CHAPTER 11

Mediation Trends and Ways Forward

Isak Svensson[1]

Introduction

In our increasingly violent, conflict-prone world, mediators have never been more needed. Historically, mediation has been such an effective way to manage, terminate and resolve armed conflicts that it has overshadowed other tools of conflict management, which have lost their relevance or potency over time. Our age should thus be the prime time for mediation, but looking at the world today, that is not what we observe. In fact, mediation is becoming less effective.

The existing measures of successful peacemaking show a decline over time. Fewer peace agreements are reached; fewer ceasefires are negotiated; and fewer negotiations between conflict parties are initiated by mediators. This presents us with a puzzling development: the mismatch between the growing need for mediation and the dwindling effectiveness of peacemaking practice. The chief explanation for this asymmetry is that the job of contemporary mediators has become more difficult.[2] In particular, three global trends are reshaping the nature of conflicts and mediators' ability to manage them effectively: the changing world order; the increasing involvement of radical actors, particularly Islamist armed actors in armed conflicts; and the global wave of state-based ethnonationalism. Mediators need to adapt to these changes to be able to meet the needs and fulfil the potential of international mediation.[3]

This chapter is divided into four parts. In the first, I will explore the need for mediation, and in the second, the decline in peacemaking success. In part three, I will examine potential explanations for the decline, discussing how three major trends affect the ability of mediators

[1] Special thanks to the Swedish Research Council for funding for my ongoing research project on which this chapter is based, and to my research assistant, Jakob Faller.

[2] On the supply and demand of mediation in a changing world, see Magnus Lundgren, Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, "Unwilling or unwanted? Explaining the decline of mediation in armed conflicts", paper prepared for the Conflict Research Society Conference, 17–19 September 2025.

[3] Teresa Whitfield, *Still Time to Talk: Adaptation and Innovation in Peace Mediation*, Accord No. 30 (London, Conciliation Resources, February 2024).

to be effective. In the fourth and concluding section, I will discuss potential implications for mediators that may stimulate discussions among policymakers on how to adapt and make mediation more effective in a challenging time, including by taking historical mediation experiences into account to a larger degree.

A World in Urgent Need of Mediation

There is an increasing need for mediation. The latest report from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) recorded 61 active armed conflicts within and between countries. These are situations where at least one government is involved and that have resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths. This is the highest number of armed conflicts registered at any time since the end of the Second World War, when UCDP records began,[4] suggesting that there have been an unprecedented number of occasions in which mediators could have acted.

More people are also being killed as a result of armed conflict. The last four years have seen the highest levels of fatalities in state-based conflicts since 1989 when data collection started. UCDP reports that 128,400 people died in battle in 2024, nearly 60 per cent of whom were killed in the Russia-Ukraine war – only a slight decrease from 2023. We are thus living in a more violent world, and higher conflict intensity should incentivize mediators to engage.

It should be clarified that the two indicators commonly used to measure violence – the number of conflicts worldwide and the global aggregate of conflict intensity – are distinct empirical processes, partly driven by different factors. In particular, conflict intensity is strongly associated with individual conflicts and is determined by how they evolve. Conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Gaza and Ukraine have been the major armed conflicts shaping casualty statistics over the last two decades. The trendline in global battle statistics fluctuates because it depends on developments in specific countries, but 2011 seems to be a turning point, for both the growing number of battle-related deaths and the increased number of conflicts.

Mediation has been shown to be an effective way to resolve conflicts and limit violence. "Mediation" as used here describes a range of diplomatic activities that an actor not directly involved in the conflict engages in to bring the belligerent sides closer together.[5] Mediation rests on the consent of the parties to the conflict; parties need to accept both the process through which mediation is carried out and the outcome that follows from such a process. Unlike arbitration, parties are not legally bound to accept mediators' suggestions, which are instead a focus for political negotiations. Mediation is always carried out by at least one individual; it is, at its core, a social, human-to-human process. At the same time, the individual mediator almost always acts on a mandate from a state or an organization (or both), and mediation is therefore a mechanism of inter-state and international relations.

[4] Shawn Davies and others, "Organized violence 1989–2024, and the challenges of identifying civilian victims," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 62, No. 4 (2025), pp. 1223–1240.

