The Challenges of UN Mediation: Introduction

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Abstract

This is the second of a two-part special issue of International Negotiation devoted to examining mediation conducted by the United Nations. The articles contribute to our understanding of the UN as an international mediator, notably its relevance and efficacy, and the challenges and opportunities it faces. Now, past its 75th anniversary, the UN can and still does mediate in the evolving international environment, showing a mixed track record of limitations and achievements in a variety of peacemaking engagements.

Keywords

United Nations – mediation – peacemaking

“Why the UN Fails.” It was in the midst of the post-Cold War conflicts in the former Yugoslavia that Saadia Touval (1994) published an article in Foreign Affairs with this provocative title, calling into question the UN’s ability to mediate violent conflicts. Touval’s explanations pointed particularly to the UN’s intergovernmental nature that prevents it from formulating and pursuing coherent and effective mediation efforts, as a result of which the legitimacy and credibility of UN mediation attempts are consistently eroded. And in the first decade

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of the 21st century, “Can the UN still mediate?” was the question that Fen Osler Hampson (2004) asked in response to Touval’s arguments. Hampson’s own answer was positive; he drew attention to some salient cases of success, including in El Salvador, Cambodia, and Mozambique, while pointing out the challenges facing UN mediators in this century, such as the intractability of conflicts, high barriers to entry, and the proliferation of mediators on the international stage. Now, past its 75th anniversary, the UN can and still does mediate in the evolving international environment, showing a mixed track record of limitations and achievements in a variety of peacemaking engagements.

Against this backdrop, this issue of the journal is the second of two thematic issues devoted to examining the state of UN mediation; the first part appeared earlier this year (Hellmüller & Wählisch 2022). This issue further contributes to our understanding of the UN as an international mediator, notably its relevance and efficacy, and the challenges and opportunities it faces. The four articles in this issue have different emphases and angles. The first article by Tetsuro Iji discusses the limits and potentials of UN mediation in bringing conflicting parties to a negotiated settlement. While Iji, drawing upon ripeness theory, is primarily concerned with generalizing across cases, the second article by Amira Schiff presents a focused examination of the UN mediator’s unique efforts during the Gaza-Israel crisis in 2018–2019, highlighting the UN’s special niche for crisis management. The remaining two articles deal with an ongoing policy challenge facing UN mediators, as noted by Hampson (2004) and by many others (e.g. Crocker et al., 1999): that is, the question of how to relate to other mediation actors, notably regional organizations, in today’s increasingly multiparty and crowded mediation environments. Julian Bergmann compares the UN and the European Union (EU) in terms of mediation approaches and capacities, and discusses their cooperation in mediation, taking up South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a case study. Thomas Kwasi Tieku and Megan Payler turn their attention to the UN’s relationship with the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in mediating conflicts in West Africa and the Sahel regions.

Challenges faced by UN mediators continue, as conflict among great powers is reignited and takes a toll on international conflict management. This thematic issue is offered with the hope that it will contribute to positive discussions and policy making in these difficult times.
References


