fragile states, which reflects the broader challenges in peace mediation and national dialogue. In this era, the mediation and dialogue tools that were created for traditional inter- or intra-state conflicts have become ineffective.

Yemen offers an interesting example. Despite the usual coordination challenges, the National Dialogue process in Yemen in 2013[2] is considered by many experts a textbook model according to previous standards of mediation and dialogue. It was supported by some of the best peace mediation and national

dialogue experts working with the UN. There was wide representation from Yemeni society and the parties involved were able to reach an agreement. However, Yemen has since then entered a very destructive spiral of violence, which is likely to lead the country into long-term chaos.

Perhaps the process remained too elite-centred and did not facilitate enough grassroots reconciliation. More importantly, it failed to address some of the crucial underlying causes of conflict, which raises questions as to whether the standard approach to dialogue gives sufficient consideration to the need to build legitimacy before entering into dialogue about how to establish or reform institutions. During the process, the clans associated with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) signalled willingness to participate in the process, but there was neither the framework nor the political will to explore that possibility. The process also was not able to provide a framework for the inclusion of Houthis, nor did it address the distrust between Saudi Arabia and Iran that is a key reason for the renewed cycle of violence.

Any dialogue process in fragile situations where there is potential for proxy wars should prioritise helping traditional clan and tribal structures to reconcile, with the purpose of building an inclusive state. The process also needs to include a framework for dealing with the interests of neighbouring states, and for supporting the establishment of an internationally protected space where the longer-term efforts of statebuilding can take place.

Yemen is likely to become a long-term source of instability spinning off to the Horn of Africa and beyond. If ISIS is defeated militarily in Syria and Iraq, it will likely find a way to establish its presence in Yemen. Similarly, extremist movements expand to different regions, either as invited mercenaries or on their own opportunistic initiative, involving themselves in regional disputes and conflicts where they eventually outnumber the local armed groups they initially supported, and taking over the battle to advance their violent ambitions.

With the presence of these movements, local conflict resolution becomes more challenging than ever. These extremist groups link local battles to global grievances and tend to be more violent than local armed groups. Current international norms also make communication with these groups and the clans associated with them even more difficult, although exactly such tribes, clans and groups are necessary to create the environment required for sustainable peacebuilding. Therefore, greater attention needs to be given to the traditional fabric and management of internal conflicts, as well as an international space created for addressing the possible interest of states that continue to fund and arm proxies that can easily derail any effort.

Fragile states are vulnerable to extremism

Terrorist organisations have for a long time aimed to establish and sustain a presence in fragile or unstable environments, and integrate their ambitions with local struggles. The international response to terrorism has been to block these groups and their affiliated clans from the political process.

This leaves local communities under the influence of the extremist groups in a very difficult and vulnerable situation. Clan and religious leaders that oppose the agenda or methods of the terrorist organisations are targeted and killed. Through these killings, terrorist organisations eventually aim to direct clans and entire tribes towards their cause in order to provide cover and to control broader and broader territories.

The inter-linkage of local tribes and clans with terrorist groups is a complex combination of lost aspirations of inclusion, joint power struggles, fear and mere survival. The way ISIS took over the Yarmouk refugee camp close to Damascus illustrates the phenomenon[3]. ISIS first established its presence in a non-significant area called Hajjar al-Aswad, where a few families were trying to survive in the midst of the fighting between the Syrian army and Yarmouk Palestinian groups. They initially tried to take over the camp by liaising with the Al-Nusra Front, an Al-Qaeda linked jihadist group in Syria, but failed because the Palestinian groups and families that defended Yarmouk were able to stick together and fought to control the situation themselves. The executions of local leaders, disruption of social services and the stricter religious interpretation promoted by ISIS alienated them from Palestinian groups. ISIS was pushed back into no-man's-land, but came back

with a more sophisticated approach. They studied the grievances among the Palestinians and won over the families that felt that an alliance with ISIS would benefit them more. These family members were given positions within ISIS, which then launched a new offensive, again assisted by the al-Nusra Front, and quickly took over the majority of Yarmouk, pushing the old Palestinian militias and powerful families into a small corner and later calling for a full-scale war against Hamas and other groups. Similar processes are now taking place in Palestinian camps in Lebanon and Jordan.