[5] On conceptual clarifications on mediation, see Jacob Bercovitch, Theodore J. Anagnoson and Donnette L. Wille, "Some conceptual issues and empirical trends in the study of successful mediation in international relations", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 28, No. 1 (1991); Peter Wallensteen and Isak Svensson, "Talking peace: international mediation in armed conflicts", Journal of Peace Research, vol. 51, No. 2 (2014). On the relationship between mediation and mediation support, see Govinda Clayton, Allard Duursma and Simon Mason, "What is peace mediation? Understanding the sources of conceptual confusion in the practice and study of mediation", Joint Brief Series: Improving Mediation Effectiveness (Stockholm, Folke Bernadotte Academy and ACCORD, 2023).

Moreover, most – though not all – mediators are unbiased when they enter into a conflict. Mediators may get involved in a conflict because they have developed particular ties with one or both sides. Previous connections do not necessarily impede mediation. In fact, parties in conflicts may accept a mediator who is biased against them because they can bring particular resources into the conflict management process (for example, unique access to the other side or the ability to influence that side and ensure it keeps to its commitments).[6]

Mediation has the potential to thoroughly transform conflicts. Much of what mediators do involves finding ways to end the violence. They do so through dialogue and more constructive negotiation processes that may open paths towards new types of solutions. But effective peacemaking goes beyond merely containing situations of violence; it also entails bringing fresh perspectives that can open up a path between incompatible positions and reconcile hostile attitudes. Mediation can also create space to reconfigure society towards broader inclusive processes and agreements that help to address the root causes of conflicts. Empirical research demonstrates that this potential has sometimes been realized: once mediators (or some specific types of mediated interventions) enter the conflict scene, they help to prevent armed conflicts,[7] shorten conflicts,[8] mitigate their intensity,[9] enable ceasefires,[10] bring about negotiated settlements[11] and deliver durable peace.[12]

Mediation is but one measure of international conflict management, among peacekeeping, international aid, multilateral institutional collaboration and (some form of) military intervention. Yet, there is a growing need for mediation because all other forms of international conflict management are in decline, strained by states' lack of financial support and political commitment. Official development assistance has fallen sharply and is projected

[6] On biased mediation, see Isak Svensson, "Bargaining, bias and peace brokers: how rebels commit to peace", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 44, No. 2 (2007); Isak Svensson, "Biased mediation," in Research Handbook on Mediating International Crises, Kyle Beardsley, Jonathan Wilkenfeld and David Quinn, eds. (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

[7] Kyle Beardsley, David E. Cunningham and Peter B. White, "Resolving civil wars before they start: the UN Security Council and conflict prevention in self-determination disputes", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 47, No. 3 (2015); Magnus Oberg, Frida Moller and Peter Wallensteen, "Early conflict prevention in ethnic crises, 1990–98: a new dataset", *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 26, No. 1 (2009), pp. 67–91.

[8] Aysegul Aydin and Patrick M Regan, "Networks of third-party interveners and civil war duration", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 18, No. 3 (2012).

9 Kyle Beardsley, David E. Cunningham and Peter B. White, "Mediation, peacekeeping and the severity of civil war", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 63, No. 7 (2018).

[10] Govinda Clayton and Han Dorussen, "The effectiveness of mediation and peacekeeping for ending conflict", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 59, No. 2 (2021).

[11] Elizabeth J. Menninga, "Bias and balance in civil war mediation," Journal of Peace Research (2023); Derrick V. Frazier and William J. Dixon, "Third-party intermediaries and negotiated settlements, 1946–2000", *International Interactions*, vol. 32, No. 4 (2006); Joakim Kreutz and Magda Lorena Cárdenas, "The women and men that make peace: introducing the mediating individuals (M-IND) dataset", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 62, No. 1 (2024).

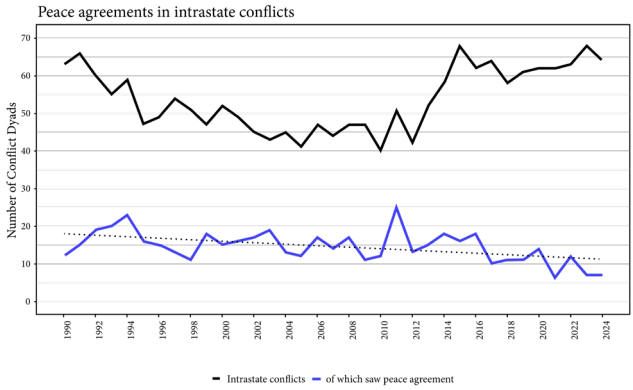
[12] Mehmet Gurses, Nicolas Rost and Patrick McLeod, "Mediating civil war settlements and the duration of peace", *International Interactions*, vol. 34, No. 2 (2008).

to fall further in the coming years,[13] while the deployment of peacekeeping forces has almost halved in the last decade.[14] The use of economic sanctions has also become politically contested at the UN.[15] There are thus fewer methods available to address the challenge of an increasingly violent world.

