

2.3 Thematic Essays

Political Missions, Mediation and Good Offices

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Mediation and good offices are variously employed in support of national peace processes underway, to help initiate new ones, in response to sudden political crises, or to help prevent or avert conflicts that threaten. Most commonly undertaken by high profile mediators or envoys engaged on behalf of the UN Secretary-General, a regional organization, an individual state, or even a non-governmental actor, mediation and good offices also represent core functions of special political missions. Fulfilling them is not without its challenges. Some functions relate to the intrinsic complexity of the conflicts or situations with which political missions engage. Others reflect the limitations of their mandate and resources, sensitivities surrounding national sovereignty, varying degrees of support or pressure from external actors, and questions regarding the integration of each mission's activities with those of other international actors.

Quantifying the impact of the mediation and good offices undertaken by political missions is difficult. This is both because of their great diversity and – in contrast to some high profile mediations – because much of their political work is necessarily discreet, in support of decisions and steps that must be taken by parties to a conflict or national actors, and over-determined by a multitude of other factors. The work of a political mission fielded by a multilateral organization is also intricately connected to the degree of support provided from the organization's member states.

Rather than attempt such an evaluation, this chapter provides a brief analysis of the varied forms



UN Envoy Joaquim Chissano and mediator Riek Machar of the Government of Southern Sudan in discussions with commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army.

UN Photo / Timothy McKelika

in which political missions engage in mediation and good offices. Its emphasis is not on the envoys and others engaged in Cyprus, the Eastern DRC and elsewhere that, by an anomaly of UN budgeting, are classified as “special political missions,” but rather the field based missions themselves. It questions the extent to which these missions can perform useful roles of mediation and good offices, both when such activities are specified within their mandates and when they are not. The small size and low price tag of most political missions as compared to peacekeeping operations – as well as the less-than-headline-grabbing nature of many of their achievements – contributes to the relative obscurity of their efforts. However, this chapter suggests that under some circumstances they are able to make contributions quite distinct from those that might be offered by a more high profile and itinerant envoy.

THE UTILITY OF “GOOD OFFICES” AND THE CHANGING FACE OF MEDIATION

“Good offices” are long established but poorly defined as a flexible tool for international diplomacy and action. “Good offices” are not mentioned in the UN Charter (but perhaps embraced by article 33 (1) which lists “other peaceful means of their own choice” among measures available to states to achieve the peaceful settlement of disputes). Yet at the United Nations, and in some other organizations such as the Organisation of American States (OAS), the term “good offices” has evolved very helpfully to mean almost anything – from a well-timed telephone call by the Secretary-General, to exploratory conversations, or a full-fledged mediation effort conducted in his or her name.

This broad interpretation of good offices is indicative of profound shifts in peacemaking. During the past ten years, recognition that different conflicts and stages of conflict require different types of mediator and mediation has been accompanied by both the profusion of mediators and a diffusion of the concept of mediation.¹ Formal negotiations – such as those seen on Cyprus or in Kenya in recent years, or those pursued by the United States in the Middle East – may be few and far between, but activities exploring or preparing for mediation, or the discreet facilitation of contacts and dialogue, are widespread. Such good offices can take place long before conditions may be ripe for a negotiation. And, as many peacekeeping operations have found, they are likely to continue throughout the implementation of peace agreements.

The United Nations remains a reference point for international mediation, even as the frequency with which its Secretary-General or his staff are called upon to lead a mediation effort have declined markedly in the years since the end of the Cold War. It has found that it need not be at the forefront of an effort to play an effective role, and in some circumstances may even have greater room for its good offices before it becomes necessary to negotiate the parameters of a mandate.² The UN has gradually adapted to the rise in the activity of regional organizations as well as an increase in the engagement of individual states and independent mediators. It is also increasingly developing its capacity to provide mediation support to its own representatives as well as to other peacemakers. Secretariat officials

recognize that these developments have created new opportunities for collaboration between different actors (political missions among them) with distinct comparative advantages, as well, at times, as unhelpful competition among them.

A number of UN political missions – from the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Cyprus, Personal Envoy for Western Sahara or the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) to the engagements of Special Envoys on the areas affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA, 2006-2009) or on the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (2008-2009) – have nevertheless operated under mandates that empower UN officials to conduct good offices or mediation in its classic form. This entails a process of dialogue and negotiation in which a third party assists two or more conflicting parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict without recourse to force.

