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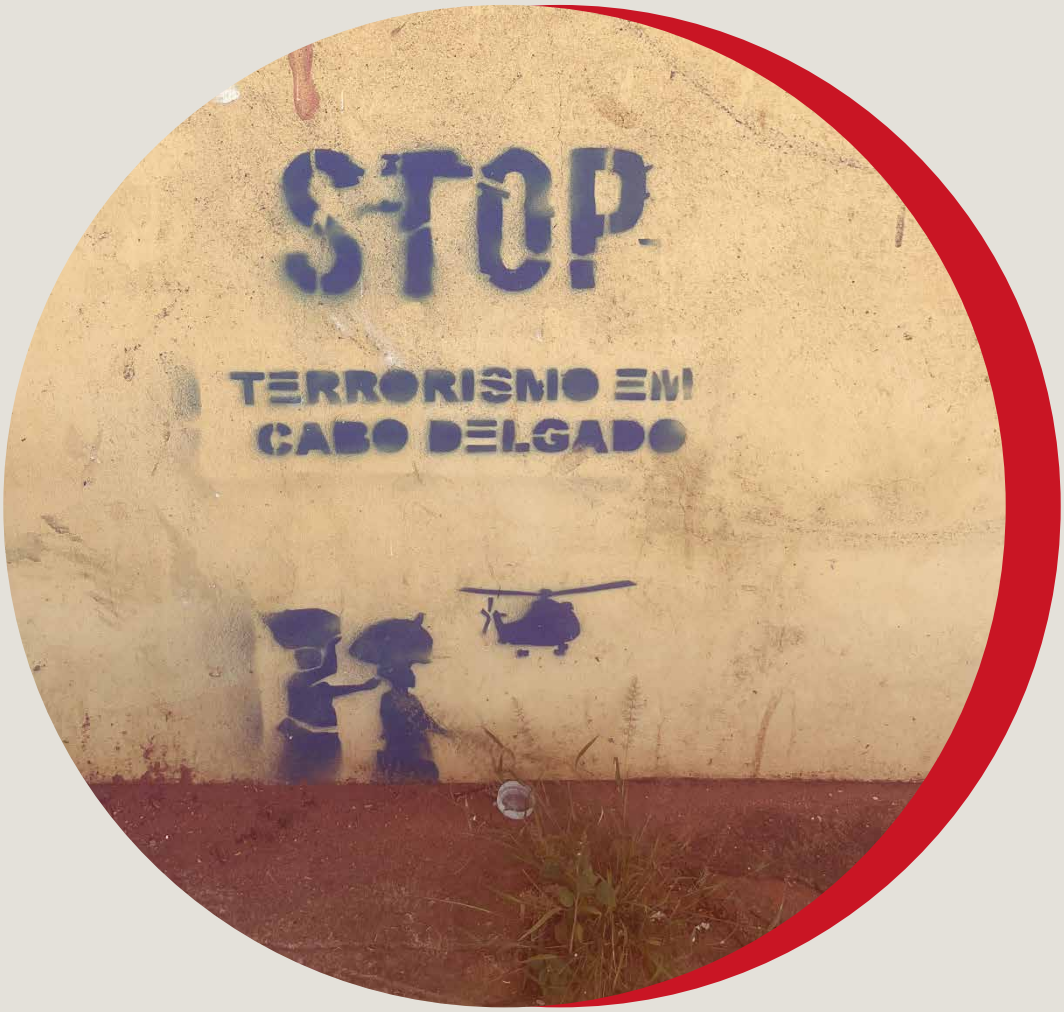
PRACTITIONER REPORT

Negotiating the Political Integration of Armed Groups in an Era of New Conflict Patterns and Changing Peacemaking Practices



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Cover Photo: Graffiti on a wall in Maputo, March 2025. Credit: Leire Bustamante Törnqvist, FBA.

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Executive Summary

This report offers practical guidance for mediators and peace support actors seeking to facilitate peace in today's rapidly changing conflict landscape. Drawing on case-based insights, it explores how peace processes can support the transition of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) from armed struggle to peaceful political participation.

The global context in which such transitions take place has changed profoundly. Traditional liberal peacebuilding models are under strain and mediators are increasingly confronted with fragmented, transnational, or semi-authoritarian environments that challenge established assumptions about peacemaking.

At the same time, new patterns of conflict, such as the internationalisation of internal wars, the fragmentation of armed groups, and the rise of actors with Islamist agendas, create additional complexities. The reliance on proscription as a political tool, the decline of comprehensive peace agreements, and the decline of multi-party democracy further narrow the space for negotiated political settlements. Meanwhile, a new generation of mediators from outside the traditional Western sphere are reshaping the ways peace can be facilitated, prompting both challenges and opportunities for international engagement. Against this backdrop, the report examines how mediators and other peace support actors can adapt their strategies to these new realities.

This report calls for a renewed attention to political inclusion as a cornerstone of sustainable peace. It argues that political integration, understood as the transformation of armed groups into peaceful political stakeholders, remains an essential and achievable goal if approaches are adapted to the diverse and evolving realities of the particular conflict. The report concludes with a number of recommendations for mediators and practitioners, giving them concrete entry points to support conflict transformation, offering guidance on how to navigate fragmentation, engage proscribed or ideologically complex actors, sequence political and security reforms, and balance innovation with inclusivity in modern peacemaking efforts.

Whether working at the national, regional, or community level, this report offers concrete frameworks, tools and options to support inclusive and sustainable conflict resolution through political transformation.

Introduction

"I do not like to be called an ex-combatant or ex-guerrillera, because I am still a fighter, my struggle is not over, I just use other means, the political means."

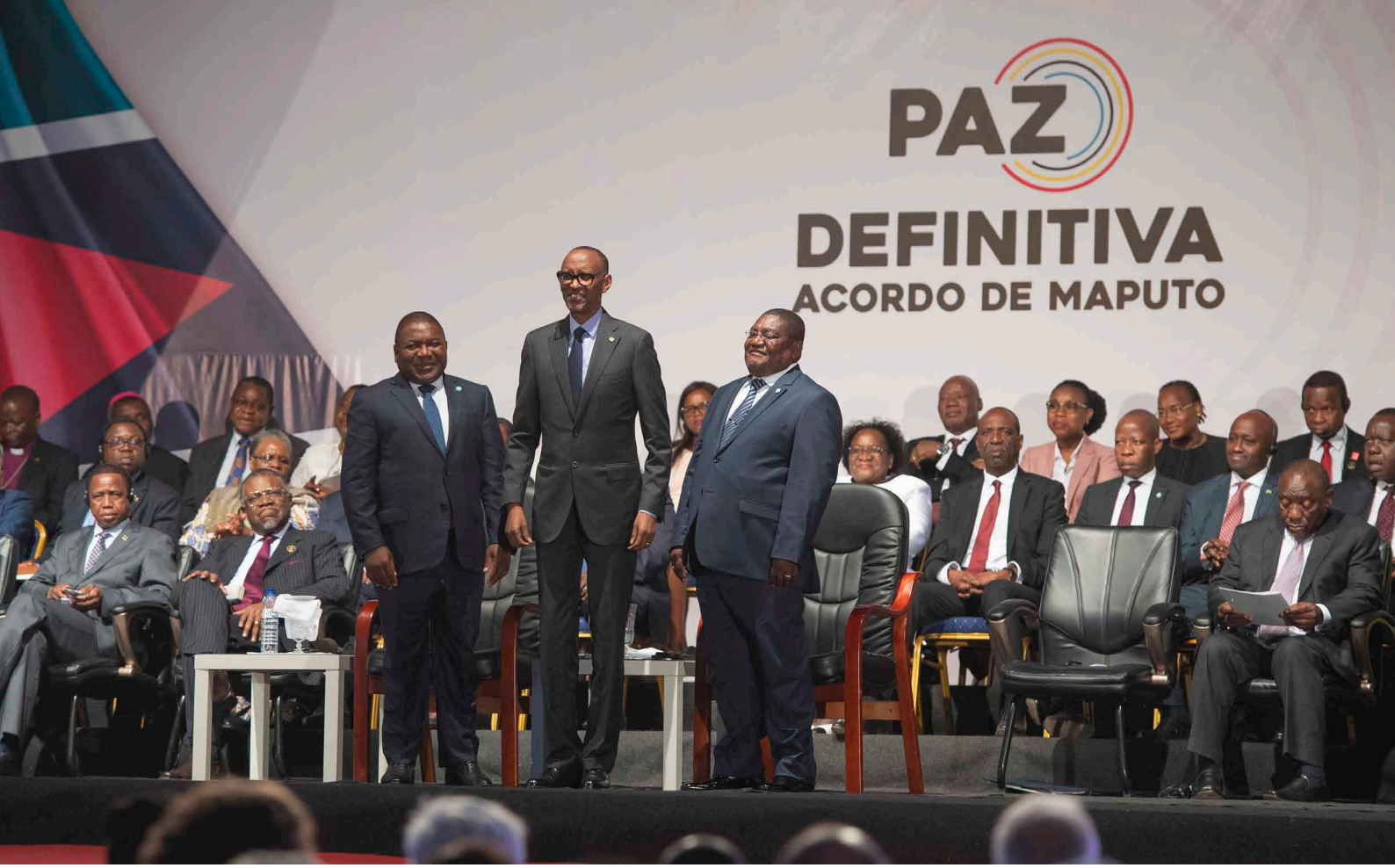
(Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, November 2022, cited in Cruz Almeida et al. 2024)