The Decline in Peacemaking Effectiveness

Mediation no longer achieves its full potential and has become less effective over time. One of the key indicators of success – the conclusion of peace agreements – has decreased in frequency (see Figure 1),[16] while other indicators of mediation success, such as ceasefires, appear to be declining as well. Mediators successfully bringing the parties to the table is yet another sign of progress in mediation, but negotiations are also becoming less frequent.[17]

Figure 1. Number of intra-state armed conflicts and peace agreements reached, 1990–2024



[13] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term", OECD Policy Briefs, No. 26 (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2025). Available at https://doi.org/10.1787/8c530629-en (accessed on 1 December 2025). "The OECD projects a 9 to 17% drop in official development assistance (ODA) in 2025. This comes on top of a 9% drop in 2024" (p. 1). Overall, the projected funding cuts are "making these reductions a major shock to international development co-operation" (p. 2). In particular, "The United States accounted for 58% of humanitarian assistance from DAC countries in 2023 at USD 15 billion, and cuts in US ODA would have important knock-on effects for humanitarian efforts through multilateral channels" (p. 12).

[14] "The number of deployed peacekeeping troops has also fallen by 42 per cent over the past decade, while the number of conflicts has risen steadily" (p. 5). Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global peace index 2025: identifying and measuring the factors that drive peace" (Sydney, June 2025). Available at http://visionofhumanity.org/resources (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[15] See Maya Ungar, "Political divides drive a reassessment of UN sanctions", International Crisis Group, 26 August 2024. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/political-divides-drive-reassessment-un-sanctions (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[16] Adam Farquhar and others, "Peace agreements in 2023: insights from the PA-X database" (Edinburgh, The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh, 2024).

[17] For example, the Peace Observatory dataset shows that the number of negotiations in intra-state conflicts has been decreasing slowly since 2014, with a strong decline from 2022 to 2023. Even negotiations in inter-state conflicts became less frequent from 2022 to 2023, although there was an upward trend in the years before. Allard Duursma and others, (2025). "Introducing the Peace Observatory: peace negotiations in armed conflicts, 1989–2023". Available at https://peaceobservatory.com/about (accessed on 1 December 2025).
On the mismatch between international capacity for mediation and number of mediated conflicts, see Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts", Research and Politics, vol. 7, No. 2 (2020).

Figure 1 shows the number of intra-state armed conflicts and the number of conflicts in which peace agreements were reached between 1990 and 2024. During this period, the proportion of conflicts that have been resolved through peace agreements has also fallen. The past 15 years have seen a growing divide, with more intra-state conflicts emerging and a continuous decline in the number of those conflicts reaching peace agreements.

This decline may be attributable to the dearth of capable, willing mediators, but that seems unlikely given the great interest among many countries in offering their services as mediators.[18] In one of the defining wars of our era – the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which is a key point of tension among the great powers – there have been several different mediation efforts. States such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have found ways to offer their good offices or act as mediators to help the parties find common ground and explore diplomatic openings. Mediation offers have also been made by China, Brazil, Israel and the Vatican.[19] Because there are many actors who wish to maintain good contact with both the US and Europe, as well as Russia, the role of mediator can be strategically important. Yet, despite numerous offers, the tangible results of these efforts have been fairly limited so far.

Why Peacemaking Effectiveness Has Declined: Three Global Trends

The reason mediation cannot meet the apparent needs of the world is that mediation practice has generally become more difficult as the global landscape of conflict has changed. While this evolving landscape entails other changes, here I outline and discuss three key global trends that are most important from a mediation perspective: the changing world order, the increasing number of radical actors in conflicts and the rising global wave of state-based ethnonationalism.

The changing world order

The end of the Cold War opened a new era with greater opportunities for peacemaking. The easing of tensions between the Soviet Union/Russia and the US brought about two major shifts: a desire to disengage from many of the proxy wars waged by the two superpowers and a greater interest and ability to collaborate within the international system, especially the United Nations. Thus, the end of the Cold War paved the way for a surge in peacemaking, as evidenced by the rising share of conflicts reaching peace agreements in the 1990s and 2000s (see Figure 1 above), as well as the increased number of mediation interventions. The UN Security Council became more effective in fulfilling its purpose.[20] This era can be characterized as a multilateral world order underpinned by a unipolar (American-led) system.