Some of these political missions reflect the UN’s role as a mediator of last resort. They encompass issues of deep intractability which geopolitical factors render unsuitable for other mediators (such as divisions within the African Union and amongst other interested states over Western Sahara or the complex relationship of Greece and Turkey, both NATO members, to the Cyprus conflict). These can remain on the UN agenda almost indefinitely.

Others reflect more recent conflicts in Africa to which the UN’s appointment of senior regional leaders – former President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique in the case of the areas affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army and former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria in the Eastern DRC – combines regional credibility and leverage with the authority of the global organization. A similar yet more low key role is fulfilled by the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), which works closely with regional actors in the context of a broad mandate for good offices.³ Given its small size and the extreme volatility of the countries under its purview, it has a seemingly limitless opportunity to pursue them.

Meanwhile, there are many contexts in which the good offices of regional organizations and other actors may be more acceptable to national sensitivities than the United Nations. Individual states – among them several such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are attractive to conflict parties because of their Islamic credentials – have grown in

prominence as peacemakers. Meanwhile, in parallel to the growing role of the African Union in the promotion of peace and security, regional organizations such as the OAS, OSCE and the EU (the latter through its network of Special Representatives) have undertaken a range of political interventions, at times involving the deployment of political missions. In the case of the OAS in particular, a growing number of missions (the OAS Office in the Adjacency Zone between Belize and Guatemala; the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia; the OAS Mission of Good Offices to Ecuador and Colombia) have had clear responsibilities for good offices and mediation.

Elsewhere there are many situations in which regional organizations lack the mandate or capacity to engage, and national as well as regional actors (such as India in the case of Nepal) have actively resisted an explicit good offices role for the UN. Yet where the opportunity is presented, the imperative to pursue political activities that are in the interest of sustainable peace remains. As current and former officials of the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) agreed in a workshop held in late 2009, “good offices’ are inherent in a UN political mission headed by a representative of the Secretary-General.”⁴

Special political missions under UN mandates, in addition to those deployed by the OSCE, the OAS and others, engage as one amongst a number of external actors in a given political situation. The clear “win” represented by the successful mediation of a peace agreement is rarely within their sights. Goals and achievements are of a lesser magnitude, with the advantages – and at times disadvantages – of political missions tied to the fact that they are, for the most part, in the field. In the best case scenario they are able to win the confidence of national actors and work to fulfill mandates variously described as being to “support,” “encourage,” “assist” or “advise” the peacemaking, building or consolidation of their national counterparts.⁵

A MIXED BAG

In practical terms, what political missions can achieve depends on the diplomatic and entrepreneurial skills of those who lead them, the resources at their disposal and the combination of circumstances and events within which they are engaged. As the

individual entries within this volume testify, the past year has seen a major, but frustrated, attempt to reach a settlement of the Cyprus question; a patient if unrewarding effort to make some headway on the intractable issue of Western Sahara (complicated by the fact that both the parties to the conflict and the major powers on the Security Council appear not unhappy with the status quo); and intense political work to sustain the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia that emerged from the UN-mediated Djibouti peace agreements reached in late 2008. Elsewhere UNAMI has assumed a growing political profile in Iraq – notably in defusing a potentially explosive situation over the disputed city of Kirkuk and in smoothing the path to elections in 2009 and 2010 – and UNOWA played a critical role in supporting the ECOWAS-led mediation in Guinea, whilst also undertaking significant involvements in Mauritania and Niger.

These headline engagements mask a host of ongoing work in which good offices encourage dialogue amongst political leaders (from Afghanistan and Burundi to Lebanon, Nepal, Somalia and Sierra Leone); engage with regional and other leaders to address sudden internal crises (in Lebanon, West Africa and Guinea Bissau, as well as elsewhere); address differences that develop around the conduct of elections (across the board but notably in Afghanistan and Iraq); and assist national authorities prepare for disputes over natural resources (Central Asia) or address trans-border threats to peace and security such as drug trafficking and other criminal activities (in Central Asia again, but also across West Africa).

By any assessment, this is a mixed bag. A brief review of some of the activities pursued by the UN’s political missions in the Middle East and Africa, before consideration of the properties and possibilities specific to those political missions constituted with a regional mandate, suggests the complexity of the challenges facing political missions, but also the opportunities with which they are presented.