These developments illustrate how vulnerable fragile states and areas are to infiltration by ISIS and other terrorist organisations. Any grievances may leave a door open for these groups to establish a presence and start to take over the local struggle. Marriages between the foreign fighters and the daughters of tribal chiefs make these groups part of the ISIS 'family'.

Often the local government or internationally backed militias claim that these tribes are extremist and should be labelled as terrorist and not engaged. That, however, creates a barrier to dialogue and to resolving the conflict. Only through dialogue and inclusion can these tribes come out of the alliance with terrorist organisations and be seen as the crucial assets for peace that they are.

It is important to recognise and understand the pressures and dangers these actors confront (as presented in a simplified way in the graph).

To successfully counter and prevent extremism these clans would need to turn against actors who promote terrorism and violent religious interpretations. Unless the clan sees a better future in following a different route, such as genuine inclusion in the political process, reconciliation and opportunities for economic development, this is unlikely to happen. International responses with military intervention and cases where the stigma of terrorism has been attached to militias, clans and tribes that oppose the local government exacerbate the situation.

Fragile states have been a driving force behind efforts to reform the international aid architecture. These efforts have not, however, led to significant change in approaches to fragility and to speeding up support efforts. Instead of helping to resolve local disputes and strengthening the legitimacy of fragile states, we are seeing them fail over and over again, making them more likely to fall into the hands of extremists.

Conflicts also have an impact on the younger generation's ability to obtain a normal education and therefore affects communities' ability to acquire and develop resilience. The impact of droughts is aggravated by conflict and isolation and often leads to famine. All these contribute to migration, and to greater numbers seeking asylum.

Many humanitarian and development aid organisations face challenges operating in fragile states, such as restricted mobility and operational capability, as extremist groups often do not recognise NGOs' traditional impartiality. Security risks have also made it too costly to sustain long-term operational capacity. International donors face difficulty finding accountable implementers, while lack of capacity and corruption often prevent direct support for local governments and institutions. Without significant changes in international political frameworks that support peacebuilding, and reforms to the UN's engagement, fragile states are unlikely to be able to complete their transition to robust states.

Inclusion of traditional and religious peacemakers is crucial

A new approach, where local communities are given a greater role in mediation and dialogue processes, requires a paradigm shift at the UN and within the broader international community. Given the increasing power and greater international mobility of terrorist organisations, however, there is no time to wait for change. Negative scenarios are becoming increasingly likely in many fragile states. Local communities are often the only actors who have the ability to challenge the rising influence of terrorist organisations in their respective areas. Therefore, the presence of Traditional and Faith-motivated Inside Mediators (TFIM)[4] within these communities, as opinion leaders, spokespersons and middlemen, is crucially important.

At the core of this approach is the understanding that in the end mediation is not about outside technical expertise or leadership but about the right to peace for the people living in conflict areas. However, decisions affecting their lives are often taken out of their hands. In many prolonged conflicts

civilian populations are held hostage by circumstances and pay a heavy price either for the poor management of processes or for the lack of political will to advance a peaceful solution.

A grassroots approach alone does not, however, resolve all the problems. Local mediation efforts need to be supported and synchronised within a wider political framework and within an international agenda. The existing gap between international policy considerations and local mediation efforts needs to be bridged.

The already prominent position of religious actors at local levels is further strengthened by the fact that many radical movements adhere to religious ideologies. Religious and traditional leaders have a multifaceted role. They have exceptional connections with local communities and they can act as middlemen in dialogue with radical movements, but above all they have a key role in local peace mediation. Local peace mediation can direct local communities away from the influence of radical movements and pave the way to wider reconciliation.