That moment now seems to be drawing to its end. There are various theoretical explanations

[18] On the mismatch between international capacity for mediation and number of mediated conflicts, see Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts", *Research and Politics*, vol. 7, No. 2 (2020).

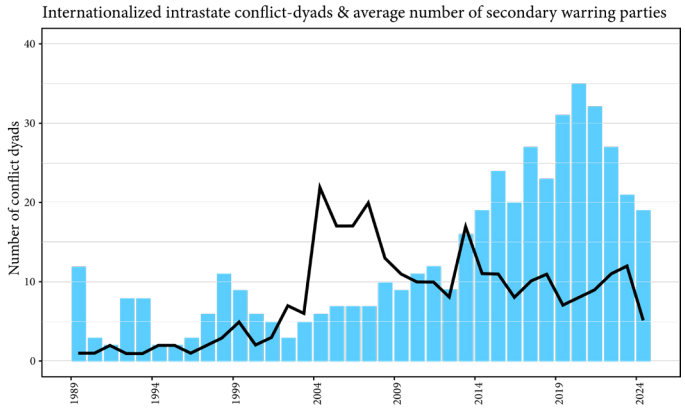
[19] Isabel Bramsen and Isak Svensson, "Peace talks in the Russia-Ukraine war: when, who, and how?" *International Negotiation*, vol. 30 (2025), pp. 97–122.

[20] Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, "The international regime for treating civil war, 1988–2017", *Daedalus*, vol. 147, No. 1 (2018).

for how peace can be maintained among nations, but the three dominant paradigms offer different diagnoses. From a realist perspective, the current turmoil is caused by shifting global power balances and growing uncertainty over a possible power transition, driven by the rise of a more assertive China, reactions to the overreach of Western-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and the rise of middle powers. From a liberal perspective, the causes include the decline of democracies (notably, the increasingly authoritarian turn in Russia), the weakening of international institutions and declining support for global economic integration. From a constructivist perspective, it is primarily norms that are being contested, including fundamental norms such as territorial integrity (with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine serving as a turning point) and basic rights that are in danger of being reversed as a result of counter-revolutions. While these perspectives can be usefully distinguished in academic discussions, most observers would recognize that all of them contribute valuable insights into the current crisis.

The changing world order affects the space for mediators in four distinct ways. First, it has led to an increase in the number of armed conflicts across state borders. There are more inter-state and intra-state conflicts, as well as internationalized intrastate conflicts – where external actors have intervened on the side of government or rebel groups – which is the category of conflict that has grown the most in recent years. Internationalization can help explain why mediation has become more challenging: there are more veto players, increased complexity, more resources available to continue fighting, an externalization of conflict costs that relieves some pressure from the battlefield and more obstacles to aligning parties' expectations, which hinders the establishment of a foundation for resolving the conflict. The last years have seen a decline in internationalized conflicts since the peak in 2020, but the number of internationalized conflicts remains higher than in earlier decades. Figure 2 illustrates the increase in internationalized conflicts from 1989 to 2024: it shows the number of active internationalized intra-state conflicts during this period, as well as the average number of secondary warring parties per conflict.

Figure 2. Internationalized intra-state conflicts and average number of parties, 1989–2024



Second, mediators face additional challenges not only because of the growing frequency of conflicts but also due to shifting type and format of internationalized conflicts. In the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the US, international coalitions of actors

came together to intervene in Afghanistan in 2001, and a similar (albeit smaller) coalition invaded Iraq in 2003. The most prevalent intervenors during this period were the US and France, and the typical intervention was undertaken in fragile countries to combat militant Islamist groups and support state-building. Today, the picture is more complex. First of all, we see fewer countries intervening. While this may decrease complexity to some extent due to the reduction in the number of actors, it is also a manifestation of the changing nature of interventions, as can be seen in Figure 2. As the number of internationalized conflicts has grown since the early 2000s, the average number of external actors involved in each conflict has been declining. Thus, fewer actors are engaged in more conflicts. At the same time, those who intervene are individual countries seeking to advance their own national interest and are less attentive to the needs of state-building. In the latest report from the UCDP, 19 conflicts were identified as internationalized. Mediators need to manage not only governments and rebel groups, but also external actors with varied motivations.