Middle East and Iraq

Although multiple UN peacekeeping and political missions are deployed in the Middle East, the overall impact of the UN presence upon the region in political terms remains less than the sum of its parts. An independent peacemaking profile is circumscribed by Israel’s suspicion of the UN as

a political actor, the UN's membership of the Quartet alongside the European Union, Russia and the United States, and the fact that the latter will be the preeminent external actor in any effort to resolve the region's inter-twined conflicts. The plethora of envoys, missions and offices create problems of coordination within the UN. These have not been helped by the overlapping aspects of some of the UN's mandates in the Middle East, or, at times, the contrasting personalities of those who lead their implementation.

Nonetheless, the UN fulfills a multitude of essential political tasks that contain the effects of conflict and may yet help ease the parties towards resolution.⁶ These include functioning as a valued channel of communication – even an occasional mediator – between Israel, Syria and Lebanon; amongst Lebanese political actors; between Israel and Hezbollah and, quietly, between Hamas, Israel and other international actors.

The UN's good offices have been engaged in the provision of technical advice to prevent crises and keep political processes on track in Lebanon as well as the occupied Palestinian territory. The organization has an unusual degree of access to regional actors that others will not deal with directly – but cannot be ignored. In spite of limitations on the UN's interactions with Hamas, especially on contacts with senior envoys, it has been able to maintain substantive dialogue at the working level. Such contacts have allowed the UN to mediate agreements between Israel and Hamas that ensured that essential goods could be transported into Gaza and to pass messages to other Quartet members.

In the meantime, the UN has the advantage of being able to act with relative impartiality amongst the various Lebanese communities. It has longstanding relations with Hezbollah as a consequence of its peacekeeping responsibilities in the south of the country and high-level contacts on issues such as prisoner exchange. UNSCOL has passed messages between Hezbollah and other political actors, and draws on its access to Hezbollah to lower tensions caused by security incidents with Israel.

The political space for the engagement of UN political missions in the Middle East is determined by factors and actors that lie far outside the office of the Secretary-General. The emerging political role of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), however, illustrates that changes

in the overall political environment may allow for unexpected opportunities.

In UNAMI's case, these opportunities were facilitated by a shift in approach by the United States and the adroit response to it by the mission's leadership. In 2007 the US began to see the benefits of the UN's undertaking political tasks for which its own overwhelming military presence in the country rendered it unsuitable. A new SRSG (Staffan de Mistura) arrived in Iraq soon after UNAMI had been given an expanded mandate from the Security Council with instructions from the Secretary-General to do more to assist the Iraqis.

UNAMI was tasked by the Security Council (SCR 1770) to “advise, support and assist” the government and people of Iraq in advancing an “inclusive national dialogue and political reconciliation.” Balancing a desire to do more with respect for sensitivities regarding Iraqi sovereignty led the mission to assume a “cautiously proactive” attitude. It concentrated its efforts on a few initiatives rather than spreading itself thinly across an impossibly broad mandate. By working in partnership with the United States and gradually winning the confidence of the Iraqi authorities, it was able to provide extensive technical advice on Iraq's electoral processes and to develop a major role in helping address the potentially explosive problem of Kirkuk and other disputed areas.

Political and Peacebuilding Missions in Africa

Partnerships of very different kinds shape all political missions in Africa. The UN's field operations, as its envoys deployed from New York, work closely with the African Union and sub-regional organizations. Joint envoys have been appointed – and in the UN Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) a joint AU-UN mission deployed. In Kenya a hybrid mediation effort, led by Kofi Annan and the AU's Panel of Eminent African Personalities but supported by the UN and other actors, has given way to a special political mission – the Coordination and Liaison Office of the Panel of Eminent African Personalities – that continues to operate with UN assistance. In West Africa, UNOWA is specifically tasked to work with the sub-regional organization ECOWAS, which has taken the leading role in countering the region's instability and conflict-prone tendencies.

UN political missions in Africa have a somewhat checkered history. In the late 1990s “peacebuilding support offices” were established in the Central African Republic (CAR), Liberia and Guinea-Bissau, and a distinct political office was established in Somalia. All but the office in Guinea-Bissau came in the wake of larger peacekeeping presences. The offices were generally viewed as overly supportive of questionable governments (including that of Charles Taylor in Liberia) and lost credibility as entities capable of delivering on the broad needs of the societies with which they were engaged.

