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# Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding

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## ABSTRACT

This article will introduce the ‘perpetual peacebuilding’ paradigm. Academics and policy-makers have accepted that the linearity of the liberal peace neither reflects, nor should it drive, the tumult of peacebuilding. Nevertheless, practitioners have made merely cosmetic changes to their approaches. Within the perpetual peacebuilding paradigm, peacebuilding is envisioned as an ever-developing process manifested in a series of (re-)negotiations of the social and political contract. Notions of success and failure and concepts such as ‘tracks’ and ‘peace agreements’ are abandoned, and peace is both utopian and subjective. Lastly, the peacebuilding community is called upon to display greater courage and creativity.

## KEYWORDS

Peace; political violence; Syria; Kenya; United Nations

## Introduction

Liberal peace theory, and its ‘linear cause–effect problem-solving model’ (De Coning 2018, 302; Eriksen 2009; Lederach 2005; Ramalingam 2013) are now widely deemed to be in ‘profound crisis’ (Randazzo and Torrent 2020, 5; see, for example, Dodge 2020 for a powerful exploration of the recent failings of liberal peacebuilding in Iraq). The tenets of the liberal peace dominated peacebuilding academia and practice in the 1990s, guiding peace process designs aimed at achieving multi-party democratic systems characterised by ‘the rule of law, human rights, free and globalised markets and neo-liberal development’ (Richmond 2006, 292). It was proposed that this would be achieved by progressing through a rigid set of phases: peacebuilders or peacemakers would begin with a ceasefire, then initiate pre-negotiations and negotiations, before supporting and funding the implementation of a settlement after which elections and liberal institution-building would follow.

There has been an increasing recognition within academia and policy that such a sequence neither mirrors, nor should it guide, the inherently complex process of creating pathways towards peaceful, inclusive societies. Nevertheless, attempts to reform international peacebuilding have been both haphazard and stilted. I will therefore introduce

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and develop the notion of ‘perpetual peacebuilding’. I propose that peacebuilding, in response to violence, must be viewed as entailing continuous negotiations, and re-negotiations, of the social and political contract of a society and polity, with pathways to peace marked by opportunities, setbacks, catalysts, friction and resistance. I will suggest that embracing this re-conceptualisation is an essential precondition for truly abandoning the linearity of the liberal peacebuilding model. In addition to surveying relevant academic and policy literature, I will also explore the peacebuilding which has taken place in Kenya post-2007 and Syria post-2011, processes which have been conducted amidst cycles of violence; this scholarly and empirical evidence will inform the paradigm developed. The two cases and the paradigm proposed are also informed by fieldwork entailing more than fifty interviews with politicians, diplomats, religious leaders, human rights and peacebuilding activists, and researchers. In addition, I have contributed to the two peace processes under examination here, together with more than twenty other processes, as both an expert adviser and facilitator, and this work has also guided the reflections within this article.

## Peacebuilding as non-linear and perpetual: Reflections from academia and policy

### *The academic sphere*

An increasing number of scholars have not only recognised the ‘messiness’ of peacebuilding but, moreover, have suggested new frameworks through which practitioners may be better able to embrace, and work within, this reality. In doing so, scholars have rejected the determinism of liberal peace theory. As early as the mid-2000s, Lederach (2005, 118) described peacebuilding as ‘dynamic’ and ‘non-linear’ (as summarised in Körppen and Ropers 2011, 11). Bramble and Paffenholz (2020, 16), have supported this, claiming that ‘the idea of a quasi-linear process’, moving from violence to formal negotiations, leading to an agreement which is then implemented, and followed by the drafting of a new constitution and the holding of elections, ‘does not reflect reality’ (see also De Coning 2018, 301; Hirblinger et al. 2019, 14, 21, 22; Randazzo 2021, 141). Björkdahl et al. (2016, 4, 1) developed the notion of ‘friction’, recognising ‘that the outcome of peacebuilding interventions is emergent and cannot be predicted’ (see also Ferreira and Richmond 2021 for an exploration of how ‘criminal governance’, for example, may undermine peacebuilding). Researchers at the Peace Agreements Database (PA-X) have created an arresting, interactive diagram which shows ‘the back and forth in peace negotiations’, visually capturing the complexity of peacebuilding and, in particular, its frequently non-linear nature.<sup>1</sup> Regarding ‘outcomes’, Bell and Pospisil (2017, 583, 577) observe that peace processes often generate that which they term a ‘formalised political *unsettlement*’, characterised by ‘enduring transformation’ in which there may exist multiple, fluctuating sources of power (see also Rocha Menocal 2017, 561, 567). Lastly, Jarstad et al. (2015, 2) evoke the idea of a ‘spiral’ towards peace, highlighting the ‘considerable diversity’ of the results of the peace accords negotiated in the 1990s while, more recently, Jarstad et al. (2019, 2) have proposed a ‘conception of peace as a complex, dynamic process of *becoming* rather than an end state [emphasis added]’. To summarise, it is emphasised within these works that there is no end-point to peacebuilding, and that it is an inherently dynamic process with a potential multiplicity of strands and entry-points.

