Ammerdown Invitation: Paul Rogers and Gabrielle Rifkind on alternative visions of security

Paul Rogers and Gabrielle Rifkind

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ORG's Global Security Consultant Paul Rogers is among 25 conflict analysts and peace-builders who have called for a public conversation about how best to build long-term security for people in the UK and worldwide. Known as the Ammerdown Invitation, the statement from the group's recent meeting provides some suggestions on how governments and citizens might begin to turn around the world's worsening security situation through local, national, and global action. The Invitation can be read in full on openDemocracy.

Below we reproduce a response to the Ammerdown Invitation from ORG's Gabrielle Rifkind.

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by Gabrielle Rifkind, originally appeared on openDemocracy on 25 September 2014

One of the most pressing issues of the 21st century is whether in international conflict the use of armed force to remove an "unjust" social order makes the world safer. We seem to be trapped in a crude, bipolar choice, in which we use military force to remove an oppressor or we do nothing.

Perhaps there are alternatives. Non-military options are insufficiently considered and there is little place in the relevant systems for serious, well-resourced early intervention and mediation to attempt to prevent the outbreak of violence. In the weary debate on intervention of recent years, more nuanced and subtle voices questioning the consequences of using force as a means of intervention have often been dismissed as naïve left-wingers. People of all shades of opinion get caught up in debate about "doing the right thing" but insufficient thought is given to how we do this and whether we can get serious about well-resourced, non-military intervention.

History tells us that it is easier to get into conflict than to get out and war and its consequences have their dangerous algorithms, feeding on themselves with a devastating momentum. The road to war may look like a careful strategic assessment—more likely it is mired in a deep fog of misreading which can unleash an unpredictable chain of events, with governments going to war with little understanding of the consequences. Decision-makers then get deeper into

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the morass, attempting to justify their earlier decisions and thereby compounding the fog of war.

Because the consequences are so devastating, there is a need for a complex analysis which considers the multiple influences that shape decisions to go to war. This should be complemented by a clear assessment of the endgame and what it is hoped intervention will achieve; then, in a geopolitical context, the consequences of different kinds of intervention should be weighed up.

When he edited the 16 July 2012 issue of New Statesman, the former UK foreign secretary David Miliband eloquently wrote: “Good politics starts with empathy, proceeds with analysis, then sets out values and establishes the vision, before getting to the nitty-gritty of policy solutions.” Given the complexity and gravity of decisions to go to war, it is essential to have structures for decision-making that involve rigorous and disciplined debate, including consideration of non-military options.

Questions need to be asked as to who the parties really are, what intervention will look like to the people on the ground, whether this will create a long- or short-term end to violence and whether there are realistic alternatives that have been properly examined. Today, more than ever, it is important to ask if the existing geopolitical architecture is still appropriate. Traditional institutions tend to see the world as it has been, have difficulty finding a vision for the future and are, by nature, resistant to inventing new structures. They are more prone to repetitive cycles of justifying actions that do not reflect a fast-changing world and how we might best resolve conflict.

Multiple lenses

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In the early days of assessing the course of intervention, it is helpful to look through multiple lenses and to be aware of the limitations of seeing the picture only through a Western "narrative". To extend our comprehension, it is valuable to involve those who understand and have practical experience of the local populations. Such an assessment could use anthropologists and psychologists, all of whom have specialist knowledge as to how communities are thinking at a grassroots level and how they will experience intervention. We could fruitfully examine what has happened between groups in conflict and how their behaviour has affected each other.

A lack of understanding will obfuscate how such fighting erupts and thereby leave us in the dark about how we can intervene to contain the violence. Early intervention may be hugely important because once lives have been lost people bay for blood and are less likely to be in a mood to end the conflict. When violence becomes entrenched, the natural impulse of those who have suffered is to hit back. The desire to destroy the other is usually motivated by the belief that it will enhance one's own survival—though it may, at times, plant the seeds of one's own destruction.

If powerful groups are fighting for survival, the likelihood that they will regress to brutish behaviour is increased. Communities which previously lived together, accepting their religious and cultural differences, become defined by these sectarian identities unacceptable to one another. Early intervention might have prevented this regression, particularly through local mediators on the ground.

Key to the effectiveness of such mediation would be local knowledge of the different groups engaging in the conflict. Recognising cultural and religious differences, this could play a role in establishing communication between the different communities, exploring how these groups could prevent the escalation

of violence and continue to live respectfully together—helping thereby to prevent the degeneration which exaggerates the potential for intolerance and divisiveness.

Underdeveloped resource

Mediation as a tool to prevent and settle disputes has been accepted by cultures throughout the world for centuries. Yet in the 21st it remains a marginal and underdeveloped resource to prevent armed violence in the international security arena.

Mediation is well established in domestic polities, used in the law courts and civil society to prevent deterioration in relationships between individuals and between institutions. But on the international stage the equivalent mechanisms are usually only put in place after a conflict has erupted.