Peacebuilding offices in the CAR and Guinea-Bissau outlasted that in Liberia, and in 2005 were joined by the UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL), following the withdrawal of a much larger peacekeeping operation, and in 2006 by the UN Integrated Office in Burundi (BINUB), after the newly elected Government of Burundi had demanded the drawdown of the UN Operation in Burundi (UNOB). These two offices (UNIOSIL became the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office, or UNIPSIL, in August 2008) faced the difficult task of fulfilling their mandates in circumstances in which national authorities had recently emerged from the tutelage of a peacekeeping operation. Governments were sensitive to any perceived criticism or interference from the missions, even as they were eager to ensure the continuation of external financial support.

The extent to which these different offices have exercised good offices and undertaken quiet internal mediation has varied, not least as a consequence of the different political trajectories followed by their host countries. The peacebuilding support office in the CAR (BONUCA), in partnership with other actors including the International Organisation of the Francophonie and the non-governmental Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, has played an active role in supporting national dialogue and a web of peace talks.

The decision by the UN Peacebuilding Commission to place first Burundi and Sierra Leone, and then Guinea-Bissau and the CAR on its agenda, expanded the responsibilities of the political missions in these countries. Senior officials – Executive Representatives of the Secretary-General (ERSGs) – heading the integrated offices wear multiple organizational hats (acting also as Resident Coordinators of the UN system and UNDP

Resident Representatives) and necessarily engage with their host governments on different levels. In the case of Burundi, BINUB was mandated a “robust political role” that was centered on the provision of political advice and substantive support to the South African Facilitator of the peace process through a multi-stakeholder mechanism known as the Political Directorate. Although this helped advance the peace process, the government became increasingly intolerant of BINUB (taking offence, for example, at mildly critical comments included in reports of the Secretary-General to the Security Council) and in late 2009 it asked for the ERSG, Youssef Mahmoud, to be removed.

In Sierra Leone, meanwhile, UNIPSIL and the various UN agencies, funds and programs present in the country adopted a Joint Vision under which they agreed to combine their efforts to further the consolidation of peace. While the approach seeks to bring together the political, humanitarian and developmental aspects of the UN’s different bodies, a distinct good offices role remains available to the ERSG. This was perhaps most in evidence in March 2009 when the ERSG intervened to help mediate – and calm – politically motivated violence that had broken out in the tense period before local elections. The UN’s peacebuilding offices in Guinea-Bissau, meanwhile, have been given mandates of increasing breadth as the implications of the country’s institutional weakness and vulnerability to drug-trafficking have become more evident. However, while UNIOGBIS’ responsibilities are broad, the UN’s long, but relatively weak presence in the country, until recently poorly supported by member states, means that the mission struggles to assert its political role with much authority.

Regional Missions and Their Uses

As the first regional political mission, the UN Office in West Africa (UNOWA), represents a slow-germinating experiment quite distinct from the country-specific political missions the UN has deployed elsewhere in Africa. Its broad mandate, small size and extensive geographical reach (over the fifteen countries of ECOWAS, as well as Mauritania) present obvious challenges. Over the nine years of its existence UNOWA has responded by focusing its energies on a combination of cross-border issues and good offices dedicated to mediating, or

supporting mediation by others, the series of crises that have assailed the region.

The office was slow to develop an effective partnership with ECOWAS. However, it helped draw attention to the cross-border nature of the region's many threats to security and played a leading role in facilitating the implementation of the October 2002 ruling by the International Court of Justice on the boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria. It has also been directly involved in regional and international responses to the succession of crises that have developed in Guinea, Mauritania, Niger and Togo.

UNOWA works with several advantages. Its regional mandate and physical location in Dakar, Senegal – long a hub for UN agencies and programmes, as well as among the most stable of West African countries – mean that it is inherently less threatening to the sovereignty of any one of the countries under its purview than a nationally located political mission. When relations with other actors in the UN system are working well, it can effectively engage in sensitive issues whilst providing a degree of political cover to the UN Resident Coordinators, agencies and programmes who may seek less complex relations with national actors. Moreover, the circumstances of its creation – by exchange of letters between the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council – and the minimal reporting demanded of it, allow it to work with a high degree of discretion.

The interlocking threats to and in West Africa both ensure an active response at the regional level and complicate its orchestration. Neighboring states – particularly the landlocked states of Burkina Faso and Mali – have great interest in maintaining a degree of stability in Guinea, for example, and can be counted on to invest time and resources in preventing its implosion. Meanwhile at the multilateral level, the close coordination between Said Djinnit, the former AU Peace and Security Commissioner who became SRSG for West Africa in February 2008, and Mohammed Ibn Chambas, who until early 2010 was President of the ECOWAS Commission, underpinned the evolving partnership between the two entities and their effective collaboration with the African Union.