Scholars have also argued that peacebuilding must therefore adapt, and move past the teleological nature of liberal peacebuilding. A number seem to take their inspiration from Lederach's (1997, 84) contention that the 'goal' of peacebuilding should be 'the generation of continuous, dynamic, self-regenerating processes', composed of 'a web of people, their relationships and activities, and the social mechanisms necessary to sustain the change sought' (see Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad 2020, 1 for a recent iteration of this claim). For example, De Coning (2018, 310) offers the idea of 'adaptive peacebuilding', consisting of 'simultaneously exploring multiple options by undertaking several parallel initiatives', each following 'an inductive methodology of participatory exploration, experimentation and adaptation'. For further examples of suggested revisions to peacebuilding processes, see Ricigliano (2012) and Körppen and Ropers (2011).

### *The policy sphere*

Randazzo and Torrent (2020, 7) and De Coning (2018, 304, 317) have argued that the UN, at least within its policy frameworks, appears to have moved away from 'the liberal peace theory of change' and instead embraced a more pragmatic approach 'which acknowledges that peacebuilding is a political activity that must avoid templates, formulas and one-size-fits-all solutions'. Indeed, within the guidance of a number of international peacebuilding institutions, there has been a recognition of the non-linear, complex nature of conflict and the need for peacebuilding interventions to adapt. The G7+ (2011, 1) has argued that 'transitioning out of fragility is long, political work'; the World Bank (2011, 12) has observed that 'countries that [have] moved away from fragility and conflict often do so not through one decisive "make or break" moment', such as a peace deal', but, 'through many transition movements'. This organisation has further claimed that 'a repeated process enables space for collaborative norms and capacities to develop, and for success to build on successes in a virtuous cycle' (World Bank 2011, 12).

In 2015, the UN undertook a crucial series of reviews of its peacebuilding architecture, introducing the notion of 'sustaining peace' as a replacement for the term peacebuilding (UN 2015a, 17). Of particular importance here is the UN's recognition that sustainable peace can be achieved through the creation of 'legitimate institutions' and that progress towards this end 'is neither linear nor mono-directional' (UN 2015a, 18). Moreover, the report introduces the possibility that peace agreements need to 'ensure that dialogue mechanisms are established that will progressively ensure the broadening of narrow peace deals into inclusive processes' (UN 2015a, 56), thus introducing the potential for long-term, ever-developing negotiations. A second UN document advocated for flexibility and 'context-specific analysis' (UN 2015b, 13). The European Union (EU) has incorporated a similar perspective (see EU 2016, 9, 10, 30, 31) while the World Bank and UN joint report, 'Pathways for Peace' (2018, 77, 78, 99) writes that 'pathways [for peace] are never linear', that there may be a multiplicity of 'entry points', and that conflict prevention demands 'flexibility, [and] adaptability'.

To summarise, then, the academic and policy spheres seem to be in harmony. Taken together, we can see a combination of arguments: while some contend that peacebuilding *is already* turbulent and unending, others claim that practitioners *should embrace* this reality, and perceive it to be 'normal'. In addition, a variety of ways in which practitioners

can approach peacebuilding in this vein are developed. The next two sections will assess the extent to which the research and normative frameworks surveyed here have translated into practice.