Third, territorial integrity, the legal norm that prohibits the forcible annexation of territory, is a cornerstone of modern international law. This norm has not been universally respected, but violations have largely been met with negative reactions by other UN member states. For example, many states have refused to recognize conquered territories in Cyprus, Palestine, Western Sahara and East Timor. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a blatant violation of the norm, and the fact that it was launched by a member of the UNSC renders it especially egregious. Yet, there are other signs that this norm is weakening. Other states are attempting to conquer territory through force, among them Israel in Syria and Palestine,[21] Rwanda in the DRC[22] and Thailand in Cambodia.[23] We have also witnessed worrying shifts in the rhetoric from other countries, suggesting territorial ambitions in disregard of the norm (e.g. Venezuela's claims to an oil-rich territory in neighbouring Guyana; US proposals to acquire Greenland and Panama; and Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed's claims of access to the sea).[24] The US recognition of Moroccan control over Western Sahara and the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights during President Trump's first term can also be viewed from this perspective. This erosion of a foundational norm has serious implications for mediation. Territorial integrity undergirds the modern international order, which is predicated on a stable set of territorially defined states. Without it, state authority would be much more susceptible to contestation and revision, heralding a new era of opportunity for secessionists and powerful states seeking to acquire strategically important and resource-rich territories. The continued erosion of this norm will make mediators' work more challenging everywhere.

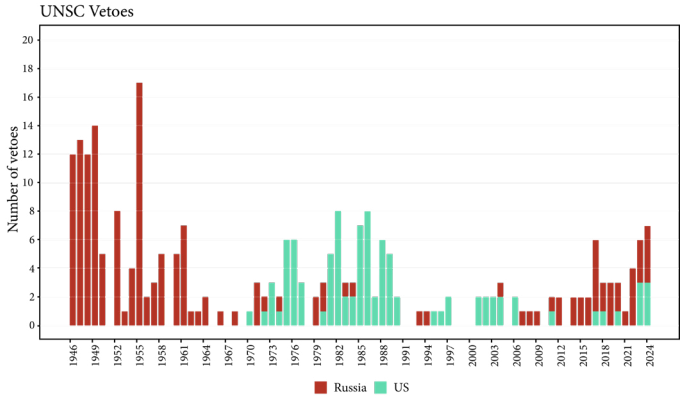
[21] Kelly Ng and Ruth Comerford, "What we know about Israel's plan to take over Gaza City", BBC, 8 August 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1mpg2glz1zo (accessed on 1 December 2025); on the Israeli occupation of Syria, see Jason Burke, "Israel to occupy Syrian southern territory for 'unlimited time', says minister", *The Guardian*, 12 March 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/12/israel-to-occupy-syrian-southern-territory-for-unlimited-time-says-minister (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[22] Richard Moncrieff, "The DR Congo-Rwanda deal: now comes the hard part", International Crisis Group, 5 July 2025. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/democratic-republic-congo/dr-congo-rwanda-deal-now-comes-hard-part) (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[23] Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Why are Thailand and Cambodia engaged in a border conflict?" *The Guardian*, 24 July 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/24/why-thailand-cambodia-border-clash-conflict (accessed on 1 December 2025).

[24] Mahemud Eshtu Tekuya, "Swimming against the current: Ethiopia's quest for access to the Red Sea under international law", *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 47, No. 3 (2024).

Figure 3. Number of vetoes by Russia/Soviet and the US in UN Security Council, 1946–2024



A fourth way in which the changing world order is exacerbating challenges for today's peacemakers is the breakdown of consensus in international institutions.[25] One indicator of this rising tension, particularly among the great powers, can be found in voting patterns of the UNSC and the use of the veto. Figure 3 shows that the number of vetoes exercised in the UNSC by either the US or Russia has been climbing over the past decade and, in 2023 and 2024, reached levels similar to those at the end of the Cold War. In 2024, the US and Russia vetoed three and four resolutions, respectively. The discord among the members of the council has undermined effective UN mediation and peacemaking, as starkly demonstrated in the case of the Syrian civil war and Israel's assault on Gaza. Russia used its veto to protect its ally in the Assad regime in Syria, and the US used its veto to protect its ally in the Netanyahu government in Israel. Mediators have not received sufficient political support for their efforts to end wars, neither UN-mandated mediators in the Syrian civil war, nor Qatar and Egypt in the Gaza war. Great-power rivalry can influence mediators' prospects to secure effective outcomes. Mediation not only requires a willing mediator, accepted by the parties, but also needs pressure (from the mediators or, more commonly, other actors) to encourage them to move towards solutions. Giving up positions they have held requires actors with leverage over the parties to engage in peacemaking and do so in a concerted manner. Unified pressure from external actors with ties to the parties is often necessary to persuade them that continuing the conflict will be too costly and that the benefits of peace will outweigh the costs. Building unity is challenging, and persuading external actors to put pressure on the conflict parties is even more difficult when they are focused elsewhere.