The UN's second regional mission, the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA), which is based in



UN Photo

Greek Cypriot leader Demetris Christofias (right) and then Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat (left) meeting under UN auspices on Cyprus.

Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, also operates in complicated terrain. A lengthy period of negotiation resulted in a broad mandate to assist the five Central Asian states to respond to existing threats and emerging challenges. The Centre's 2009-2011 plan of action focuses on cross border threats from illicit activities (terrorism, organized crime and drug-trafficking); environmental degradation and resource management; and the implications of the situation in Afghanistan.

Although working with a minimal staff, and without the presence of a robust sub-regional organization such as ECOWAS as a counterpart, UNRCCA's SRSG, Miroslav Jenca, has gradually been able to build up the credibility of his office. He secured a relatively high degree of access to the region's governments – none of which would have accepted a political mission established on a national basis – and developed effective relationships with the region's UN Resident Coordinators. Preventive work on the pressing problem of water scarcity drew upon additional expertise from DPA's Standby Mediation facility and underlined the utility of UN technical expertise as an entry point to an issue of evident political sensitivity. In the wake of the uprising that toppled the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan in early April 2010, UNRCCA worked closely with the OSCE in the interests of an effective international response to the crisis.

CONCLUSION

This whistlestop account of the wide variety of good offices and mediation undertaken by political missions suggests the difficulty of drawing broad conclusions from their efforts. Yet in this rapidly evolving field some patterns are discernible.

Political missions conduct more good offices and mediation takes place more frequently than the number of formal negotiations, or overtly mandated activities would suggest. This is a natural and ethical response to the challenges posed to political missions by the complexity of the circumstances into which they are deployed. It does not imply that mandates are violated, or the wishes of host countries, regional or other international actors defied. Rather it suggests that there are circumstances within which the presence of a political mission in the field – with the understanding of national actors and regional and more far-flung international partners (or spoilers) that a sustained field presence brings with it – can reap benefits distinct from those that might be seen from the engagement of a visiting envoy.

These benefits are by no means assured, as the wide variance in efficacy and impact evident within

the political missions profiled in this volume makes clear. Rather they will depend on factors that fall with differing degrees within the competences of those who plan, mandate, and lead political missions. Skilful diplomacy will be required to reassure national counterparts with respect to understandable sensitivities regarding national sovereignty, but may not always be sufficient. Superior political and bureaucratic skills are likely to be needed to help design and secure an adequate mandate and resources for the mission itself. Again, such skills may not always be equal to the challenge.

As always, the impact of external actors – in this case political missions – will to a great extent be determined by national factors and processes to which their own contribution will be largely auxiliary. In the best cases, nevertheless, the advice, support and expertise that is offered through political missions' mediation and good offices should be received as a helpful contribution to processes in which the hard decisions need to be taken, and implemented, by national and regional actors. Mediation and good offices will have played their part in maximizing the contribution of the international community that the political mission aspires to.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Griffiths and Teresa Whitfield, "Mediation: Ten Years On – Challenges and Opportunities for Peacemaking," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, March 2010.
- 2 The chapter on UNMIN briefly refers to the good offices conducted by the UN from New York from 2003 on and by a small team lead by the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General in the months before the negotiation of UNMIN's mandate in early 2007.
- 3 In 2001 Secretary-General Kofi Annan described the responsibilities of the new office as including "carrying out good offices role and special assignments in countries of the subregion, on behalf of the Secretary-General, including in the areas of conflict prevention and peace-building efforts." *Letter dated 26 November 2001 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council. S/2001/1128, 29 November 2001.*
- 4 Teresa Whitfield, "Focused Mission: Not so Limited Duration: Identifying lessons from the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)," Center on International Cooperation, February 2010.
- 5 UNAMI has a mandated role to "advise, support and assist" the Government of Iraq on political processes (SCR 1770); in late 2007 BINUB was given a "robust political role in support... of the peace process, in full coordination with regional and international partners" (SCR 1791 of 17 December 2007); UNRCCA is mandated to "encourage" the peacemaking efforts and initiatives of regional organizations such as the OSCE, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (S/2007/279).
- 6 Lizzie Sellwood, "The Role of the United Nations in Middle East Conflict Prevention," Center on International Cooperation, July 2009.