### Perpetual negotiations towards a peaceful, inclusive and just society: the experience of Kenya, 2007–2019<sup>2</sup>

The recent political history of Kenya provides an apt example of the manner in which peacebuilding amidst violence can be convoluted, cyclical, and unsteady, can face resistance and setbacks, and is composed of persistent attempts to negotiate, and re-negotiate, the social and political contracts of a given state. This section will reflect upon the recurring election-related violence witnessed in Kenya since 2007, arguing that it is largely locally-owned, formal and informal processes which have reduced and prevented violence. These ‘change processes’ have occurred at ‘critical junctures’, and many were not formally deemed to be ‘peace processes’; instead, they adopted a variety of formats, from mass movements for political reform, constitutional amendments, Track I negotiations, to anti-corruption initiatives (Kamungi, Paffenholz, and Mpaayei 2020). These dialogues, negotiations and movements have also been accompanied by, and have influenced, high-level pacts and, moreover, have almost always taken place in the context of ‘light-touch’ international support. The analysis supports many of the insights teased out in the previous section, and has implications for the understanding of peacebuilding amidst violence. It must be noted from the outset, though, that here the case of Kenya is serving merely as an illustration and not as a ‘model’.

Alleged electoral manipulation during the 2007/2008 Kenyan elections provoked severe and concentrated violence; more than 1,000 people were killed and 600,000 were displaced, while sexual and gender-based violence also erupted (Charvet 2016, 2; Kanyinga 2011, 85; Kamungi, Paffenholz and Mpaayei 2020, 105; Waki Commission 2008). The African Union (AU) launched an initiative, the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation (KNDR), led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, to facilitate talks between President Kibaki and Raila Odinga, leader of the opposition party, the Orange Democratic Movement (Kanyinga 2011, 86; Kamungi, Paffenholz and Mpaayei 2020, 105). Even before the KNDR, however, informal, civil society initiatives were launched: the ‘Concerned Citizens for Peace’, ‘Kenyans for Peace with Truth and Justice’, and a ‘Women’s Alliance’ collectively paved the way for more formal negotiations and, more importantly, advocated for particular agenda items such as the need to address human rights violations and to form a government of national unity (Kanyinga 2011, 96; Kamungi, Paffenholz and Mpaayei 2020, 105). It took six weeks for a formal peace deal to be reached, an agreement which brought an end to the violence, which did indeed create a government of national unity, and which included a commitment to hold accountable those responsible for the violence and to address the underlying causes of the election bloodshed (National Accord and Reconciliation Act 2008). In order to achieve this agenda, an innovative set of implementation commissions was established while Annan continued to engage with the parties long after the agreement.

Many of the reforms which resulted from the KNDR process were incorporated within Kenya’s new constitution, endorsed in 2010. This constitution also created a more devolved political system, with greater power awarded to newly created counties. The

intention was to minimise ethnopolitical hostility and the risk of election violence. In a similar vein, the new constitution also created new, elected positions, and competition for these ushered in a practice of ‘negotiated democracy’, or informal negotiations between community leaders, regarding the sharing of these new seats (Elfversson and Sjögren 2020, 50; Kamungi, Paffenholz and Mpaayei 2020, 105–6). Negotiated democracy, and elite bargaining, also led to the formation of inclusive political coalitions, alleviating resentment provoked by perceived political marginalisation. Lastly, the constitution stipulated revenue-sharing with Kenya’s counties, and civil society organisations were given greater oversight over the government’s devolved units. Progress was not, however, smooth, nor was it without resistance (Kamungi, Paffenholz, and Mpaayei 2020, 105–106).