In addition to religious and traditional leaders, special focus should be given to the role of peacemakers among the communities who may not have traditional authority, but act as opinion shapers and go-betweens. This is especially true since these peacemakers can act in the so-called 'grey zone' under the radical movements' sphere of influence, although this places the actors in an extremely vulnerable position.

Particularly difficult is the position of local communities under the influence of violent extremist and terrorist groups. These groups systematically alter religious interpretations and insist on stricter behaviour, which reduces religious and traditional community leaders' room to manoeuvre. Often these changes can be traced to state-sponsored ambitions to change the religious landscapes, where religion is used as a vehicle to expand power interests. These developments have even led to intra-Muslim and intra-Sunni cleansings.

Elders and local leaders can help where the UN is failing – the Somalia example

Finn Church Aid's (FCA) findings based on interviews with more than 300 key actors in 2007, suggest that more comprehensive inclusion of tribal elders and religious leaders could alter the process and help to bring stability to Somalia[5]. After mapping the key actors, FCA started to convene representatives of key clans, first in Hargeisa and, later, throughout the country, leading to successful local reconciliation efforts. The UN was still focused on convening a limited number of actors outside Somalia (then in Djibouti) and pushing for a deal that was not rooted in the Somali social fabric. These UN-led efforts had failed 14 times before the establishment of the Djibouti process and formation of the transitional government led by Sheik Sharif Ahmed.

The UN Political Offices for Somalia (UNPOS) finally took a new course under the leadership of Margaret Vogt and, later, Augustine Mahiga. The end of the transition in 2012 came about through the ownership of Somali clan elders and leaders that helped to design the roadmap, convened in Mogadishu to approve the constitution and to select a parliament. However, the elders had to overcome one major obstacle. The UN Security Council tried, mainly at the initiative of the US, to take a shortcut and have the transitional parliament elect a new president. After the powerful alliance of elders had convened in Mogadishu, the FCA and Religions for Peace (RfP) brought their views to the attention of Security Council members, who agreed to the same elders leading the process. At their meeting the elders had promised to end the transition and create new and legitimate state institutions within one year – which they did[6].

The Somalia case inspired the UN Mediation Support Unit (MSU) to consider enlarging the UN's toolbox to include working with traditional and religious actors. The Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) had already advanced multiple initiatives in which states and the UN would create and support better platforms for more inclusive dialogue at the policy level and ensure that UN peacebuilding reforms responded to the increasing need for more participatory and inclusive approaches.

The UN's approaches to peacebuilding, mediation and dialogue need to be changed to ensure inclusion of local communities, which hold traditional authority and have religious influence. UN agencies and missions need to increase their engagement with these local actors and build structures that facilitate interaction with groups that are outside the state structure or in conflict with fragile state structures. Local voices, including those of religious and traditional peacemakers, need to have access to the Security Council to be able to share their insights, knowledge and recommendations.

Various ongoing UN reforms[7] offer an opportunity to make concrete political and operational progress on some long-standing impediments to effective collective action, thanks to the convergence in time and content of a series of important UN review processes and global agendas in different sectors. There is an emerging sense that the UN peace and security architecture has not kept pace with evolving challenges and that a failure to come to terms with this gap will have serious consequences.

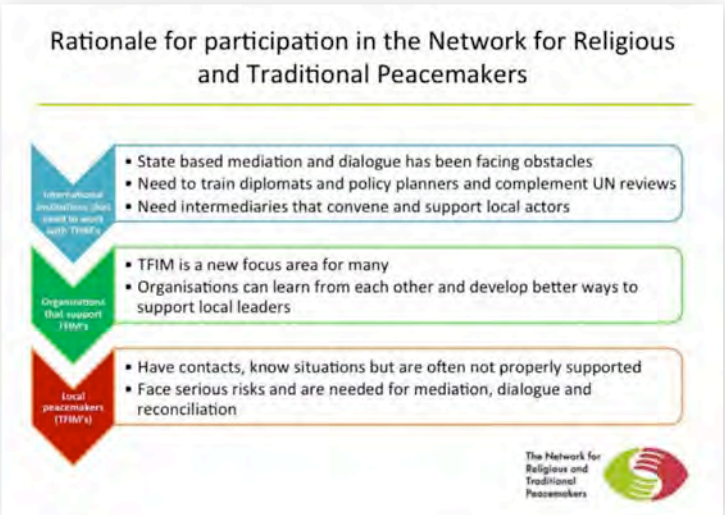
Preparations for Security Council meeting.