The proliferation of radical actors

Over the past few decades, the increase in conflicts framed in Islamist terms is one of the most significant shifts in the conflict landscape. To a large extent, this development has been driven by an increasing number of conflicts where at least one side has been associated with one of the two major transnational jihadist networks, the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. It is also a function of the fact that conflicts involving actors with self-proclaimed Islamist goals,

[25] For more on how world order changes affect peacemaking practices, see Sara Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a shifting world order: a macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 48, No. 3 (2022); Sara Hellmüller and Fanny Badache, "Children of their time: the impact of world politics on United Nations peace operations", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025).

as well as conflicts more generally framed in religious terms, tend to be more intractable. Once religious claims become part of a conflict, they tend to hinder mediators' ability to resolve the conflict peacefully. Islamist conflicts, especially those with a transnational focus, are even harder to resolve because the international scope on both the government and rebel sides makes the termination and resolution of conflicts more difficult to achieve. In many of these conflicts, the explicit demand for mediation from the conflict parties seems to have been low due to the parties' resolve as well as the complexity that arises from external support structures surrounding these types of conflicts.

Mediation practice has been further complicated by the use of terrorist proscription, especially in conflicts involving actors fighting over self-proclaimed Islamist goals. Western states, particularly following 9/11, have tended to view non-state armed actors in general, and Islamist armed groups in particular, through a terrorism lens and have increasingly used terrorist proscription to enforce legal action. Proscription has prevented diplomatic engagement with these types of groups and associated actors, in the process strengthening hawks on both sides – governments gain legitimacy for violent repression and groups see no other way forward than through violence.[26] The use of proscription against conflict parties has become more frequent over time.[27] Terrorist proscription limits the space for mediation. It can hinder one of the key steps in negotiation: recognition of the other side and the identification of valid spokespersons with whom both sides can talk, which is a common precondition for serious negotiations. One-sided violence against civilians by non-state actors is not increasing over time, but the perception and treatment of actors using these types of tactics seems to have shifted.

The global wave of state-based ethnonationalism

The trend towards globalization over the last decade has faced a growing counter-force, as ethnonationalism and religious nationalism have taken hold in countries around the globe.[28] Support for internationalism has fallen sharply as nationalist political forces have gained or consolidated power in countries including Israel, the US, India, China and Russia, all of which play key roles in shaping international relations.[29] The divisions between the new form of nationalists and traditional political parties also run deep in Europe, in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, while the opposition in France, Germany and the UK is currently dominated by parties with nationalist ideologies. Revisionist political forces in

[26] Sophie Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace: How Listing Armed Groups as Terrorists Hurts Negotiations* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021).

[27] Magnus Lundgren, Emma Janson and Martin Lundqvist, "Introducing the proscription of armed actors dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 62, No. 4 (2024).

[28] As pointed out in a recent study: "The global frequency of [right-wing populist] leaders has surged in recent years (albeit with temporal and regional variation), having surpassed even the period leading up to World War II." See Minnie M. Joo and others, "Right-wing populist leaders, nationalist rhetoric, and dispute initiation in international politics", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 69, Nos. 2–3 (2024).

[29] On the growing power of nationalist parties in Israel, France, Germany and Poland, see Freedom House, "Freedom in the world 2025" (Washington D.C., 2025). On nationalism as a driving force for withdrawals from international governmental organizations, see Seung-Whan Choi, "Nationalism and withdrawals from intergovernmental organizations: connecting theory and data", *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 17, No. 1 (2021). Relations between great powers have varied over time historically between periods of particularism versus universalism, driven to a large extent by domestic changes within the great powers. See Peter Wallensteen, "Universalism vs. particularism: on the limits of major power order", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 21, No. 3 (1984).

Russia and Israel are pressing for territorial expansion on the basis of religious nationalism.

The rising wave of ethnonationalism poses challenges for mediators. Ethnonationalist political group are actively working against multilateral collaboration and peacemaking efforts. In some of the most intense conflicts, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, nationalist actors from multiple countries work politically to undermine solutions based on international law. Collaboration between ethnonationalist actors seems to be on the rise.