Across time and space, war-to-peace transitions have facilitated the abandonment of non-state armed groups (NSAGs)' reliance on violent struggle for the benefit of realising their political objectives within the parameters of non-violent politics. Transformed armed groups have participated in politics in multifaceted ways, as part of the executive, in opposition politics, or through informal political channels, networks, and organisations. Some groups have pursued a multifaceted struggle all along, with parallel tracks of engagements during the armed conflict, while some undertake a more ambitious transformation towards the end of the war, adapting their organisations to remain relevant in the post-war political era.

As peace processes are decisive moments for the configuration and distribution of political power in a society, they constitute windows of opportunity for opening, strengthening or encouraging pathways for former NSAGs and their members to partake in the political sphere of their context (Sindre and Söderström 2016). For this reason, the transformation of former warring parties to peaceful political stakeholders has constituted a core feature of negotiated settlements to civil wars since the early 1990s. More than one-third of all of the NSAGs who signed peace agreements between 1975 and 2018 subsequently participated in formal party politics, either for the first time or in a reformed or renewed capacity (Söderberg Kovacs and Martínez 2022).

But armed groups also enter the political space through other means of war-to-peace transitions, for example through military takeovers. In these situations, the de-facto rulers may also enter into negotiations over the political settlement in formation. A case in point is the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the emergence of a regime led by the formerly NSAG known as Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS).

Why is the political integration of NSAGs relevant to peace negotiations? Research has shown that including formerly armed actors into the post-conflict political arena has generally had a positive impact on a country's subsequent peace and stability (Marshall and Ishiyama 2016; Tuncel, Manning, and Smith 2022). One of the reasons for this is linked to the origins of the armed conflict itself. Because the so-called root causes of most civil wars are often grounded in perceptions of the unequal or unfair distribution of power, resources and wealth in a society, it is generally acknowledged that conflict resolution efforts should encourage the establishment or construction of more inclusive, representative, and legitimate political systems (Söderberg Kovacs



Signing of Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in Mozambique, Maputo, 6 August 2019 *(Link to the picture: Signing of Peace and Reconciliation Agreement | Maputo, 6 ... | Flickr)*

2007). Political integration can also serve to foster trust in democratic institutions and can encourage broader political accountability, which can in turn work to prevent the recurrence of violence. On a more technical and pragmatic level, political participation can also provide NSAGs with a concrete civilian alternative and strengthen the incentive to put weapons beyond use. Importantly, integration is often the preferred alternative of the armed group members themselves (Dudouet, Giessmann and Planta 2012).

However, most of the well-known cases of political integration of NSAGs stem from the era of so-called 'liberal peacebuilding', when democratisation was often considered an integral component of the war-to-peace transition and the content of peace agreements reflected this approach. Mediators and facilitators are today faced with both a new conflict landscape and in important ways an entirely new playing field for peacemaking. New geostrategic power constellations also challenge the established models for conflict resolution and approaches to peacemaking.

These changes raise questions about to what extent our established knowledge and practice of political integration of NSAGs in war-to-peace transitions is still useful and relevant in contemporary peacemaking. What is still applicable and what needs to be adjusted? Can and should we still work towards the objective of political integration when faced with armed groups with self-proclaimed Islamist objectives, terrorist-designated armed groups and a fragmented landscape of armed opposition groups? What are the implications of the downward trend in signed peace agreements and the upward trend in new mediators?

The focus of this report, therefore, is on the relevance of political integration of NSAGs in a new global era of conflict and peacemaking. This report acknowledges the global political shifts that impact how peace is mediated. Contemporary peace processes may still follow the now familiar steps from "talks about talks" and agenda setting to formal negotiations and the signature of partial or comprehensive peace agreements. However, they may also follow slightly different logics that influence the methods and scope for engagement.

Although the content of this report is relevant to a broad range of actors involved in peace processes – the negotiating parties as well as third party actors engaged throughout various stages of the peace process – seeking an understanding in how to best support the political integration of armed groups, our core target group are mediators at the negotiation table and mediation support actors who are entrusted by the parties to facilitate the resolution of the armed conflict.

The first section of this report presents a brief summary of the existing research on the political integration of armed groups. This is followed by an analysis of relevant contemporary trends in armed groups' characteristics, conflict features, and peacemaking. We ask why and in what way these trends pose challenges to peacemaking in general and the political integration of armed groups in particular, and show how existing research on the political integration of armed groups can help to address these challenges. At the end of the report, a set of recommendations is proposed to help mediators and other peace support actors to identify avenues for supporting political integration in a way that will enhance the potential for a sustainable settlement of violent conflict.

Defining the political integration of non-state armed groups

In this report, the political integration of NSAGs refers to the process by which they undergo a transformation from actors that primarily use armed struggle to pursue their political goals, to engaging in non-violent political practices, either within or outside the formal political system of the respective country. This process varies across contexts, but its core feature is the shift from violence to peaceful political engagement. NSAGs may pursue formal political participation in party politics, either by transforming into a political party, forming multiple new parties or joining existing parties, or they may seek to influence the political process more informally as part of civil society or ex-combatant interest groups. While in some contexts the term "reintegration" may be an accurate term to describe combatants' return to civilian life, the focus here is on the political inclusion of NSAGs with political objectives, irrespective of their earlier status or experience in politics of the respective country.

Setting the stage: Starting from what we know

Transitions from armed warfare to peaceful political participation occur in many different types of conflicts – both in so-called separatist conflicts over territory and in conflict over government power in a state.[1] In some peace processes, the political integration of the NSAG constitutes one of the main agenda points at the negotiation table and a core component of the bargain between the parties. Such was the case in the negotiations between Frelimo and Renamo which resulted in the 1992 peace agreement in Mozambique or in the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP). In other cases, formerly armed actors engage in politics more as a byproduct of the deal itself. This scenario has occurred in situations where new autonomy arrangements have been established as a result of the peace agreement, such as in the case of the 2005 accords signed by the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) or the 2014 peace agreement in the Philippines between the Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Many peace agreements include dedicated provisions specifically aimed at the political integration of former armed groups and their members, for example by explicitly allowing them to become legal political parties. Other reform processes which have been agreed upon in the negotiated settlement between the parties may also influence the prospects and opportunities for political integration, for example by stipulating political or electoral reforms, reserving seats for former combatants in the administration or legislature, or other forms of power-sharing arrangements. Most peace agreements also include provisions for the establishment of some form of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process. Taken together, the precise modalities of such provisions, the timing and sequencing of their implementation, the political and security environment in which they are expected to operate, as well as the characteristics of the armed movements themselves, have the potential to shape the strategies and trajectories taken by former NSAGs after war and the wider implications for the post-war political order.

Existing research shows that the political integration of ex-combatants is far from uniform, and can follow multiple pathways. Collectively, many NSAGs have opted to continue their political struggle by establishing new political parties at the national level. Other armed groups, notably in the context of peace processes in separatist conflicts, decide to pursue political inclusion at the provincial or regional level. In yet other contexts, peace settlements have enabled NSAGs to dismantle their armed wings and reorient members to pre-existing political parties or to legalise their political wings which had operated underground or outside of formal politics during the conflict. As part of this integration process, research also shows that NSAGs are likely to adapt their ideology, including their political goals and governance principles – often as a result of participating in negotiations, or post-war elections.

Political integration, however, is not only a result of group-level organisational transformation. It can also

1 This section draws on extensive academic research on armed groups' transitions 'from bullets to ballot' conducted by the authors and other researchers in the Politics of War network. The findings have also been presented in the series of research briefs titled *The Political Dynamics of DDR*. See Cho et al. 2022, Aalen 2022, Cho and Sindre 2022, Dudouet and Almeida 2022, Ishiyama 2022, Tuncel et al. 2022, Matfess 2022, Whiting and Whiting 2022. This section also draws on findings from a joint project (2021–2026) on 'the politics of DDR' (Berghof Foundation and UN DPO DDR Section 2022).

take place at the individual level, by enabling former NSAG leaders and combatants to engage politically. Some peace processes involve granting individual NSAG members positions in the state executive or in the sub-national administration. Others may join existing parties to pursue political careers outside of the collective identity of the wartime movement.

