

## **Conflict Prevention & Early Intervention: A credible team of mediators**

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**War has its own devastating momentum that exacerbates the worst aspects of human behaviour. In the quagmire of armed conflict, when this has become dangerous and out of control, concepts such as ‘early intervention’ can appear as being irrelevant. There is a tipping point in armed conflict when the fight for survival stimulates the kind of aggression that magnifies hatred and perpetuates the most destructive aspects of human behaviour. The real challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to become smarter by intervening early on and more effectively so as to prevent this kind of breakdown. A new form of structured ‘quiet’, behind the scenes, mediation by trusted interlocutors, empowered by the international community would make a difference.**

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### **Mediation culture: a Conflict Prevention tool**

Mediation as a tool to settle disputes has been around and accepted by many cultures throughout the world for a good deal of time. Mediation is well established in domestic politics and is used in the law courts and by civil society and is a well-respected practice for families and divorcing couples. It is recognized that it can prevent deterioration in disputes between individuals, workers and employers and between companies, corporations and so on. Sophisticated systems and institutions, including at international level, have been created to cater for these areas of mediation, but remarkably, as yet, there is no relevant equivalent institution on the international stage to address the prevention or resolution of armed conflict around the world.

Once groups in power are fighting for their own survival, the likelihood that they will regress to nasty brutish behaviour is increased. Communities who previously lived together with their religious and cultural differences are at risk of being defined by their sectarian identities. Early intervention by credible mediators, independent of governments, before communities have been traumatised, might prevent a regression back to these more violent identities.

For this to happen in a structured way there is a need to institute an internationally accepted, all inclusive, mediation culture to address deteriorating political situations threatening to break out into armed conflict whether within the borders of a single nation or between nation states. This does not obviate the need for traditional diplomacy, but there will be cases when diplomacy is of little effect, if only because diplomats ultimately represent the interests of their respective states and cannot therefore be seen as being credible mediators.

A worldwide conflict prevention mediation culture can exist if countries directly involved, or proxy countries with leverage to influence events, perceive it as a credible tool at their disposal, ie not controlled by particular power groupings or by 'big' states, and a process that gives them the feeling of equality and of retaining a modicum of control over their future.

### **The role of a swift, agile team of mediators**

Mediators would be part of a team directed by a multi national institution, like the UN, acceptable to all parties. To claim any sort of legitimacy the mediators would need to be seen as credible independent parties, possibly nationals of the countries where conflict was brewing. They would be best placed to explain the realities on the ground and the perceptions and attitudes of the respective countries for which they were mediating, whilst being accepted as trustworthy by 'their' respective countries.

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.

For the mediators to be effective they would need to have been delegated personal responsibility and be granted the authority to take the initiative without having to go through heavy official structures. The mediators would leverage the weight of the international institution from which they depend, but also have the necessary agility to act because of the delegated authority granted to them by that institution.

Failure would be their personal failure, success would go to the parties involved in the conflict. The formula of previous UN Secretary General, Perez de Cuellar, is instructive: "If you succeed the international community wins, if you fail, your personal name will carry the fault".

### **Skills/Qualities of the mediator**

The skill of the mediator would be to work quietly behind the scenes, outside the glare of publicity, with the aim of trying to address some of the early underlying causes of the breakdown in relationship or of the violence. Those empowered in this role would have the ability to build personal relationships, read the national and individual narratives. They would therefore need to be highly trained and culturally sensitive, good polyglots and fluent in the local language of the country for whom they were mediating.

The mediators would need to have the skills of immersing themselves in local knowledge, of listening and understanding the complexity of the human mind. It would be important to have a balance of men and women.

Mediators would be recruited because of their natural ability as mediators. Key qualities would also include intellectual honesty and dedication. They would need to have the capacity to work 'behind the scenes' and manage being 'grey

people' and prepared to remain so. This would mean no interviews. Their names would not be made available to the media.

Part of the effectiveness of the mediation process would be to draw on local knowledge and social media to gather information about potential emerging violence on the ground.

### **A possible Home**

A specialist Mediation Unit could be established in the UN and be known as UNMU. Such a Unit might be part of the Office of the Secretary General and be regarded as a tool of the Secretary General, ie acting under his direct authority. It would need to create acceptance and respect for itself and be trusted by all Member States and by all world political and military groupings eg NATO, CSTO, GCC, EU, OSCE etc.

To maintain costs and administration to a minimum UNMU might be constituted by a small permanent Secretariat and by a semi-permanent core staff of multi-national mediators. The latter group might be made up of an 'inner circle' and by an 'outer circle'.

**INNER CIRCLE:** These individuals would be chosen from a variety of nationalities, religions, ethnic and professional backgrounds and would have demonstrated the skills and qualities mentioned above. They would constitute the scouting element of the mediation process. They would be the first on the ground with the task of clarifying contradictory perceptions, determining what mattered to the respective sides and to any proxies involved, identifying possible trigger points that might escalate the dispute and starting up the mediation process. They would also explore possible weaknesses and strengths and vulnerable pressure points. They would report back to the Secretary General on a regular basis.

**OUTER CIRCLE:** These individuals would be more high profile, known senior figures with a successful mediator and negotiator track record, who would, if appropriate and if required, join the mediation process. They would be the public face of the mediation process once the initial 'cooking' by the inner circle mediators had taken place. Inner circle mediators would remain engaged in the background as the process evolved.

The advantage of such a Unit is that it would be nimble and responsive and not caught up in a bureaucratic quagmire. It could operate quietly off the record, outside the media glare and would not have the need to score political points or make jingoistic statements (usually for domestic consumption). This would offer the possibility of a more precise understanding of the dynamics and thereby point to possible solutions.

Importantly UNMU would be called into action before matters got out of hand as a result of its early warning systems. Prevention rather than cure would be the key mantra. Countries in trouble would either themselves request UNMU

mediation directly, or through a relevant proxy country, or should be prepared to respond positively to an UNMU offer of assistance.

Initially UNMU mediators from the two sides would meet outside of the area to prepare their ground, agree possible existing convergence points, weaknesses, strengths and a co-ordinated strategy before contacting their respective countries/governments to start the mediation process.

Where UNMU mediators would have the advantage over traditional diplomats, would be their independence from governments. Their credibility would be that they were not representing the interests of governments and therefore their strength would be to engage with the competing narratives in any conflict without taking sides. Their primary aim would be to bring an end to the violence and get the warring parties to sit together.

The current system of mediation outside of governments is piecemeal, fragmented and depends on private initiatives and therefore lacks any coherent framework. There is randomness as to what initiatives are pursued and there are the private interests of these organizations. An independent body such as UNMU mediators would be better placed to achieve success than current mediation bodies.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional attempts at peace making have shown little evidence of success in the prevention or resolution of conflicts. Current structures have proved to be cumbersome and ill attuned to the skills of mediation. A new form of structured, all-inclusive, non-partisan mediation is now required, one that intervenes early and works quietly behind the scenes outside the glare of any publicity before the conflict had polarized. What is being proposed is a universal Ombudsman of sorts, who is seen as credible, egalitarian, trustworthy and competent.

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