This is not the first time the world has experienced a global wave of ethnonationalism. Nationalist sentiments were mobilized after the end of the Cold War, fuelling a number of ethnic conflicts around the world. During the early and mid-1990s, ethnonationalist political forces dominated countries on the margins of the global power system, in regions such as West Africa, the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. The current wave, by contrast, has involved key players in the international system: the US, Russia, China and India, while Europe's future direction remains uncertain. In the 1990s, the major powers could work together to address the effects of rising nationalism. This time, the centre itself is weakening, and peacemaking is up to actors who have historically been less influential on the international scene.

Conclusions: Ways Forward for Mediators?

> *Is it a new land*
>
> *in another reality than today´s?*
>
> *Or have I been here before, before the day?*
>
> *I woke up…*
>
> Dag Hammarskjöld, excerpt from his last quote in *Markings*

There is, as I have shown here, an urgent need for mediation, but at the same time, mediation is proving less successful than in the past. Mediation processes have become increasingly difficult to bring to fruition, but what this means is less clear. The reasons, I have argued, are rooted in three main global trends that together make the work of today's mediators much more challenging and complex: the changing world order, the rise of radical actors in conflicts and the global wave of state-based ethnonationalism. The reality facing the peacemakers of today is thus markedly different from yesterday. Mediators find themselves in a tough spot.

The changing nature of conflicts can impede the chances of conflict ripeness. Research shows that mediation often relies on a sense of urgency, generated when the conflict is perceived by the parties as too costly to continue to pursue. Once parties are unable to escalate with available resources and cannot make progress towards their goals, even as the status quo is untenable, they will seek solutions. Skilful mediators can recognize such openings, help

create them and capitalize on them when they appear.[30] In many cases, the changing nature of conflict, as described in this essay, reduces the likelihood of a hurting stalemate. Several trends suggest that conflicts are increasingly perceived as less costly by decision makers, which discourages them from seeking peaceful solutions: internationalization serves to externalize conflict costs; some extremist Islamist groups tend to be much more intransigent, less likely to compromise and less war-averse; and growing ethnonationalism reduces the scope for common ground or potential agreement. With more external actors, more armed groups with self-proclaimed Islamist goals and the more frequent use of terrorist designations, the chances of identifying a solution are further diminished. Therefore, ripeness may be less likely to occur in today's conflicts compared with those in the past. One implication of this is that more efforts should be directed towards limiting the resources available to conflict parties to continue fighting, and the economic and political cost of conflicts must be ramped up. Mediation alone cannot be expected to settle conflicts; it must be done within a context where more actors impose costs on conflict actors, especially those mainly responsible for the continuation of the wars.

Mediators also need to adapt to allow for more constructive ways to manage conflicts that involve actors with self-proclaimed Islamist goals. For example, in addressing the challenge posed by the increasing number of Islamist armed conflicts, mediators have begun exploring ways to distinguish between the more intransigent transnational actors and the locally embedded actors, who tend, for various reasons, to be more pragmatic. Islamist conflicts can be approached more constructively by localizing transnational Islamist issues and exploring ways to accommodate local actors.[31] Drawing on this distinction, there are ways to engage constructively with Islamist actors, where de-transnationalization is both a condition for dialogue and often also a consequence of it. Mediators, particularly in the Gulf, have also found ways to circumvent the obstacles associated with the terrorist designation.

Clearly, the tensions among the great powers have hindered effective UN mediation activities in many situations. This does not mean, though, that the UN is passive. Nor have other actors remained on the sidelines: new countries are stepping into the fold. The peace mediation sector has, for some time, been dominated by diplomats from Western countries, including Switzerland, the Nordic countries (primarily Norway, but also to some extent Sweden and Finland) and Canada. In recent years, this trend has begun to change. Countries like Oman and Qatar have a long tradition of peace mediation but have become more vocal and visible in their roles as mediators on the international scene. Türkiye has also been positioning itself as a mediator. The increasing number of mediators from Middle Eastern countries has created new opportunities to address some of the issues linked to the conflict landscape, in particular the ability to engage actors who have framed their conflicts in Islamist terms; they are also less bound by all terrorist proscription regulations. How countries that do not necessarily belong to the liberal democratic political tradition will

30 On conflict ripeness and mutually hurting stalemates, see William Zartman, Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars (Washington D.C., The Brooking Institution Press, 1995). See also Michael J. Greig, "Moments of opportunity: recognizing conditions of ripeness for international mediation between enduring rivals", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 45, No. 6 (2001); Marieke Kleiboer, "Ripeness of conflict: a fruitful notion?" *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 31, No. 1 (1994); C. R. Mitchell, "The right moment: notes on four models of 'ripeness'", *PARADIGMS: The Kent Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, No. 2 (1995); Siniša Vuković, "Expanding ripeness beyond push and pull: the relevance of mutually enticing opportunities (MEOs)", *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 21, No. 2 (2022).