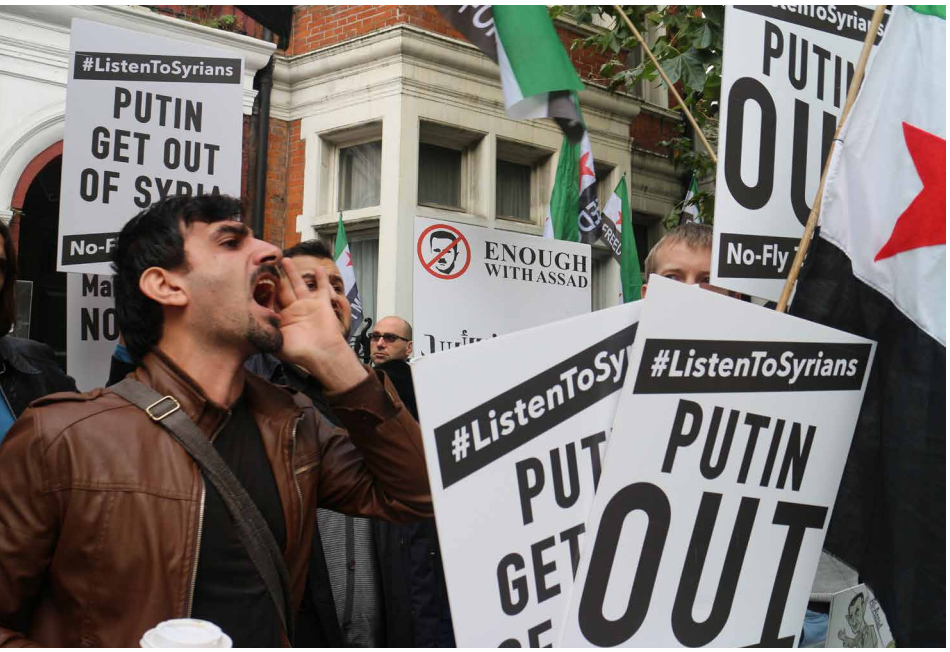
Beyond formal politics, former combatants – especially rank-and-file members – have also turned to other forms of collective action to influence governance and decision-making, through civil society entities such as community-based organisations, veteran associations, or issue-based advocacy groups and social movements. Given the gender backlash which often follows the end of an armed struggle, when women combatants are often left out of traditional party political structures, women ex-combatants tend to be more prone to pursue informal forms of political engagement.

Table 1: Political Integration Pathways for Armed Groups

Pathway	Description	Opportunities	Challenges	Examples
Rebel-to-party transformation	The armed group turns itself into a new political party to contest elections	· Direct political representation · Enables group to shape policy	· Risk of electoral defeat · Requires legal/ political reform	· FMLN (El Salvador) · FARC-EP (Colombia) · Renamo (Mozambique)
Join existing political parties	Members join pre-existing parties individually or as a bloc	· Faster legal entry · Less institutional burden	· Risk of marginalisation · Weakens group identity	· Hezb-e Islami (Afghanistan) · ONLF (Ethiopia)
Participation in subnational governance	The group governs at the local or regional level via autonomy or decentralisation	· Suitable for territorially-based groups · Reduces national-level competition	· Risk of local elite capture · May fuel secessionist fears	· GAM (Indonesia) · MILF (Philippines)
Informal political participation	Leaders or ex-combatants join CSOs, advocacy groups, or other civic platforms	· Bypasses party politics · Suited to repressive or closed systems	· Limited political influence · May lack recognition	· Ex-FARC women in Colombia · War veterans from ex-Yugoslavia
Military victory and *de facto* political power	The group controls national power through armed victory or regime change	· Guarantees political influence · Strong bargaining power	· Lacks democratic legitimacy · May face sanctions and/or international isolation	· Taliban (Afghanistan) · HTS (Syria)

Political integration and contemporary peacemaking

In this section we discuss seven contemporary and inter-related trends that are particularly relevant to the prospects and limitations of political integration within the confines of traditional peacemaking efforts. These are organised along three overarching clusters: (1) new trends and patterns in armed conflict; (2) the nature and features of armed groups; and (3) changes in the peacemaking landscape. For each trend, we discuss the main challenges it is having on political integration efforts. We then identify possible ways in which these challenges can be mitigated, and conclude by suggesting a few guiding questions for mediation actors to consider.



Protest against the bombing of Syria opposite the Russian embassy, London, 3 October 2015 - Called by the Syria Solidarity Movement. *(Link to download the picture: IMG_4879-140 | Nearly 100 protest against the bombing of Syr... | Flickr)*

Internationalisation of internal armed conflicts

The landscape of armed conflict is today very different to what it was, for example, in the late twentieth century. Internal armed conflicts are now highly internationalised. External actors are now regularly and directly involved in the military aspects of internal civil wars. Russia's backing of the Assad regime in Syria, the United Arab Emirates' patronage of the main paramilitary group in the war in Sudan, the Saudi coalition's involvement in the war against Houthis in Yemen and Rwanda's backing of the M23 rebel group in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are all examples of the scenario where major global or regional powers choose sides in a national conflict and provide military and financial support either to non-state armed groups or government forces. The participation of foreign funded mercenary groups such as the Russian-sponsored Wagner group is another example of more indirect forms of international involvement sustaining old conflicts or fuelling new ones. While these forms of proxy wars and transnational involvement are behaviours characteristic of the Cold War era, the contemporary dynamics reflect new geopolitical trends with regional powers driving some of the shifts rather than traditional 'super power rivalry'. Crucially, it represents a significant departure from the recent decades' trends of viewing wars primarily as being fought within state boundaries.

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

One consequence of this development is the ability of both armed groups and state forces to sustain warfare for much longer periods. The inflow of external resources from foreign powers can result in protracted conflicts and make the prospects of a hurting stalemate less likely. Another consequence is that the core conflict drivers, that is, the grievances or political motivations of the armed groups that fuelled the conflict to begin with, become secondary to the power politics and ambitions of external patrons and states. For instance, the intervention of the regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran into the conflict in Yemen drew the country into a regional proxy struggle along the Sunni-Shia divide and shifted the focus of the conflict away from the political demands by the Houthi insurgents who had originally sought to overthrow the existing Yemeni regime as a way to improve economic conditions (Center for Preventive Action 2025).

A second consequence of more internationalised conflict is that wars can become more unpredictable. Depending on a patron's strategic behaviour and interests, the power balance between warring parties can shift quickly and unpredictably. The sudden influx of military equipment, for example, can strengthen an NSAG's position in the battlefield, as was the case with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, or weaken it, as was the case in Yemen following the Saudi intervention. Conversely, external military support for government forces can strengthen the incumbent at the cost of opposition movements, as was the case with Russia's involvement in Syria.

A third challenge which the internationalisation of armed conflicts presents is the greater difficulty in reaching political settlements that are necessary for the political integration of armed groups. A political settlement, in any form, would be reliant not only on the primary (domestic) conflict parties, including the non-state armed groups, but also their external patrons and allies. This creates two main dilemmas. First, the interests and goals of domestic actors may differ significantly from those of the external patrons. Second, if foreign powers are the primary actor pursuing negotiations, peace processes may be motivated by 'transactional interests' that lead to short term deals rather than long-term outcomes that address the core grievances of a conflict (Hellmüller and Salaymeh 2025).

How can this challenge be addressed?

Despite the interference of external actors in internal conflicts, it is important to not assume that because NSAGs are part of transnational or regional conflict dynamics or directly funded by external powers, they do not have political ambitions or motivations that can translate to political engagement as part of peace negotiations. When it comes to the political integration of externally-backed NSAGs, a central question worth asking is whether these groups have political motivations which are separate from those of their external patron. It could be that the armed groups' reliance on external support is strategic rather than political and henceforth the alliance may be short lived.

Sudden external shocks, such as the withdrawal of a patron's support, or the emergence of internal divisions within an NSAG, may lead to rapid shifts in the balance of power and create the opportunity for an unexpected stalemate or a ripe moment for peace. Efforts at direct engagement with the NSAG regarding political incentives for disarmament and demilitarisation will therefore remain essential even when it seems that the key strategic factors shaping the conflict are determined by the involvement of other external actors.

Political power within the state, whether at national or sub-regional level, can still be an option for the NSAGs that operate in regional conflict contexts, and may as well reduce dependence on external support quests as their own political influence is enhanced. However, whether this is relevant depends on the nature of the groups themselves such as their origins and links to constituencies, and the identity of the external patron.