In 2017, the Kenyan general election was marred, again, by irregularities and, for the first time in African history, the results of the presidential vote were annulled by the Supreme Court (Cheeseman et al. 2019, 216). New elections were called for and Odinga, the main opposition leader, once more the presidential candidate for the Orange Democratic Movement, boycotted the second round and was later ‘sworn in’ by his supporters as the ‘People’s President’ on the 30 of January 2018 (Campbell 2018; Lynch 2018). The mood in the country was tense, further violence was feared, and the crisis brought the economy almost to a standstill. Religious leaders, peace groups, human rights activists, coalitions of women, youth groups, academics, former politicians and elders, the private sector and political institutions all launched informal dialogue processes at the national and sub-national levels in an attempt to address the immediate crisis and stave off violence. These actors also sought to tackle Kenya’s long-standing challenges and disputes: the root causes of violence. The religious leaders of Kenya united under the ‘Dialogue Reference Group’ to gather together the array of initiatives and attempt to coordinate one, united national dialogue. Meanwhile, the diplomatic community provided political and financial support for these various mediation and negotiation efforts which eventually developed into a concerted effort to renegotiate the reforms of the 2008 peace deal and the 2010 constitution (Kamungi, Paffenholz and Mpaayei 2020, 106).

President Uhuru Kenyatta and Odinga met in March 2018, and shook hands at the site of the 2008 peace agreement (BBC 2018; Lynch 2018). The two agreed on a formal process for political reform, the Building Bridges for a New Kenya Initiative (BBI), appointing a fourteen-member taskforce, including women and men and drawn from the country’s different ethnic groups and two political camps to steer a process of nationwide consultations. Proposals for reform were made by this group in a report released in December 2019 (BBI 2019). In parallel, a dialogue ‘ecosystem’ generated further reform proposals generated by opposition political parties, a number of which overlapped with the suggestions made by BBI while others opposed them. Taken together, the proposals vary from executive power-sharing, to reforms in the political, security and social spheres, to means through which inclusion can be fostered within education. Kenyan youth, too, have played their role, together with professional peace NGOs, alliances of women, and coalitions of religious actors. Members of the international community have sought to support the negotiations, and re-negotiations, which are taking place. A number of Western ambassadors, accompanied by diplomats and officials of the EU and the UN, united to coordinate their political support. Donors have also supported a number of the aforementioned initiatives while a Swiss ‘think and do’ tank, has provided expertise

and facilitation for a number of the actors and initiatives described above (Kamungi, Paffenholz and Mpaayei 2020, 106–107). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the journey, rendering it difficult to unite these various proposals for reform. It remains to be seen whether Kenyan actors will succeed in making progress on this reform agenda or whether they will look back on this period as yet another incomplete attempt at national dialogue.

The Kenyan case clearly demonstrates that pathways from violence and towards peace are not linear and involve substantial effort by a diversity of actors. Moreover, phases of peace processes are indefinite and occur under different labels and within various formats. Peace agreements which appear as a ‘destination’ may, in truth, serve as a point of departure for further dialogue, change and resistance. There is no success and failure but, rather, an ebbing and waning series of debates and dialogues, entangled in an array of supporting and resisting interests. Conceptualising peacebuilding amidst violence in this manner has repercussions for the way in which peace processes are supported. Just as academics and policymakers have made clear, our understanding of peace processes needs to be shifted from viewing interventions as linear models, to a more adaptive, fluid approach. This will entail not only identifying and supporting ‘change agents’ but also facilitating the conditions under which they can operate and, indeed, flourish. However, while the international community appears to have adapted well in response to the most recent crisis in Kenya, to what extent has there been a consistent shift in approach by international actors in other cases? The next section of this article will reflect upon this.

## From policy to practice: Missed opportunities and superficial adjustments

### *Initial assessments of the implementation of the new peacebuilding policy frameworks*

Section 2 explored how, for decades, scholars have argued that linear processes, composed of the same rigid, sequence of steps regardless of the conflict and its nature, do not mirror the convoluted reality of peacebuilding, and that international peacebuilders should not strive to promote peace in this manner. Section 2 also revealed how, from 2011 onwards, international policymakers seem to have ‘caught up’ with the scholarship on this issue; following an intensive review of the UN’s peacebuilding architecture, an Advisory Group of Experts imagined a new, more holistic, comprehensive, inclusive, multi-layered and adaptable form of peacebuilding, and their 2015 reports joined those of the EU, the World Bank and the G7+ in calling for reform. While this normative shift is fresh, and although prominent organisations such as the UN remain in the throes of critical self-assessment (UN 2020b), it is nevertheless pertinent to reflect on the effect of these new frameworks upon peacebuilding in recent years.