31 Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, *Jihadist Peace: Ending Civil Wars* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025).

shape the form and outcomes of mediation remains to be seen. The inclusion of civil society may be negatively affected, although tentative empirical evidence does not support this hypothesis.[32] The increasing involvement of countries from the Middle East may also affect the outcomes of mediation. Often, mediation processes have involved constitution-making (or at least a pre-process to constitution-making), aimed at laying the groundwork for a post-conflict democratic system. Whether mediators that are not liberal democracies have the interest and capabilities to support the democratic transition in conflict countries is also an open empirical question.

Mediators appear to be increasingly averse to seeking to craft comprehensive peace agreements that can bring about a genuine transformation of the conflict, although such agreements have always been rare. Also, peace agreements of a less ambitious nature appear to be more difficult to achieve, given the current state of world affairs. Mediators have adjusted their expectations and tailored their goals to what can be achieved; local ceasefires, solutions to specific sub-issues or the mitigation of the consequences of wars seem to be the main objectives of many mediators.

There is still room, albeit more restricted, for would-be peacemakers to act. There are certain areas where great powers can find common ground and agree to cooperate. For example, in Yemen, the UN mediator Hans Grundberg has been able to maintain acceptance from both external and local actors. Furthermore, mediators have been able to make progress on conflicts that lie outside the primary attention and sphere of interests of the great powers. The key processes that have made some progress during the last years have been in countries where the great powers, although having supported one of the sides, have not had particularly strong stakes in the conflicts, such as in Ethiopia (Tigray peace agreement in 2022), the Philippines (framework agreement in 2022), Colombia (peace agreement with FARC-EP in 2016), Yemen (de facto ceasefire) and Thailand (opening of negotiations).

There are risks associated with mediation adaptation. Mediation is a way to reconcile the diverging interests of conflict parties but should not impede any of the parties' fundamental rights. To be considered legitimate, mediation should be based on international law. An emerging trend in peacemaking and mediation is the increasing dominance of the transactional mediation model.[33] This is most evidently manifested in US President Donald Trump's mediation efforts around the world, where economic benefits for the US are a central focus, including rare earth deals negotiated with DRC and Ukraine, strategic development projects such as the Trump Road to International Peace and Prosperity in Armenia and the proposed US takeover of Gaza for the purpose of property development ("the Riviera of the Middle East").[34] It is an approach to peacemaking that ignores fundamental issues about rights and status. It seeks to pacify conflicts, not transform them. This less principled approach to mediation, which shows little respect for the UN Charter and the prohibition against the acquisition of territory by force, is gaining traction. If this trend continues, mediation may serve to reinforce a development that is, in the longer run, detrimental to the

[32] I explore this further with Desirée Nilsson in a forthcoming book tentatively titled, *Bringing Them in or Leaving Them out? Mediator Types and Civil Society Inclusion in Peace Negotiations.*

[33] Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking: warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025).

[34] Nadine Yousif, "Trump wants US to take ownership of Gaza Strip", *BBC*, 5 February 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyk0r3kvxyo (accessed on 1 December 2025).

fundamental purposes of peacemaking.

Finally, it is important to remember that many of the challenges facing contemporary peacemakers are not entirely new; issues that confronted peacemakers during the Cold War can now serve as valuable lessons for contemporary mediators. As the above quote from the renowned Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, reminds us, it is worth asking ourselves whether we have been here before. Hammarskjöld was active during the Cold War, an era dominated by great power rivalries. Hammarskjöld worked to expand the mandate of the Secretary-General and make the UN a relevant player in the management of international crises. His approach to preventing local conflicts from being drawn into great power rivalries offers an example to us today. A readiness to talk and engage in dialogue with key actors, even the intransigent parties; a willingness to act in situations where there are opportunities to make progress; and a commitment to anchoring mediation practice in international law – these were all hallmarks of Hammarskjöld's mediation approach. It remains as relevant today as it was then.