Impossible Peace?

Expert workshop, University of York, 11 March 2016

This workshop - funded by Dr Nina Caspersen's Fellowship from the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences - brought together area specialists, conflict scholars and practitioners to discuss what can be done to resolve the most challenging intra-state conflicts. Namely conflicts that involve many factions and/or external actors, that are characterized by extreme levels of violence, that have lasted for decades and where fears, grievances and mistrust have become deeply entrenched, or where the rebel forces have gained de facto independence. The speakers drew on a range of different cases - including Liberia, Israel-Palestine, Kosovo, Fiji, Nagorno Karabakh, East Timor and West Papua- to explore topics such as third party intervention, intra-communal dynamics, bottom-up approaches, interim agreements, territorial self-governance and other possible solutions. Many of the speakers stressed that peace is very challenging but not impossible. However, it may require a rethink of existing approaches, greater creativity, and context-specific peace processes and solutions.

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3 Panels

10 Speakers

Panel 1: Getting to Peace

The opening panel explored the opportunities and constraints for finding solutions to intra-state conflicts.

Dr Alan Kuperman (University of Texas) started off by presenting the case of Liberia which he described as the one case where international intervention actually made things better. He argued that this was because third parties did the opposite of what is usually done. He emphasized the relatively small military intervention and identified three lessons: 1) muscular mediation: bolster the weaker side, but threaten to withdraw support once they start winning and push for a compromise, 2) do not reward rebels for provoking violence; deter their maximalist aims, 3) Permit regime elements to survive.

Dr Kristin Bakke (University College London) proceeded to examine the importance of intra-communal dynamics, in particular the effects of a fragmented opposition movement. She stressed that this is the normal state of affairs, even in ethnic conflicts, and explained how fragmentation makes violence more likely; complicates bargaining and mediation efforts, for example by making it harder to persuade governments to make the necessary concessions; and is likely to prolong the war. Fragmentation can have several causes, including the presence of foreign fighters, and must be recognized by third parties intervening in a conflict. For example, strategies for humanitarian intervention need to consider from whom civilians are to be protected.

Andy Carl (founder of Conciliation Resources) wrapped up the panel by talking about his experiences from 21 years with Conciliation Resources. This work has stressed the importance of following and

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supporting the people, of providing safe spaces where local communities can discuss, develop trust and confidence. Andy Carl pointed to the risk of developing "a toolbox" for solving conflicts, which tends to oversimplify causes and complexity and put too much faith in hard power. He stressed that what we have done collectively has worked, and it is important to remember how difficult things used to be, also in the successful cases. But he called for the development of new ideas and argued that we should not be afraid to fail.

Panel 2: From Process to Outcome

The second panel focused on the specifics of the peace process and the challenges it presents. The three speakers all emphasized the importance of processes at different levels, but also the difficulty of connecting these different tracks.

Dr Jacob Eriksson (University of York) focused on mediation strategies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He stressed the potential contribution of third parties, and focused on the small state mediation which can be particularly important in facilitating informal, clandestine talks. However the challenge is to lift these results up to a political level; the secrecy constitutes a barrier as the public will not be prepared. Dr Jacob Eriksson suggested that there is a need for multiple actors playing different roles in the process, including that of trusted facilitator, external powers willing to play the bad cop, and third parties ensuring accountability in case of violations of the agreed terms.

Dr Gezim Visoka (Dublin City University) focused on the EU-mediated talks between Kosovo and Serbia and asked if there is a distinct EU approach to peace-building, based on technical low-politics interactions, spillovers and elite transformations. The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has been characterized by such a "neo-functional peace" approach and has focused on normalization rather than the divisive issue of status: starting with the most marginal technical issues, thereby avoiding confrontation. Dr Gezim Visoka pointed to the progress made, even on highly politicized issues. But he also noted the limitations of this approach: the process stalled once political elites became involved, once it moved to Track I.

The problem of linking Track II and Track I processes was also central to the arguments made by the panel's last speaker, **Ciaran O'Toole (Conciliation Resources).** His talk focused on the constitutional development process in Fiji. Conciliation Resources played a large part in this process which involved extensive community consultation. However tensions emerged between the constitution commission and the regime, and the latter eventually embargoed the constitution and drafted their own. This case demonstrates that the opening of space for public participation can foster momentum and the potential of change. However the expedited and private drafting of the constitution made the regime suspicious and did not give time for the elites to process the potential solutions.

Panel 3: Possible Solutions

The final panel examined different solutions to these conflicts. The speakers all pointed to the importance of the conflict context, including intra-communal dynamics, for the outcome and for its sustainability.

Dr Argyro Kartsonaki & Professor Stefan Wolff (University of Birmingham) focused on the utility of territorial self-governance as a mechanism for conflict mitigation. They argued that the success of such arrangements depends on their specific design and fit with the conflict context; it depends on the ability to address actors' motives and ameliorate aspects of conflict feasibility. They stressed that it is necessary to preserve, and sometimes enhance, the viability and sustainability of the overall state. Territorial self-governance therefore typically needs to be combined with state-wide human and minority rights legislation, local power-sharing, tailored fiscal decentralization, administrative capacity building, and mechanisms for coordination and dispute resolution.

Dr Nina Caspersen (University of York) focused on interim peace agreements which postpone the final decision on the status of the contested territory and grants autonomy in the interim period. She analyzed five cases where such an agreement has been reached (Sudan, Bougainville, Serbia & Montenegro, Israel-Palestine and Chechnya) and used this to assess the prospect for an interim agreement for Nagorno Karabakh. She argued that interim agreements can provide a solution in cases where separatist forces have achieved de facto independence, but only under certain conditions, related to divisions within the breakaway region; the balance of power between the two sides; and the use of ambiguity.

Dr Claire Smith (University of York) concluded the panel with a comparison of East Timor and West Papua. Two very similar cases, with two very dissimilar outcomes: The Indonesian Government accepted the independence of East Timor but denied it for West Papua and instead resorted to illiberal peacebuilding. Dr Smith argued that although part of the explanation can be found in the different status in international law of the two territories, and the resulting difference in international pressure, we also need to consider elite dynamics. At the national level, a more hardline leader came to power after East Timor gained independence; while at the regional level, the Papuan elite lacked coherence.