Mediator's Checklist

- ✓ Who are the external patrons or allies influencing the NSAG?
- ✓ Are their interests aligned or at odds with local grievances?
- ✓ Is there an opportunity to leverage regional organisations or quiet diplomacy with the foreign backers of the NSAG?
- ✓ How can local political agency be protected or restored in negotiations?

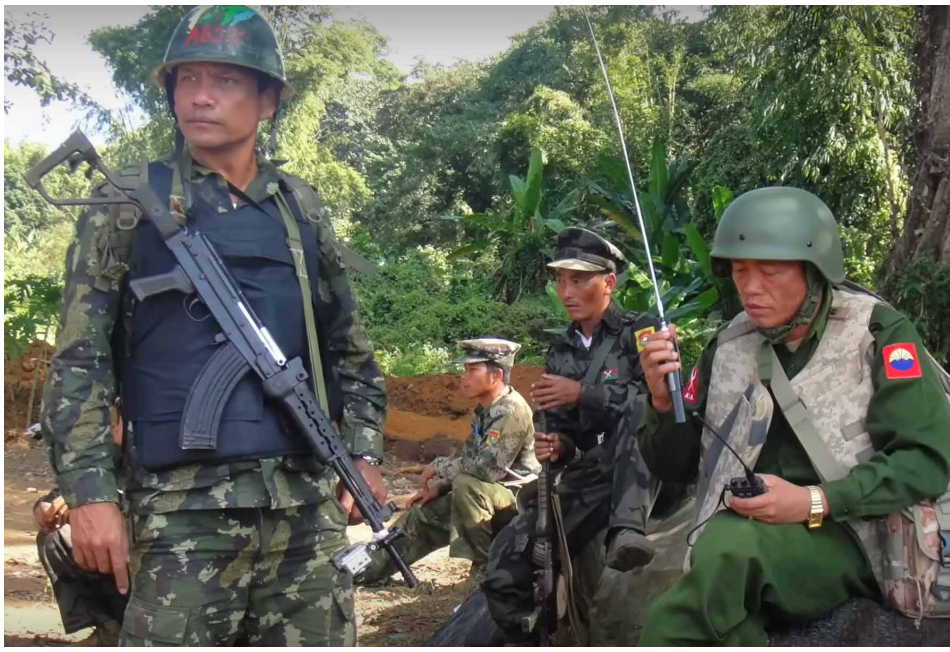
Fragmented landscape of non-state armed groups

Internal armed conflicts are today highly fragmented. Rather than a single armed group emerging to challenge the existing leadership, modern political conflicts are characterised by the participation of multiple armed groups or military factions. While most of the political settlements that were agreed in the 1990s were characterised by negotiations taking place between two main warring parties – the government and one large non-state armed group – many civil wars today include a plethora of armed actors. This is notably the case in Myanmar, Syria, the Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

A fragmented landscape of multiple armed groups poses major challenges to reaching a political settlement and identifying the pathways for the political integration of armed groups. With so many actors, how should negotiations be organised and who should be included?

Kalonge, South Kivu Province, DRC: MONUSCO led a Joint Assessment Mission to Kalonge groupment in South Kivu in April 2023, following increasing reports from civil society about recurrent incursions by armed groups committing several human rights violations against the civilian population. Photos MONUSCO/Michael Ali. *(Link to original picture: A07I5607 | Kalonge,South Kivu Province,DRC: The civil Affair... | Flickr)*



An ABSDF fighter with KIA fighters, Myanmar, March 2025
(Link to download the original image: Search media - Wikimedia Commons)

One key characteristic of the new fragmented conflict landscape is the changing role of the state. In many of the aforementioned cases, the central state is either considerably weakened or at the verge of collapse and is only one of many stakeholders to the conflict. Moreover, sustained armed mobilisation by multiple – and often competing – armed groups has restructured and fragmented state power, providing space for alternative governing models by NSAGs. These dynamics will not only shape the prospects for reaching a political settlement, but also be central to the type of political settlement that can be reached. Importantly, if a regime collapses and armed opposition groups move in to take over the state, their role in state-building and shaping the post-war political order will be more prominent than in contexts where political settlements are premised upon inclusion into pre-existing state structures, such as was the case with the EPRDF in Ethiopia and the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan, but has also featured in the more classical peacebuilding processes in Kosovo, Timor Leste and South Africa.

In contexts where an NSAG has successfully taken control over a specific territory and acted in a governance role for a sustained period of time, any political settlement needs to take account of this reality. In such instances, it will be essential to ascertain the diverse logics which have driven the NSAG's territorial governance practices when outlining the scope for political settlements. In some conflicts, the territory under an armed group's control – alongside their governance provision – may correspond to an 'ethnic' or regional homeland, as with the Kurds in Syria (e.g. Rojava) and the Ethnic Resistance Organisations (EROs) in Myanmar. In such instances the territorial acquisition is an extension of the armed group's political project. This is not dissimilar from traditional peace negotiations that have led to territorial power sharing or special autonomy provisions as exemplified by Aceh in Indonesia (2005) and Bangsamoro in the Philippines (2014).

The political capacity of many non-state armed groups to actually govern in the place of the state will also vary significantly. NSAGs that have been able to successfully establish their de facto authority and governance mechanisms have rarely done so in a vacuum. Some have derived their legitimacy through building alliances with other political actors or local community leaders. Others have developed strong diplomatic fronts, foreign political offices and diaspora links that further bolster their legitimacy and political footing (Sindre 2018; Ishiyama and Sindre 2023). These types of groups can be expected to seek out political settlements that recognise their de facto authority and legitimacy. Importantly, these groups may not necessarily pursue democracy as the primary outcome of any political settlement.

Other NSAGs may enter peace negotiations from a weaker vantage point, both militarily and politically. For instance, militant groups in Northern Nigeria are often perceived as lacking a political agenda, being poorly organised and primarily driven by war economy interests, all of which limit their military

strength. Nevertheless, such groups represent a significant security threat and if ignored may destabilise any political settlement. If excluded from negotiations and agreements, they may move quickly to take over territory or exploit resource acquisition opportunities and become militarily stronger. While such groups may appear to lack a clearly articulated agenda, their popular base may store visions of political change. Individual leaders and combatants may view political inclusion and access to formal and/or informal power as an incentive for reaching a peace settlement.

An additional feature of fragmented conflict landscapes is that NSAGs evolve over time and influence each other's developmental trajectories. Some strategise to build alliances, whether through strategic political calculations or as a result of battlefield logics, and become embedded into armed oppositional coalitions. Other groups may be eradicated as a result of inter-group fighting. Such developments signal the importance of assessing inter-group relations as well as intra-group dynamics when considering pathways and opportunities for political settlements that involve the political integration of NSAGs.

How can this challenge be addressed?

Because there are so many pitfalls associated with a fragmented conflict landscape, mediators seeking to reach political settlements in such contexts need to pay careful attention to wartime legacies and battlefield logics as well as armed groups' organisational and political characteristics.

Any effort at negotiating a political settlement offers an opportunity for rethinking the social contract that was questioned in the first place. Conversely, from a security standpoint, for any settlement to prove stable in the long-term, it needs to reflect the real power dynamics on the ground. This calls for innovation and flexibility in approaches and pathways to political integration. Presented with options, ethno-territorial groups may only wish to pursue political engagement within their specific region. This can be reflected through provisions which allow for DDR and political or security sector integration at the regional or other relevant sub-national level. As the following sections will make clear, the process of mediating political settlements, and through them the political inclusion of an NSAG, may be reliant on using a wider set of negotiating tools and adopting novel forms of thinking around how peace processes are managed.