For a number of scholars, the translation of policy into practice is yet to be seen. Ross (2020, 5) claims that ‘overall, liberal, democratic peace continues to drive most international engagement by institutions such as the UN’, oversimplifying ‘the iterative and cyclical nature of most peace processes’. Autesserre (2019) agrees, arguing that ‘apart from a few marginal cases’, the UN ‘is largely paying lip service’ to the ideas proposed following its 2015 review (see also De Coning and Gelot 2020).



Scholars seem to have elucidated four constraints on the capacity of international institutions to adapt: (i) an unwillingness (perhaps due to the difficulty it would entail), on the part of peacebuilding organisations, donors and member states of the UN, to implement the new frameworks (Novosseloff 2019, 5); (ii) a failure, by the peacebuilding enterprise, to fully understand the sustaining peace agenda and its implications for changing ‘business as usual’ (Connolly and Powers 2018, 2); (iii) the restrictive nature of funding for peacebuilding which prevents flexible, expansive operations (Call and Campbell 2018, 68; Carvalho and Kok 2016; Mahmoud and Mechoulam 2018, 56; Novosseloff 2019, 1; Sarfati 2020, 8–9; Van Veen and Dudouet 2017, 2, 4); (iv) and, lastly, a possible lack of courage on the part of decision-makers to embrace complexity and uncertainty, and to leave their ‘comfort zones’ (Call and Campbell 2018, 70). Continuing to assess the implementation of the new policy frameworks will prove essential, as will attempting to uncover the reasons for delays and failure. The following sub-section will contribute to this goal, focusing on the efforts made by the UN to mediate peace in Syria.

### *The UN and the Syrian crisis*<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, Syrians across the country rose up against their government, inspired by the pro-democracy revolutions seemingly sweeping across the Arab world. The violent response of President Bashar al-Assad and his security services, however, and the gradual militarisation of the revolution, rapidly transformed the crisis into an internationalised war (Darke 2014; Hokayem 2013; Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016). The conflict has raged for ten years, and has claimed the lives of more than 500,000 people, with 5.6 million forced to seek refuge outside Syria and 6.6 million internally displaced (Human Rights Watch 2019; UNHCR 2018). An array of international actors has sought to bring the violence to a peaceful end; none has succeeded, and prominent amongst these peacemakers is the UN. From the outset, however, the UN has remained wedded to the classical, linear approach: a clinging to the notion that high-level peace talks, mediated by the UN, will bring about a political transition to a liberal democratic Syria. In a brief but uncomplimentary report, Harland (2018) examines the challenges faced by UN peacemaking in Syria. Two of the arguments made are relevant here: the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria is deemed by this author to lack ‘any real room for political manoeuvre’, and the process is viewed to be neither ‘discreet’ nor ‘agile’ (Harland 2018, 8). These claims will be elaborated upon in this brief overview while it will also be argued that the UN has, on occasion, made alterations to its approach; however, these have proven to be merely superficial, revealing a lack of meaningful engagement with the new frameworks envisioned from 2011 onwards.

The UN began its engagement in Syria in 2012. Kofi Annan, the first Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League on the Syria Crisis, drafted his Six-Point Plan which advocated for a political process headed by Syrians (UN 2012a); shortly after his appointment in February 2012, the UNSC also authorised a team of unarmed military observers (the UN Supervision Mission in Syria, UNSMIS) to monitor a ceasefire, a deployment which later expanded in both numbers and scope (UN 2012a, 2012b). While ‘escalating violence’ provoked UNSMIS to be disbanded just months later (BBC 2012), Annan persisted, gathering together the Secretaries-General of the UN and the Arab League, and the foreign ministers of China, France, Russia, the UK, the US, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and the European



Union (EU), to form an ‘Action Group for Syria’. These officials released a communiqué which called for a ‘Syrian-led transition’ and the ‘establishment of a transitional governing body which ... should be formed on the basis of mutual consent’ (Phillips 2016, 101; UN 2012c, 3–4).

