SUMMARY REPORT: THE SEVENTH ISTANBUL MEDIATION CONFERENCE

The Seventh Istanbul Mediation Conference was convened on 17 September 2020 with the theme of "Peace Mediation in the New Normal". Following the opening remarks by Ambassador Sedat Önal, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, the conference featured the UN Secretary General H.E. Mr. Antonio Guterres, several special representatives/envoys of the UN Secretary General, seasoned mediators, scholars and experts in the field of peace mediation.

Due to the pandemic, this year's edition was held online. The event was livestreamed and is now uploaded to the official YouTube channel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey (TCDisisleri). Throughout the Conference, #istanbulmediation and #mediationforpeace hashtags were widely shared on Twitter.

With the opening and closing sessions, the conference had five sessions in total. The conference focused on the current situation in conflict zones with personal reflections of seasoned mediators; highlighted the impact of the pandemic on conflict dynamics; and shed light on the transformative role of digitalization in peace mediation. Deliberations on technology built upon the earlier discussions at the last two Istanbul Mediation Conferences in 2018 and 2019, as well as the 10th Ministerial Meeting of the UN Group of Friends of Mediation held in New York in 2019.

Opening Session

In his opening remarks, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ambassador Önal underlined the negative impact of the pandemic on conflict dynamics and the growing need for preventive diplomacy as well as mediation in today's conflict landscape. He also lamented the limited impact of the UN Secretary General's appeal for a global ceasefire which Turkey has supported. Ambassador Önal attributed this to the hiatus at the Security Council, wavering multilateralism and the economic depression. The Deputy Minister underlined that the efforts of Turkey in Syria and Libya prevented further deterioration of the humanitarian situation in these two neighbours. He also highlighted Turkey's wider efforts to promote mediation in peaceful resolution of conflicts and initiatives in Somalia and Venezuela.

With regard to the importance of digital technologies, he underscored the Digital Diplomacy initiative of Turkey and voluntary financial contributions to the mediation-related activities of the Innovation Cell within the UN. He emphasised that Turkey has been the first country to earmark voluntary contribution to this newly-established body focusing on the use of technology and innovation for peace efforts.

In his video message, the UN Secretary General reiterated his call for cooperation in the fight against common threats. The Secretary General stressed that the pandemic has added further to polarisation in the international system. He referred to his call for a global ceasefire aimed to prevent further deterioration of the situation in conflict-ridden geographies. He also discussed the transformative power of digitalisation and its potential for peace mediation.

Session 1: An Insider Look at Peace Processes: Reflections from the Field

The first session was dedicated to exploring the recent developments in the conflict geographies and the lessons-learned. It was moderated by Henrik Urdal of the Peace Research Institute Oslo. The session featured four panellists from different conflict settings, contexts and dynamics. Ghassan Salamé (*Former Special Representative of the Secretary General and Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya*) focused on his experiences in the Libyan conflict while Staffan de Mistura (*Former UN Special Envoy for Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq*) underlined his encounters. Halit Çevik (*Ambassador, Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine*) brought in his experience from the OSCE geography, whereas Fred Ngoga-Gateretse (*Ambassador, Head of Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division in the African Union*) completed the picture with the African perspective.

One of the main findings of the session was that the number of conflicts has been following an upward trend while peace agreements have been in general decline. The panellists underlined the internationalised and protracted nature of today's conflicts and its implications for peace processes. Three main arguments were put forth to explain this phenomenon: Firstly, there is deterioration of relations among great powers. Secondly, this led to new engagements by regional actors, whose growing inclusion in conflicts added to the fragmentation. As a result, it was underscored there is a growing need for coherence, complementarity and coordination among the multiple actors in the conflict and peace landscape.

The session also discussed the flourishing "mediation industry" with an increasing number of actors involved or willing to be involved in peace processes. The increasing number of interested mediators, it was argued, created duplicity that might jeopardise peace processes. As the number of interested and involved mediators increased, conflict parties could manipulate one mediator over another. It was also stated that there are some prominent and reliable regional actors who could make meaningful contributions. The Astana mechanism in Syria and its role in the cessation of hostilities were given as examples.

The panellists advocated the need for coherence in mediation efforts as key for strengthening the credibility and delivery of the mediator. That would not exclude other

actors, who should complement the endeavours of the lead mediator.

On the other hand, one panellist stated that the complex and multistakeholder nature of the conflict and peace landscape makes relying on a single mediator difficult. Additionally, it was underscored that there is an over-reliance on the personality of the mediator. Therefore, instead of reducing the number of actors involved, the panel called for a focus on (1) finding ways/means for benefiting from the multiplicity of actors through making use of their comparative advantages, and (2) ensuring their endeavours are complementary.

Inclusion was another major theme discussed at length in the first session. The two main groups discussed in this regard were women and youth. The panel called for a realistic approach for inclusion of women and mediators should pay attention to their contributions.