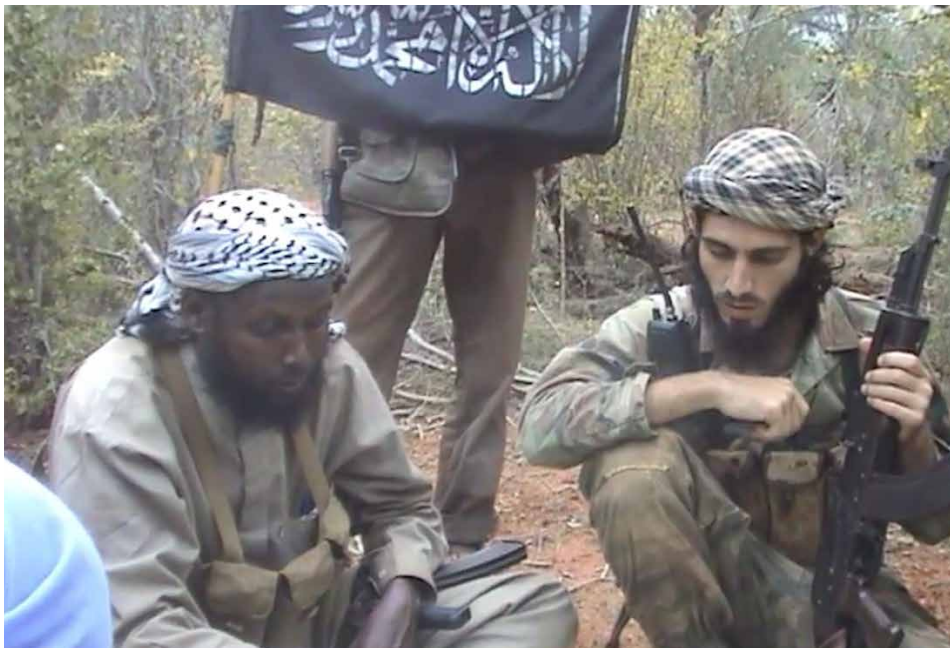
In the context of fragmented conflicts with multiple and diverse actors, the smart sequencing of implementation actions can be an important strategy. Reaching an agreement with one group can be used to incentivise another group to enter peace talks and sign an agreement. In such cases the timing of DDR should be closely linked to the political transformation of the NSAGs. Failure to sequence the DDR processes correctly can lead to instability in the short and medium term, even after a seemingly successful peace agreement has been reached.

Mediator's checklist

- ✓ Have all groups with local influence been identified?
- ✓ Are there any governance structures under NSAG control?
- ✓ Can phased inclusion reduce spoilers?

Armed actors with self-proclaimed Islamist political agendas

A notable trend in the world of contemporary armed conflict is the proliferation of armed actors with a self-proclaimed Islamist political agenda. Such objectives may range from the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate to the increased use of Sharia law. While such actors were unusual only a few decades ago, they are now a defining feature in the majority of intra-state armed conflict across the globe (Nilsson and Svensson 2021). Armed conflicts involving Islamist militant groups range from the Pattani insurgency in southern Thailand to the conflict in the Capo Delgado province in northern Mozambique.



Mukthar Robow and Abu Mansoor Ali Amriki of the Al-Shabaab insurgent group looking over a map while planning an ambush in July 2008. Robow presently serves as the Religious Minister of the Federal Government of Somalia. *(Link to original picture: Search media - Wikimedia Commons)*

This development poses a significant challenge for the peacemaking community. Research shows that Islamist armed conflicts tend to be more violent, more durable, and more difficult to resolve through traditional conflict resolution methods, such as negotiated peace agreements. Several reasons for this have been suggested, although the causes are evidently complex and multifaceted. One contributing factor may be the transnational and fluid nature of many Islamist movements, which enables them to draw on external resources to offset any military losses and remain operational even under significant battlefield pressure (Nilsson and Svensson 2021).

Another reason for the durability of such conflicts may be the often decentralised and fragmented organisational features of Islamist armed groups which makes them less suited to the process of centralised political peace negotiations (Söderberg Kovacs 2020). Ideologically-based movements also run a high risk of internal leadership struggles over strategic and tactical decisions, which makes them vulnerable to organisational splits. Since the establishment of the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State global transnational networks, many armed groups with an Islamist political profile have pledged allegiance to one of these networks, despite often having emerged and mobilised on the basis of very specific and locally grounded grievances (Krause 2024). As a result, these local groups can often find themselves listed as an internationally proscribed armed group, which can further reduce the likelihood of achieving a mediated settlement (Lundgren and Svensson 2020).

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

Beyond the fact that Islamist armed actors are less likely to be offered a seat at the negotiation table, and hence closing the door on one of the most common pathways for political integration (Goldner-Ebenthal and Dudouet 2019), there are several additional factors for why the political integration of these groups remains a significant challenge. The cross-border character of these groups and the nature of their political claims decrease the likelihood of realistic and desirable options for political integration. Whether they explicitly call for

the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate or direct their efforts towards the application of Islamic law at the local or national level, their ideology is often built in opposition to liberal forms of democracy which remain at the core of most comprehensive peace agreements. Although national liberation movements anchored in an Islamic agenda are not by definition set against playing by the democratic rules, an unfortunate precedent was created when Western governments failed to uphold the electoral victory of the Palestinian movement in 2006, which undoubtedly damaged the credibility of liberal democracy among Islamist groups. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021 after failed attempts at a negotiated settlement may have increased perceptions among mediation practitioners that there can be no negotiated political solutions with jihadist groups. The recent developments in Syria since the ousting of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the establishment of a de facto government led by the former Islamist armed movement HTS may constitute an alternative precedent although it is yet too early to tell.

How can this challenge be addressed?

The political integration of any armed group requires a thorough analysis of its political claims and underlying grievances and necessitates a differentiation between its stated ideology and its strategy and tactics.

Research findings suggest that when a group's political aims remain grounded in local realities and grievances, the chances of a political settlement are greater. Once an Islamist armed group has established a formal allegiance with any of the global trans-jihadist networks, this window of opportunity tends to close. This underscores the value of early engagement with such actors. It also suggests that when seeking to engage with a transnational armed group, potential intermediary steps in the right direction could include attempts to delink the group from its global partners, while legitimising its local political claims and institutionalising its local organisational structure. Several Islamist armed groups have developed close relationships with the local communities operating in the areas under their territorial control. These groups have gone on to provide a rudimentary form of local governance, services, and security, as well as engaging with local religious leaders. Research shows that such activity may prompt them to moderate their guiding Islamist ideology and the ways they seek to interpret and apply it (ICRC 2018).

The prevailing assumption that there are few, if any, examples of Islamist armed group transitioning to peaceful politics is a misconception. There are several examples which can serve as useful illustrations of both the obstacles and opportunities involved in the political integration of Islamist groups. In 2005 and 2014, comprehensive peace agreements were signed with GAM in Aceh, Indonesia and with the MILF in Mindanao, Philippines, respectively. Both groups subsequently transformed into political parties and have since participated in local elections and joined political institutions. These actions demonstrate the ability of Islamist groups to integrate their Islamic principles into their governance models (such as Sharia law in Aceh and 'moral governance' in Mindanao) while abiding by the rules of competitive electoral democracy. Several other Islamist armed groups have also abandoned the armed struggle in favour of peaceful politics through other pathways (Krause and Söderberg Kovacs 2023). For example, the Gamaa Islamiya in Egypt laid down its arms following the granting of prison amnesties, and its members took part in the peaceful revolution in 2011, subsequently forming a political party to compete in parliamentary elections (Ashour 2015). There are also examples of Islamist armed groups who have transitioned to peaceful social activism in Indonesia (Matesan 2020).

In some instances, pre-existing political parties have demonstrated their ability to absorb former members of an armed group. In 2015, the Afghani armed group Hezb-e Islami – which had been active since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – entered into formal negotiations with the Afghan government which resulted in a peace deal the following year. Because its ideological programme was already represented at the state level through its affiliated political party Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan, armed leaders saw the potential to pursue their

objectives through institutional politics (Rahim 2018).

A recent example with far-reaching potential to change the established narrative around the political integration of Islamist armed groups is the coming to power in Syria in December 2024 a de facto regime led by the former Islamist armed movement HTS. HTS has signalled its intention to establish a regime resting both on the values and teachings of political Islam and an inclusive political and social contract (Drevon 2024). This ongoing transition, and its acknowledgement by the international community through e.g. the removal of the group's terrorist designation, could create a powerful precedent and strong appeal for other locally rooted jihadist groups, showing that there is an effective path to demilitarisation and political integration.

The UN Security Council Extends Mandate of Team Monitoring Sanctions against Taliban-Linked Entities in Afghanistan, 16 December 2022 *(Credit: UN Photo/Loey Felipe, Link to original picture: United Nations Photo - 20221216_LF_2077.tif)*

Mediator's checklist

- ✓ Is the group primarily locally rooted, or bases its claims on local grievances?
- ✓ Has it pledged allegiance to any global jihadist networks?
- ✓ Are there entry points for negotiation through service provision or religious leaders?

Increasing use of proscription of armed groups

Another contemporary trend that has had a strong influence on the perception of, and the prospects for, the political integration of NSAGs as a realistic and desirable tool for peacemaking since the 9/11 attacks is the increasing use of terrorist proscriptions (Lundgren et al. 2024). Proscription is a political tool applied by both governments and intergovernmental organisations and involves using counter-terrorism frameworks for combatting and managing armed groups. Many experts, however, believe that the terrorist listings maintained by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the US government are some of the greatest obstacles to the peaceful resolution of contemporary armed conflicts.