The UN-initiated Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers

Following the UN Secretary-General's report on mediation from 2012[8] the MSU, together with OIC, RfP, the UN Alliance for Civilisations (UNAOC) and FCA, initiated the establishment of a Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. The Network aims to increase cooperation among organisations that work with local religious and traditional peacemakers, developing joint mechanisms to provide more professional support to local efforts. The Network has also generated great interest among states and state-based organisations, such as the Government of Finland and the KAICIID[9] Dialogue Centre, which are currently major contributors to the Network.

The Network has started to establish mechanisms that enable the best experts in the field to provide timely support in planning and implementing mediation efforts. The idea is to bring already existing expertise into a Network of experts and organisations that are committed to the cause of assisting better local mediation efforts and to linking them with the UN and other actors who are engaged in formal negotiations. The Network consists of government representatives, NGOs that work with local TFIMs, peacemakers and other local actors.

The Network Secretariat works currently from Helsinki, Vienna, Bangkok, Brussels, Washington and New York, but is present through its members in all conflict areas. The Secretariat provides support to the Network and local peacemakers in four ways. The first is wider support for political inclusion in close cooperation with the UN. The second is support for local mediation efforts and stand-by support for local TFIMs. This includes, specifically, support for women as peacemakers both within the religious and traditional communities and in international policy-making. The third is providing advanced training and research that helps both diplomats and local actors. The fourth is help for local communities to express and deepen understanding of extremism and how to prevent it[10].



Recently, member states supporting the Network, such as the US and Finland, have agreed to start a process of ensuring that UN peacebuilding reform incorporates outreach to traditional structures and local communities in conflict zones. However vulnerable the traditional and religious peacemakers might be, eventually they can evolve into mainstream actors in resolving current conflicts.

The question is not, in the end, about the capacity of outside actors. Peace is the right of the people living in the midst of conflict and they will ultimately not only define peace but also help to bring it about. The question is when and how the UN will be able to systematically reach out to them and support their efforts.

Notes

[1] www.nybooks.com/shared/cbbd4b368e5e743c7fe99a0e373b78c9

[2] e.g. www.hiwar-watani.org/

[3] www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/10/isis-damascus-seize-yarmouk-refugee-camp

[4] This name has been suggested by the Berghof Foundation to describe local peacemakers who live in the midst of conflicts, use local methodologies and contacts, but are often neglected and face serious risks in their initiatives.

[5] www.cmcfinland.fi/download/49261_Studies_1_2013_Lepisto.pdf?4e667800ade8d188

[6] www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13533312.2015.1059283

[7] Peace and security reviews: the Peacebuilding Architecture Review; the Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on UN Peace Operations and the Global Study on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325, Sustainable development processes: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development etc.

[8] A/66/811

[9] The King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) was established by the states of Saudi-Arabia, Austria and Spain, and the Vatican is a permanent observer. The organisation is based in Vienna.

[10] www.peacemakersnetwork.org

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Antti Pentikäinen has extensive mediation experience and a long history of humanitarian work. He has been facilitating UN efforts to reach out to insurgencies in several conflict zones. He has been Special Advisor to Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, co-founded the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) where he led its finance and administration division. He has been Executive Director of Finn Church Aid (FCA), Finland's largest development agency and has also served during 2010-2011 as Conflict Transformation Director of Religions for Peace. Prime Minister of Finland Juha Sipilä appointed Mr. Pentikäinen as his Special Envoy for the Migration Crisis and addressing the root causes.