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RESEARCH NOTES AND COMMENTARY · GLOBAL SECURITY AND CONFLICT STUDIES

Mediation Fatigue

A Note on Declining Third-Party Engagement in Protracted Civil Conflicts

Marcus Webb-Åström and Fatima Al-Rashidi
Geneva Peace Institute

ABSTRACT

This research note examines a pattern observed across several ongoing civil conflicts: a measurable decline in sustained third-party mediation efforts as conflicts extend beyond the five-year mark, even where humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate. Drawing on preliminary data from mediation attempts recorded between 2010 and 2023, the note documents a drop-off in formal mediation initiatives after the initial three-to-five-year window of international attention, coinciding with donor fatigue, shifting geopolitical priorities, and the diffusion of media and diplomatic focus toward newer crises. Rather than offering a fully developed causal model, this note presents the pattern as a preliminary finding warranting further systematic investigation and proposes several hypotheses — attention economy effects, mediator burnout, and normalization of protracted conflict as a policy baseline — that could structure future research. The note closes with brief policy-relevant reflections on sustaining mediation infrastructure in conflicts that outlast the international news cycle.

Keywords: conflict mediation; protracted conflict; donor fatigue; peace processes; civil war

1. Observation

Civil conflicts that resist early resolution present a puzzle for the study of international mediation: despite continued or worsening humanitarian conditions, the intensity of third-party mediation effort does not appear to remain constant over the life of a conflict. Preliminary data assembled from mediation attempts recorded between 2010 and 2023 across a sample of protracted civil conflicts suggests a marked decline in the frequency of formal mediation initiatives — defined here as facilitated talks convened or supported by a recognized third-party mediator — once a conflict passes the three-to-five-year mark, a pattern we refer to as mediation fatigue.

This decline is not uniform. Conflicts that generate acute, high-visibility humanitarian crises can experience renewed mediation attention even after years of stalemate. But the general pattern across the sample examined here points to a front-loading of international mediation effort into the early years of a conflict, followed by a substantial and sustained tapering.

2. Candidate Explanations

We propose three non-exclusive hypotheses that might account for this pattern, each of which points toward a distinct future research agenda rather than a settled explanation.

Attention economy effects. International media and diplomatic attention is a scarce and competitively allocated resource. As new crises emerge, they may displace older, unresolved conflicts from the agendas of foreign ministries, multilateral organizations, and donor states, independent of any change in the severity or mediability of the original conflict.

Mediator burnout and institutional turnover. Sustained engagement with protracted, low-progress conflicts may exhaust the institutional appetite and personal capital of individual mediators and mediating institutions, particularly where early mediation attempts have failed to produce visible progress, leading to a gradual reallocation of skilled personnel and diplomatic resources toward conflicts perceived as more tractable.

Normalization of protracted conflict as a policy baseline. Over time, a conflict's continuation may come to be treated by external actors as a stable, if undesirable, status quo requiring humanitarian management rather than active resolution, shifting the dominant policy framework from conflict resolution to conflict containment.

3. Scope and Limitations

This note draws on a preliminary and relatively small sample of conflicts and does not attempt to adjudicate between the three hypotheses proposed above, nor to establish a formal causal claim. The pattern identified here should accordingly be read as suggestive rather than conclusive, and as motivation for a more systematic, larger-sample study using consistent coding of mediation attempts

across a broader universe of protracted conflicts.

4. Policy Reflection

If mediation fatigue is a general feature of protracted civil conflicts, it carries a practical implication for the design of international mediation infrastructure: institutional mechanisms that do not depend on sustained high-level political attention — such as standing regional mediation capacities, or dedicated funding streams insulated from short-term donor prioritization — may be better suited to sustaining engagement with conflicts that outlast the natural life cycle of international attention than mediation efforts that rely on renewed diplomatic mobilization at each stage.

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