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

Listing an armed group as a terrorist organisation has limited the opportunities for peaceful conflict resolution efforts, notably by hindering the ability of third parties, including local bridge-builders, to engage with an NSAG (Dudouet and

Göldner-Ebenthal 2019; Haspeslagh 2021). By viewing an armed group primarily through the lens of counterterrorism and focusing efforts on the prevention of so-called 'violent extremism', primacy is placed on a group's violent activities at the expense of the political claims and the core grievances that originally motivated them and continue to mobilise their followers.

Listing also tends to affect the conflict dynamics on the ground in such a way that they become self-reinforcing, for example by forcing armed groups to go underground and move their operations abroad, contributing to fragmentation and radicalisation inside the group and enhancing the risk that they will establish links with both trans-jihadist and organised criminal networks. With listing, the political aspects of the armed struggle become harder to recognise; it becomes increasingly difficult to envision policy solutions within the realm of tested conflict resolution mechanisms, including those aimed at political integration.

How can this challenge be addressed?

First, it is essential to establish a more transparent system for terrorist listings. Clear criteria for both listing and delisting armed groups needs to be agreed and implemented, especially by the major international inter-governmental organisations. Delisting is often the first important step towards political integration, as the case of the FARC-EP in Colombia (Haspeslagh 2021) or as the 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement between the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People' Liberation Front (TPLF) demonstrate. Proscription regimes need to be more nuanced, for example opening up for considering possibilities to de-list a nationally or locally based Islamist armed group in exchange for its agreement to break its ties with global trans-jihadist networks. This creates the opportunity to use terrorist listings in a more strategic manner, as a positive incentive ('carrot') instead of solely as a negative sanction ('stick').

Another possibility could be the delisting of a political wing of an armed group as part of a package of incentives alongside political party development. In both the Basque Country (Spain) and the Kurdish region of Türkiye, political parties affiliated with proscribed armed groups have successfully entered legal politics. While the previous incarnation of these political parties had been proscribed, their delisting meant that their successors were able to compete in democratic elections.

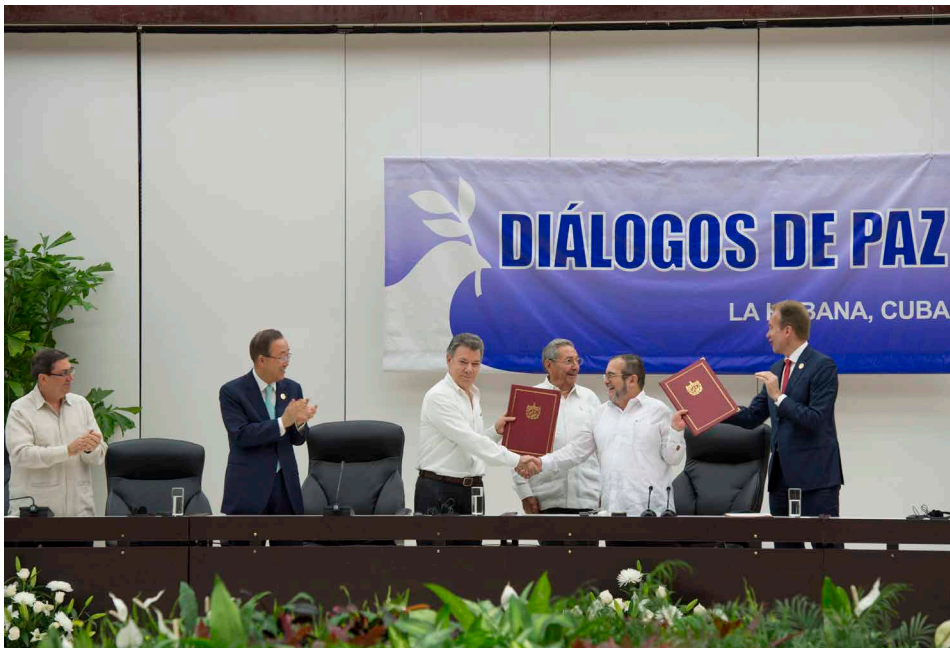
For those groups that remain listed, their options are more limited. However, the updated and revised international standards for DDR (IDDRS) states that reintegration support can be provided to former combatants and associates who voluntarily leave these groups (IDDRS). As such, including briefings on options for political integration during the rehabilitation process or implementing a project on political integration in community-based reintegration programming remains at least a theoretical possibility in those contexts.

Mediator's checklist

- ✓ Can delisting be used strategically as a 'carrot' to incentivise peace and transformation?
- ✓ Is there a distinction between an NSAG's armed and political wings?

Decline of peace agreements

Another trend that constitutes a potential obstacle to the political integration of armed groups is the decline of negotiated peace settlements. In the period that followed the end of the Cold War, most major armed conflicts were resolved by negotiated peace deals between the warring parties. Since the mid-1990s, however, there has been a gradual decline in the number of peace agreements (Farquhar et al. 2024).



Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, President of Colombia, shakes hands with Timoleón Jiménez, Commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP), at the ceremony in Havana for the signing of a ceasefire and the laying down of arms. At their side are Raúl Castro Ruz, President of Cuba; Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Cuba; UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. *(Link to the picture: Ceremony for Colombian Ceasefire Agreement, Havana | Flickr)*

This trend should be seen in light of the changing nature of peacemaking more generally, particularly the departure from the prevailing idea that violent armed conflicts require political solutions (Whitfield 2024). While peacemaking in the first decades after the end of the Cold War was strongly characterised by negotiated peace agreements, this model became seriously challenged by the shift away from a unipolar American-led international order to a multipolar world with new geopolitical configurations. This shift has not least hampered the role that the UN and other intergovernmental organisations have been able to play as peacemakers (Aall et al. 2020). In the wake of this power shift, the global norms guiding peacemaking have also changed. Peacemaking efforts are now directed towards a stronger reliance on transactional peacemaking, an approach which prioritises bilateral deals over multilateral approaches, interests over norms, and short-term gains over long-term outcomes (Hellmüller and Salaymeh 2025).

Parallel to this development, and driven strongly by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, there has been a significant shift in the international norms directed towards NSAGs. As a result, political processes focused on conflict resolution have been increasingly replaced with military-led approaches intended to restore the monopoly of violence in the hands of the legal state authority through counterterrorism activities and stabilisation efforts and a renewed acceptability of total military victory (Howard and Stark 2018). In spite of receiving greater attention in the absence of political settlements, ceasefire agreements have also declined over the last decades (Clayton et al. 2022).

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

Many of the negotiated settlements signed in previous decades built on the fundamental idea that by addressing some of the core grievances that caused a civil war to begin with, the chances for sustainable peace would increase. As most civil wars were considered to be rooted in real or perceived experiences of political, economic and social exclusion, a core feature of these agreements was the establishment of institutions and reforms aimed at increased political inclusion. This often included the political integration of the NSAG signatories, notably by supporting

their transformation into legal political parties (Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016). In the 1990s and 2000s, some of the most well-known cases of rebel-to-party transformations emerged as the result of such negotiated settlements, for example the deals agreed with the Renamo in Mozambique, the FMLN in El Salvador, the Maoists in Nepal, and the GAM in the Aceh province of Indonesia.

Research has shown that the content of a peace agreement has an important effect on both the incentives and opportunities for political integration during a war-to-peace transition. The terms of a settlement can create path dependencies that can shape the post-agreement trajectories of former armed groups long after the peace process has concluded. This commonly includes provisions for elections, political power sharing, DDR, amnesty, military integration, and 'rebel-to-party' provisions explicitly stating the right of the formerly illegal or banned armed group to participate in politics. Almost half (48.9 percent) of the armed groups which later transformed into political parties signed at least one peace agreement that included specific rebel-to-party provisions (Söderberg Kovacs and Martínez 2022).

For example, the collective transformation of the FARC-EP into a political party was a central component of the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement in Colombia. The peace agreement included several provisions that together aimed to support the former armed group's political integration. In addition to conditions guaranteeing the participation of the FARC-EP's political party in general elections and reserved seats in the Colombian Congress for two consecutive terms, the agreement also included other provisions aimed at strengthening the rights of the political opposition and electoral reform. Experience from several peace processes suggests that institutional safeguards protecting political competition are critical. Even if the former armed party does not secure as many votes as it had hoped in the first post-war elections (which is often the case), interim arrangements can serve as a guarantee of political influence in the immediate post-accord period and prevent or reduce the risk of recidivism during the political transition. However, with the recent decline in comprehensive peace agreements, one of the historically most common entry points for political integration of non-state armed groups is in short supply.

How can this challenge be addressed?