No Syrians attended the meeting of the Action Group; Syrian ‘disputants’ would not meet in the same room until 2014. Annan resigned in August 2012, criticising a divided UNSC (Black 2012), and Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed to the position of Envoy. Brahimi oversaw the next stage of the elite-level process which was initiated in January and February 2014: ‘Geneva II’ began with a public ceremony in Montreux before a delegation representing al-Assad and his government, and a delegation formed of members of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), met in Geneva. Many members of SOC are recent or long-term exiles and this Syrian opposition organisation received a great deal of financial and political support from states opposed to al-Assad (Phillips 2016, 114–116). SOC (and its predecessor, the Syrian National Council) was favoured by Western international actors, and was promoted as the sole opposition body in the negotiations even while other groups and factions, unaffiliated with or inadequately represented within SOC, assumed control over major population centres in Syria (Alsarraj and Hoffman 2020). I would therefore argue that Western international actors ‘constructed’ the negotiation partner with which they wished to work during the peace process; moreover, I would argue that this shows the degree to which the UN and major member states were intent upon mediating a traditional negotiation between two, opposing ‘disputants’. Rather than contend with the complex, ever-fluctuating, reality of the uprising and its attendant violence, and the diffuse nature of ‘local’ resistance in Syria, the UN instead depended upon an opposition organisation with increasingly diminishing legitimacy within the country and which failed to include all the relevant actors in the Syrian conflict (BBC 2016; International Crisis Group 2013; The Atlantic 2013).

Geneva II collapsed in February 2014, with the two delegations unable to even agree on the sequencing of the agenda for the talks, and Brahimi left his post shortly after. Staffan de Mistura was next. During his tenure, the UN continued to attempt to bring together the Syrian government and the opposition to forge a deal which would lead to peace and the ousting of al-Assad; in February 2016, ‘Geneva III’ was launched, only to be suspended just two days after the attempt began. The opposition, now represented by the ‘High Negotiation Committee’ (HNC), refused to negotiate with the government as they had done in 2014, demanding first that sieges be lifted in opposition areas, airstrikes halted and detainees released (Cumming-Bruce and Sengupta 2016). Further compounding the futility of the mediation efforts, Al-Assad launched a military advance against rebels in the north of Aleppo on the second day of the negotiations, and the Envoy suggested that ‘the government’s failure to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria by allowing food and medicine into rebel-held towns had prevented any serious discussions’ (Cumming-Bruce and Sengupta 2016).

De Mistura tried, once more, to mediate talks in 2017 but the HNC and the representatives of al-Assad did not reach a ‘breakthrough’. During this period, we also witnessed two instances of adaptation to the new policy frameworks; firstly, in an attempt to broaden the perspectives drawn upon during the peace negotiations, de Mistura

launched the ‘Women’s Advisory Board’ (WAB), following intensive lobbying by the ‘Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy’ (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 9). This body was comprised of twelve Syrian women, drawn from across the political spectrum, and their role was to advise the UN Envoy. In the absence of sustained peace talks, members of the WAB were flown back and forth to Geneva, participating in training events all over the world and enjoying a great deal of attention from donors. Its members, however, grew increasingly frustrated while their representativity was questioned and the manner in which they were framed – as a politically neutral force, invested in peace – was vehemently criticised by the Syrian Feminist Lobby as being reductive (Gambale 2016; Kapur 2017, 33–37). The WAB also faced heavy criticism on social media (Gambale 2016). Rather than a meaningful widening of the peace process to include a greater array of actors, or an attempt to introduce a parallel process truly led and guided by Syrian women, the WAB developed into a mere ‘tick-box approach’, a cosmetic attempt to respond to the disappointments of the Geneva Peace Process. Compounding this, and without assessing other options, the UN and the donor community seized upon the WAB as the sole instrument through which the inclusion of women in the Syrian peace negotiations could be fostered, even while the talks floundered and violence persisted.