Another approach to the issue of inclusivity focused on the concept of ownership. It was stressed that civil society members, including women and youth, should be included in peace processes as this would support ownership.

A more holistic approach, the panel argued, can be sought for who wants and does not want peace. Proponents of peace should be granted an access to peace process.

Participants also underlined the fact that common threats like DAESH or Covid-19 pandemic failed to induce the importance of prevention of conflicts.

The importance of governance was another point of discussion in this session. It was argued that there is a crisis of governance and it requires attention. If this crisis goes unaddressed and governments fail in providing citizens with their basic needs, it could generate new conflicts.

Other critical issues that were covered included the need to readjust peace endeavours in the face of new developments to stay relevant and ensuring that mediation is not just about finding a peaceful solution but also extends into the implementation of peace agreements.

Session 2: Post-Pandemic Conflict and Peace Landscape

In its quest for exploring the implications of the pandemic for conflict and peace landscape, the second session, moderated by Adam Lupel of the International Peace Institute, featured Asako Okai (*Assistant Secretary General and UNDP's Assistant Administrator and Director of the Crisis Bureau*), Oscar Fernandez-Taranco (*Assistant Secretary General for Peacebuilding Support at the UN*), Aleu Garang (*Director of Mediation Support Unit of the IGAD*), Tuula Yrjölä (*Ambassador, Director of the Conflict Prevention Centre of the OSCE*), Katariina Mustasilta (*Senior Associate Analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies*) and Saime Özçürümez (*Associate Professor at Bilkent University*).

One of the main focuses of the session was on the very nature of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was argued that although the pandemic was first and foremost a global health issue, it has evolved into an all-encompassing phenomenon as one of the biggest disrupters for human security, governance and peacemaking. It was also underlined that the pandemic created further obstacles in the efforts towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

The panellists mentioned the Covid-19 as a major stress test for the international community and its role in amplifying conflict dynamics.

Several points have been made in this regard. Firstly, despite the appeal for a ceasefire by the United Nations Secretary General, there has been no drastic reduction in violent conflicts. In fact, the pandemic was accompanied by a continuation of political violence across conflict zones. Secondly, the policy measures taken to combat the spread of the virus provided further opportunities for non-state actors and violent armed groups in conflict-ridden geographies. Particularly in the initial stages of the pandemic, non-state armed groups capitalised on the situation to speed up their violent campaigns. Similarly, governments have also taken advantage of the imposed restrictions to suppress opposition.

Thirdly, it has been asserted that the pandemic has aggravated the already existing political grievances which are inherent to many conflicts and has further marginalised vulnerable groups.

In the session, an optimistic approach was also observed with regards to the implications of the pandemic. It has demonstrated the importance of strengthening institutions, reducing inequalities and enhancing dialogue.

The use of digital technologies was another point of discussion in this session. As the Covid-19 is the first pandemic of the digital age, the technological tools at human use are critical. Digital means were used in Sudan, Yemen, Libya and Afghanistan amid the pandemic. However, it was stated that the use of digital technologies should be carefully weighed. Since they would not replace the traditional face-to-face communication in peace processes, we should try to make use of these technologies to the best of their capabilities. What matters here, it was claimed, is choosing the appropriate digital tools to support mediation.

The session also shed light on the importance of fragilities and the critical nature of resilience. It was stated that resilience is also critical in both addressing and overcoming challenges posed by the pandemic. The need for building resilience highlights the importance of observing and understanding tipping points as well as the need to improve our conflict analysis and risk assessment skills.

Session 3: Harnessing Technology for Building and Sustaining Peace

As the pandemic once again revealed, the digital transformation is now affecting all aspects of human life including conflicts, and it is here to stay. To better understand how technology plays a role in building and sustaining peace, this session, moderated by Itonde Kakoma of the Crisis Management Initiative, featured prominent figures who have been working on this issue: Fabrizio Hochschild (*Under Secretary General and Special Advisor on Preparations for the 75th Anniversary of the UN*), Teresa Whitfield (*Director of Policy and Mediation Unit of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*), Akın Ünver (*Associate Professor at Kadir Has University*) and Andreas Hirblinger (*Researcher at the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute Geneva*).

The session underlined that technology has a transformative power that can be utilised for both malicious and peaceful goals. However, we must be cognizant that the tools available to peacemakers are also available to disruptive actors. The defining characteristic of digital tools is that they are more easily accessed, require less financial resources to obtain and enable anonymity/non-attribution for their users. The number of cyberattacks after the onset of the pandemic increased by 400% globally. Deliberate spread of misinformation is another example. As the session revealed, during the pandemic there was an exponential spread of misinformation which led to the introduction of the concept of "*infodemic*".