First, it is important to acknowledge that negotiated peace settlements are not a prerequisite for political integration. Historically, a large number of armed groups have transformed into political actors on the basis of military victories. This includes many of the so-called African liberation movements who fought against colonial powers to achieve independence, such as the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda and Frelimo in Mozambique, but also other victorious armed movements such as the Rwandan Patriotic Front, led by Paul Kagame, which took control of the country in 1994 and has been in power ever since. One of the most recent and best known examples is the Taliban in Afghanistan which, after a military takeover in 2021 leading to the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, have governed the country ever since. Most recently, the Sunni militant Islamist group HTS was able to successfully oust the long-term Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 and became the de facto rulers of the country.

While the number of peace agreements being signed worldwide has gradually declined, they are far from completely absent political instruments. For example, in 2023, several different types of security, humanitarian or political agreements were in signed in Colombia, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Farquhar et al. 2024). While only a small proportion of these agreements were categorised as comprehensive peace agreements (CPAs), it is possible to argue that CPAs have always been rare occurrences, even in the 1990s. Importantly, the political integration of armed groups is not exclusively a product of CPAs: ceasefire deals or partial agreements may also form the basis for political integration and some of these agreements may also include rebel-to-party provisions.

A recent illustrative example is the case of the joint statement between the government of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front (NDF) that was announced in November 2023. In the

agreement, the parties stated that if negotiations were successful, the rebels would end their armed struggle and transform into a political movement. Another example is the 2018 agreement between the government of Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Ending the 34-year insurgency in eastern Ethiopia's Somali Region State, it allowed the ONLF to undertake a peaceful political struggle in Ethiopia.

Theoretically, political integration could also form a positive component of locally negotiated peace agreements. Representatives of local communities – such as local government authorities, community elders, religious or traditional leaders, or business owners – sometimes engage in direct negotiations with armed groups active in their area, including factions of proscribed armed groups. These local stakeholders, also called 'insider mediators', often have better knowledge of the conflict dynamics on the ground, better access to potential interlocutors, and greater legitimacy than national government actors in many of today's armed conflicts (Bell and Wise 2022). They may also have greater incentives to resolve these conflicts, and fewer preconditions, normative red lines, and preconceived outcomes. They are also likely to share many of the local grievances that these armed groups voice. As such, there is great potential for political integration and local political reforms in locally negotiated peace agreements.

Mediator's checklist

- ✓ Can local/partial agreements be used as entry points for political inclusion?
- ✓ Are actors prepared for phased engagement?

Declining appeal of political integration in flawed democracies

Today's peacemaking efforts are unfolding against the background of a global decline in the perceived credibility and legitimacy of multi-party democracy as the most optimal or desirable model for political governance, especially at the national political level. Not only are we witnessing a general democratic backsliding in the world (Nord et al. 2025, Holm 2025), but we are also most likely facing the end of a prolonged era of liberal peacemaking which began and perhaps peaked in the 1990s and strongly shaped the preferred approach of war-to-peace transitions. This has a profound effect on the content of negotiated peace agreements.

Creating and supporting the opening of political space in war-torn societies through the (re) establishment or strengthening of democratic institutions and procedures, such as the holding of elections, rebel-to-party transformations, and power sharing arrangements, may no longer necessarily be the most preferred way for non-state armed actors and governments alike to pursue peace. Many of them have become disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises of democracy in the past. Many states that formally became multi-party democracies in the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War, are today best characterised as semi-democracies or even semi-autocracies, and are often falling short of delivering the expected political reforms, security, and state services that a more educated and informed population is increasingly demanding.

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

There are many reasons to believe that traditional party politics is a less attractive pathway for the post-war political integration of an NSAG than it was just one or two decades ago.

When multi-party democracy is weakened or flawed, governments are often seen as less legitimate powerholders by opponents. This creates a lack of trust in state institutions and a lack of government credibility during any peace

In Datu Piang, 82 locals from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) community hurdled challenges of access and security to build a water system. About 34 per cent of local workers engaged by the project were women, while 32 per cent were former combatants. (*Link to original picture: Safe water for peace, decent work in Maguindanao | In Datu P... | Flickr)*

negotiations. If there are no checks and balances in place to hold a government accountable to its promises and concessions, it becomes more difficult to reach an agreement in the first place: the commitment to implementation is simply less credible. Moreover, a decrease in the prospect of accessing peace dividends through peacebuilding and development support also shifts the incentives and benefits associated with pursuing formal party politics in the first place (Cho et al. 2022). In more consolidated democratic systems, free media and public oversight contribute to hold political leaders accountable. When these are weakened, corruption and the abuse of power often thrive. This erosion of democratic practices typically leads to the marginalisation or repression of opposition parties, civil society groups, and minority voices. Exclusion can fuel grievances and intensify conflicts, making it harder to reach peace agreements. Furthermore, if the political system is seen as biased or dysfunctional, this can hinder the ability of armed groups to envision a political future beyond armed conflict and short of military victory.

How can this challenge be addressed?

If integration into formal politics is not perceived as the ideal governance model, then alternative pathways need to be envisioned for an armed group's political participation. This does not necessarily mean that the fundamental idea of political integration per se is no longer relevant, but it should prompt mediators to think more creatively and outside the box of traditional party politics. In essence, most civil wars still stem from perceived political, economic and social grievances and a sense of exclusion from power and influence, which suggests that while conventional pathways for political integration may need to be revised, aspirations for political agency should remain at the centre of peacemaking practices.

The political environment plays a crucial role in shaping possible pathways for an armed group's transformation. A careful analysis of the existing political system and context can help guide a group's vision for its political future. For example, if the political space is perceived as closed or if party politics carries a negative connotation of corruption and dishonesty, a group may prefer to avoid formal politics altogether. Therefore, transformation approaches must be grounded in a comprehensive analysis of the group's goals, and structures, as well as the broader opportunity structures that shape their environment.

In countries like Chad, Ethiopia, and the DRC, where multi-party systems exist in theory but political space remains constrained or non-existent, the pathway from armed group to political party is fraught with challenges. When political parties hold little sway in a given country, there is neither sufficient incentives nor viable opportunities for armed groups to pursue democratic approaches to

political participation. Similarly, when the formal political arena is already crowded, the chances of electoral success for new parties are often limited. In such cases, alternative forms of political engagement, such as joining social movements, interest groups, or CSOs, may offer more viable routes for participation outside of party politics.

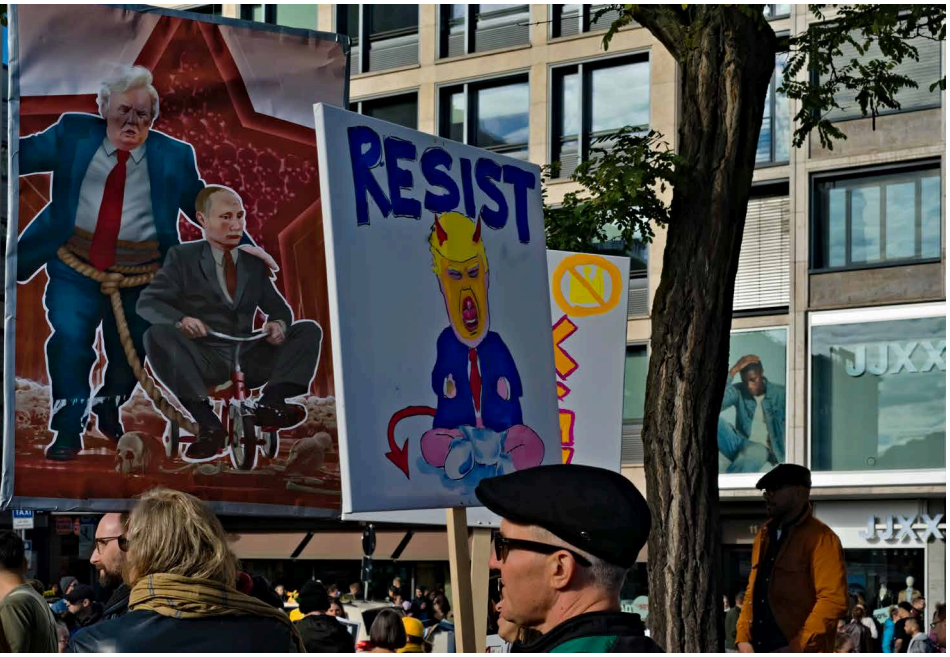
Another important consideration is the level at which political engagement is possible or meaningful. If national-level political participation is unlikely to succeed, focusing on local or regional political pathways may be more appropriate, especially for community-based or locally rooted armed groups. Peace processes and ensuing settlements between national governments and sub-national armed groups are often marked by asymmetry: the state operates at a national level, while the armed group's legitimacy and demands are rooted in local contexts. In such cases, entering national politics may not adequately address the group's grievances. Including decentralisation or devolution mechanisms in peace agreements can help to ensure that these sub-national concerns are meaningfully addressed. In the 2019 Maputo agreement in Mozambique, the terms of political participation for Renamo were renegotiated to address perceived injustices in the setup of the political system.