An internationally accepted culture of mediation is needed to address deteriorating political situations threatening to break out into armed conflict, whether within the borders of a state or between states. While traditional diplomacy is a key tool there are cases where it is of little effect, because diplomats ultimately represent the interests of their respective states and cannot therefore be seen as credible independent mediators.

Mediation can work if the countries directly involved, or proxy states with leverage to influence events, perceive it as a credible tool at their disposal. It would need not to be controlled by particular groups or major powers and those participating would need to feel they were being taken seriously and retaining control over their future.

Mediator teams would need to retain a degree of autonomy, while being able to respond with speed and agility and not get caught in the quagmire of bureaucracies. To claim any sort of legitimacy the mediators would need to be seen as independent.

At the same time they would need direct lines of communication and to be credible with multinational institutions and the stakeholders concerned. They would also need to be able to feed back to governments at the highest levels where decisions are made.

Teams would include nationals of the countries where conflict was brewing, who would be best placed to explain the realities on the ground and the perceptions and attitudes of the countries and stakeholders concerned. It would be essential for the mediators to have the complete trust of the countries or governments in whose name they would be acting but they should not be, nor should they be seen to be, apologists or mouthpieces for “their” countries.

Different levels of mediation

Mediators would as appropriate operate at a number of levels: from the grassroots and local, through government, to regionally with the countries fuelling a civil war and globally with the international community. While early intervention at a local level will be of key importance, what happens at a governmental level will also be critical. And what appears to be a local conflict may be stoked by countries engaging in proxy wars in the region, for example in the funding and training of militias. This underlies the importance of connecting the different levels of mediation.

At government, regional and international levels, a number of individuals could be appointed with a higher profile—senior figures with a successful record as mediators or negotiators, who would, if appropriate and as required, join the mediation. They would be the public face of the process once the initial "cooking" by the infrastructure of mediator teams had taken place.

The teams would be embedded at all the different levels and would remain actively engaged in the background as the process evolved. Working behind the scenes, they could be nimble and responsive, quietly building significant and sustainable relationships with the parties. Operating off the record, outside the media glare and without the need to score political points or make statements for domestic consumption, they could develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the conflict and thereby point to possible solutions.

What characterises credible mediation?

A prerequisite would be accurate early warning of wars and genocide, gleaned from local media, mobile phones, the internet and satellites. Teams must have authority to take the initiative, with the benefit of a light reporting and administrative structure. They would have to assume a high level of individual responsibility, but would have legitimacy to act given by international institutions or a small group of countries. Failure would be their personal failure, while success would be attributed to the parties involved in the conflict.

Teams would also need strong working relationships with local mediators on the ground with deep knowledge of the complexities of the conflict and the different characters involved, and the skills needed to bring the different parties together. The mediators would need to have the skills to immerse themselves in this local milieu, listening and understanding the complexity of

the human mind. They would require the ability to build personal relationships and to “read” national and individual narratives.

They would therefore need to be highly trained and culturally sensitive, good polyglots fluent in the language of the country for whom they were mediating. It would be important to have a balance of men and women. Key qualities would include intellectual honesty and dedication. They would need to have the capacity to manage being “grey people”: they would conduct no interviews and their names would not be made available to the media.

What are the challenges?

A major challenge is to establish sufficient legitimacy to enable stakeholders to “buy in” to mediation. It will take time for effective interventions to become known, especially since in this field it is important not to take credit for successes. There is an immediate need for more examples of good practice demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach.

In the longer term there might be scope for an international institution, which could be named the International Institute for Mediation (IIM). Countries would sign up to it as part of a treaty acknowledging such mediation as preventive and therefore to be welcomed. As with the International Criminal Court, states would choose to participate in such a system, membership being based on the usefulness of the institution and its processes, as opposed to something imposed. In the short term existing regional institutions could be built on, with NATO, the Gulf Co-operation Council and others providing an umbrella.

It would be essential that this be funded in such a way as to guarantee independence and long-term planning. Resources would need to be sufficient to ensure that such initiatives were not peripheral but seen as comprising an

essential policy tool for peacebuilding. Wider strategic reassessment would be necessary to prioritise such non-military options. This could usefully be compared with the cost-effectiveness of military spending. Given public disquiet with recent failed military intervention and their huge cost, it is opportune to introduce innovative ways of preventing and resolving armed conflict.

Traditional attempts at peacemaking have shown little evidence of success in the prevention or resolution of conflicts. Existing structures have proved cumbersome and ill-attuned to the skills of mediation. Current mediation outside of governments is piecemeal, fragmented and depends on private initiatives and therefore lacks any coherent framework. There is a randomness as to what initiatives are pursued and the organisations involved have their own interests.

A new form of structured, all-inclusive, non partisan mediation is required, involving early intervention and quiet work behind the scenes before a conflict has polarised. It would be an essential policy tool before violence has deteriorated to the point where people seek only retribution.

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