With regards to the issue of digital technologies and digital transformation, the session also focused on the possible downsides. Firstly, it was stressed that when we talk about digital technologies and their usefulness for peace, we should also discuss the lack of inclusivity. This is because not everyone has equal access to digital tools. Secondly, digital technologies may jeopardise peace processes. Hate speech, for example, can undermine the achievements in peace processes. Thirdly, developing technologies, as one panellist illustrated, expanded the audience for conflicts. Any development pertaining to a conflict or peace process may easily be shared with millions of people over online platforms. Therefore, mediators will now need to mediate the expectations of not only conflict parties but also a wider audience. This also calls in the concept of adaptation.

The panellists underlined the need for mediators to truly understand how technology affects mediation and peace processes as technologies evolve and shape the environment in which they operate. Big data, Artificial Intelligence and machine-learning need to be better comprehended with regards to their potential use in peace processes. When used ethically and effectively, such technologies may complement and support peace endeavours. Building bigger and more efficient mediation labs to gather people from different backgrounds is a possible step in making this

connection more salient and understandable for peacemakers.

Finally, the session revealed that as digital technologies develop, tech companies should also be included in peace processes because peacemakers need to adapt to these technologies as much as potential disruptors.

The session also focused on the need for increasing digital literacy of mediators, developing tailor-made solutions instead of one-size-fits-all approaches, using digital tools to support inclusivity of peace processes and developing technologies in line with our aspirations for peace.

Session 4: Charting a Way Forward for Peacemaking and Mediation

This final session aimed at taking stock of what has been covered throughout the conference and what awaits peacemakers in the years to come. The session featured William Zartman (*Professor Emeritus at Johns Hopkins University*) and Burak Akçapar (*Ambassador, Director General for Foreign Policy, Analysis and Coordination at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey*).

In his remarks, Prof Zartman underlined that there are two prominent features of current conflicts. Firstly, mediation is not taking place between well-constituted actors today. As non-state actors are now increasingly becoming conflict actors, it is getting harder to find well-established interlocutors for such groups. Secondly, Prof Zartman put forward that there are no salient solutions to the conflicts of today.

For mediators to operate in such an environment, Prof Zartman explained that there are two steps. The first step is bringing conflict parties to the negotiation table, which is more important. The second step is setting up the architecture or designing the peace process.

According to Prof Zartman, there is one particular aspect to motivate conflict parties to be mediated. It requires changing their perceptions by instilling the idea that the conflict cannot be won by unilateral steps, there is a mutually hurting stalemate and mediation is the only way out. Only by ripening the perception of parties can a mediator actually start a peace process. When this idea of a mutually hurting stalemate is not accepted by warring sides, no mediation or solution will be available as observed in the cases of Syria, Libya, South Sudan and Nagorno-Karabakh. It is also required that a mediator has the backing of the UN Security Council, the lack of which tantamounts to a “diplomatic sin”.

With regards to the digital transformation, Prof Zartman emphasised that technology cannot and will not replace face-to-face communication. As Zartman stated, it is not always easy and possible to convince or ripen the conceptions of someone who is sitting behind the screen.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Burak Akçapar underscored that developing

strategies for peace is as crucial as strategies for preserving core national interests. He emphasised Turkey's efforts in this regard embodied in the co-chairmanship of three distinct groups of friends of mediation at the UN, OSCE and OIC, which culminated in four mediation-related UN General Assembly resolutions, two mediation-related OIC Council of Foreign Ministers resolutions as well as Istanbul Mediation Conferences.

He emphasised that Istanbul Mediation Conferences aim to provide a broader picture towards peace mediation by looking at the past, present and the foreseeable future. The second goal is to bring to fruition solid policy outcomes. He stated that although these twin goals have been pursued by bringing people physically in Istanbul, this year's conference did so by having people on board through digital means.

Ambassador Akçapar stressed that the pandemic has accelerated and aggravated the already existing conflict trends globally. Despite the UN Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire, the pandemic has been accompanied by an increasing violence, intensification of big and middle power rivalries, and deteriorating social and economic conditions of vulnerable groups. He also stated that the pandemic has made it obvious that we need reliable and functioning governance particularly in conflict-ridden geographies and that resilience is of utmost importance as it enables communities and states to fend off threats that could potentially evolve into conflicts.

Dr Akçapar also emphasised, in line with the main arguments of the panellists of the conference, that the nature of conflicts has been changing with the inclusion of more conflict parties. This ever more crowded field, he asserted, creates a design and implementation problem for mediators. Additionally, this situation, he stated, makes it ever more important to achieve and sustain coherence, complementarity and coordination in peace processes.

With regards to the role of digital technologies, he highlighted the Janus-faced nature of such technologies. Although they have been helping people in conflict geographies to maintain communication despite Covid-19 restrictions, they also have the potential to spoil processes through hate speech and disinformation.

Ambassador Akçapar concluded his remarks by suggesting that even in the age of AI and robotics, the ultimate responsibility for peace lies with us and in the social trust we build, the legitimacy and design of the institutions we create, and our readiness to use, reform and improve them when needed.

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