Insider mediation efforts at regional and local levels have been recognised as helping to expand the space for previously excluded actors to participate meaningfully in peace processes. Women, marginalised communities, and traditional leaders who are often excluded from national-level negotiations have found a stronger voice through local mediation. This, in turn, has opened up new pathways to political influence and inclusion for groups historically excluded from national power structures.

Finally, if checks and balances are missing in a political system, the provision of joint monitoring bodies, comprised of members of both conflict parties and supported by international allies can create the necessary oversight to incentivise both sides of the conflict to deliver on a peace implementation plan. An illustrative example is the design of the implementation of the 2014 peace agreement between the government of the Philippines and the MILF.

Mediator's checklist

- ✓ Is the formal political space open or restricted?
- ✓ Are alternative platforms (CSOs, social movements, local governance) available?
- ✓ Would local or informal integration be more credible than participation in national elections?



"No Kings" anti-trump movement: demonstration in Frankfurt, Germany *(Link to Original Picture: Anti-Trump protest | Frankfurt, Hauptwache "No Kings" moveme... | conceptphoto.info | Flickr)*

Emergence of new geopolitical realities

The current geopolitical landscape offers another challenge to the conflict resolution models that have dominated the immediate post-Cold War era. Countries in the Global South are increasingly critical of what is seen as the hypocrisy of Western values and international interventions (Whitfield 2024). The result has been an erosion of the credibility and legitimacy of peace support actors traditionally located in the West. Compounding this, the United Nations, once a central pillar of international peacemaking, now faces the diminution of its influence due to both external pressure and internal blockages, particularly within the Security Council. Geopolitical rivalries have exacerbated divisions, rendering the Council largely ineffective in the face of major crises such as the Israel-Hamas conflict and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This inability to act has called the UN's legitimacy and composition increasingly into question.

Meanwhile, more and more governments across the globe have started to embrace authoritarianism as an attractive form of governance. In this context, the liberal norms and values historically promoted by Western actors in mediation are becoming less accepted or desirable among conflict parties.

Replacing the prominence of Western-led initiatives, so-called new actors in the peacemaking field are on the rise. Several Gulf countries, Türkiye, Russia and China are increasingly positioning themselves as peace mediators. While all external interventions are interest-driven to some extent, several of these new mediators are also direct stakeholders in the conflicts within which they are seeking to mediate (Hellmüller and Salaymeh 2025). This behaviour has raised critical concerns about their impartiality and the potential for a biased outcome of any mediated settlement.

The growing prominence of these new mediators, as well as the source of the resources at their disposal, have led many Western third-party actors working in the field of mediation and peace process support to perceive a shift in their role: away from directly convening and shaping peace negotiations towards the provision of platforms and infrastructures that support peace processes more generally.

The increasing number of external actors active within a single conflict context can lead to the fragmentation of peace efforts and create a degree of competition over access to stakeholders, influence, relevance, and visibility. This competition is harmful to the prospect of achieving peace, as it diverts resources, leads to duplication of peace efforts, and can even harm conflict dynamics and affected communities.

Why is this a challenge for political integration?

The fragmentation of peace initiatives moves the prospect of peace away from a negotiated comprehensive settlement towards partial agreements, temporary humanitarian truces on a

more limited scale, tactical (e.g. prisoner exchange) deals, or local ceasefires. Such agreements tend to address the symptoms of armed conflict rather than its root causes and thus lead to a de-politicisation of the peacemaking process, this is despite the fact that intra-state conflicts are, in most cases, rooted in grievances over exclusion from power and/or resources and are, thus, inherently political. Without addressing these core issues, peace agreements face high risks of failure or stagnation at the implementation stage.

The rise of these "new" mediators carries with it the risk that these actors may not carry a vision of politics that is based on democracy, participation and inclusivity and may be less inclined to promote the political integration of armed groups or to adopt an inclusive approach to peacemaking. Under such conditions, NSAG leaders may be granted individual incentives, such as a position in government, while the mediators neglect to address wider aspirations for political integration from within the armed group. As the research shows, a broad buy-in on the part of the majority of NSAG members is needed in order for an agreement to hold and be implementable (Ishiyama 2022; Cho et al. 2022). If the rank-and-file membership and the constituency of an armed group feel excluded from peace dividends and access to political leverage, the risk of splintering and recidivism increases. This risk can be further enhanced if peace processes are driven by expediency and the drive for quick results, without allowing the conflict parties sufficient time to conduct broader internal consultations.

How can this challenge be addressed?

While the rise of new mediators may intensify competition among third party actors, it also opens the door for innovation and collaboration. Indeed, actors pursuing complementary approaches to mediation could foster useful synergies if these "multimediation" scenarios are deliberately coordinated. New mediators, for example, tend to be less restrained in engaging with terrorist-proscribed groups and may provide new opportunities for meaningful engagement with these actors. Earlier engagement with proscribed actors could provide a space for these groups to envision a non-armed political future, a process which is critical if these groups are to achieve a successful political transformation. At the same time, Western actors could provide complementary engagement with the government side of a peace negotiation by encouraging a lateral thinking through of the options for allowing political participation, backed by reconstruction and development assistance incentives.

More systematic multi-actor coordination and an effective distribution of roles between different mediation actors can also open up a space for third parties to facilitate internal negotiations within the conflict parties. Evidence of the political integration of armed groups shows the importance of maintaining intra-group cohesion for the successful implementation of peace agreements. Supporting internal dialogue between leaders and their rank-and-file members can lay the foundation for broader participation and support for political transformation and may promote the adoption of more inclusive political norms.

Mediator's checklist

- ✓ Are different mediators working at cross purposes and can their roles be divided strategically?
- ✓ Is political inclusion on the agenda or is it being sidelined?
- ✓ Are internal dialogues being supported to maintain group cohesion?

Implications and considerations for mediation actors

This final section draws on the identified trends, and related challenges and opportunities, to offer key recommendations for mediators and other peace support actors to consider when preparing or conducting peace negotiations – nationally or locally, formally or informally – between government actors and one or several NSAGs.

1. **Tailor strategies to the NSAG's political motivations**
   Even in proxy wars where local NSAGs are sponsored by international actors, mediators should seek to engage directly with the NSAG and determine its internal political aspirations, rather than viewing it only through the lens of its external patrons.

2. **Build internal consensus within the NSAG**
   Support intra-group dialogue as a way to strengthen the organisational cohesion necessary to prevent splintering, especially during the early phases of a transition to political engagement.

3. **Recognise and navigate group fragmentation**
   Conduct a detailed mapping of the NSAG's organisational structure and operational landscape. Seek to understand its inter- and intra-group dynamics in order to identify and support flexible integration approaches.

4. **Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches**
   Adapt political integration strategies to accommodate NSAG objectives, be they national-level influence, regional autonomy, or informal engagement through civil society or social movements.

5. **Sequence DDR and political reform as parallel processes**
   Ensure that DDR processes are timed and sequenced to align with the political incentives being offered to an NSAG so that they do not undermine the conditions necessary for its political transformation.

6. **Engage early with Islamist armed groups**
   Early efforts at dialogue can help distinguish local political grievances from transnational jihadist agendas and open up space for potential political integration before alliances with global extremist networks harden.

7. **Incentivise moderation through political pathways**
   Use the promise of political participation, legal recognition, and governance roles to encourage moderation and ideological evolution within an NSAG.

8. **Push for transparent and flexible proscription regimes**
   Advocate for clear, reversible terrorist listing criteria and explore partial delisting (e.g., of political wings) as a tool to incentivise NSAGs towards peaceful transformation.

9. **Leverage locally led peace initiatives**
   Support and legitimise insider mediators and locally negotiated political settlements. These can be more influential with certain NSAGs than national-level agreements.

10. **Reframe inclusion beyond party politics**
    If formal political systems are weak or discredited, offer the NSAG alternative avenues of political influence, such as sub-national governance, local councils, or civil society/social movement participation and mobilisation.

11. **Accept alternative integration models short of liberal frameworks**
    Be open to political integration models that are not necessarily rooted in liberal institutional frameworks if they reflect legitimate and inclusive governance arrangements.

12. **Focus on power dynamics, not solely on institution building**
    Ensure that political integration efforts reflect actual wartime power structures and are not solely tied to institutional templates or formal agreements.

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