Secondly, the De Mistura period also saw the launch of the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), an initiative sponsored and organised by the UN in conjunction with the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) and swisspeace. Once more, this mechanism was established in response to pressure exerted by Syrian civil society actors (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 7). The platform gathered together diverse members of Syrian civil society, drawn from ‘different areas of Syria and the region’, in a bid to ‘strengthen the participation and contributions of Syrian civil society actors to the official talks by facilitating exchanges between civil society and the UN mediation team’ and to encourage ‘discussion and dialogue amongst Syrian civil society’ (swisspeace n.d.). The participants tended to meet during the official mediation attempts, but ‘outreach’ gatherings, in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, together with remote meetings, also took place (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 9). Turkmani and Theros (2019, 11, 25) make the claim that ‘the CSSR was far more than a complementary process to the political track’, further stating that ‘it has created a process in its own right’. Indeed, these authors describe the work of the CSSR as constituting a ‘reimagining of the social contract’. Hellmüller and Zahar (2018, 1, 5) also depict the platform as both ‘novel’ and ‘innovative’. Nevertheless, within the same report, the frustrations of the CSSR are also noted; particularly significant is the claim that ‘ensuring substantive engagement’ became a challenge (Hellmüller and Zahar 2018, 4). As the CSSR tended to meet during the peace talks, the level of attention members of the UN team were able to devote to the civil society actors gathered was limited. Indeed, as the authors of the report continue by noting, ‘the mere presence of civil society actors in the room is not enough’, while it is also speculated that the continued efforts to bring CSSR members to Geneva specifically during the Track I negotiations were due to the ‘symbolic importance’ of their being present. This notion of symbolism is of crucial importance, and also applies to the WAB. These mechanisms were not able to compensate for an overall process design built upon an outdated linear model which has not been adapted to the realities and complexities of the local, regional and

international context of the Syrian conflict, nor have they succeeded in halting violence. Rather than being viewed, and treated, as a truly parallel path through which possibilities for peace could be explored, in the words of Autesserre (2019), the CSSR and the WAB constitute mere ‘add-ons’ to an otherwise malfunctioning system.

Since 2019, and the arrival of a fourth Envoy, Geir Pedersen (UN 2018), the UN has adopted a slightly different approach, conducting a wider outreach to various Syrian, regional and international constituencies and convening the Syrian Constitutional Committee, with delegates from the government, the HNC and civil society having been periodically gathered together since October 2019 to draft proposals for a new Syrian constitution (UN 2019). Nevertheless, despite this relative broadening of participants, the notion of a need for a new constitution is drawn from the 2012 communiqué (UN 2012c, 4) and, more pressingly, there remains little expectation that the Syrian government, ‘in an increasingly strong military position, will see the need to make any major political concessions to secure western recognition’ (Wintour 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has, of course, interrupted the process but it is difficult to see how deliberations over a new Syrian constitution, convened in Geneva and with seemingly limited interest displayed by the al-Assad government (Oudat 2020), will generate a just and peaceful society in Syria, nor stymie violence. The Constitutional Committee, similarly to the WAB, seems to be yet another shallow change to the UN’s approach rather than an embracing of a new agenda. There are caveats to this criticism, of course: the Syrian crisis is protracted, profoundly complicated, and a markedly ‘internationalised’ conflict. Moreover, the Security Council remains deeply polarised, and the depth of military and political support provided to al-Assad by his allies, Russia and Iran (Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019; Tabrizi and Pantucci 2016), has undoubtedly further hindered the capacity and flexibility of the UN. Moreover, trialling new mechanisms such as the WAB or the CSSR should be lauded. However, these efforts have not addressed the more fundamental problems inherent within the UN approach in Syria.

Notwithstanding these caveats, why has the UN, and why have Western states, failed to explore alternatives? Since 2011, parallel peace processes, such as the Russian-sponsored talks in Astana, have begun; the military strength of the various groups embroiled in the crisis has waxed and waned, and their influence on the ground has shifted; and the ideological power and breadth of the alleged representatives of Syrians opposed to al-Assad have also mutated. Moreover, throughout, Russia has made it increasingly clear that the state intends to ‘steadfastly’ protect the al-Assad government from the consequences of any refusal to negotiate with the opposition (Thépaut 2020). The intricacy of the Syrian conflict, the extent of the violence inflicted within the state, and the failure of the traditional, linear model, seems to call for flexible and multifaceted peacemaking and peacebuilding, long-envisioned by academics and called for by all relevant policy frameworks and reports. Yet, the UN has nevertheless remained fixated on the notion that a deal can be thrashed out between the al-Assad government and the exiled opposition and, moreover, that this deal will pave the way for the exit of al-Assad and a transition to free and fair elections. Support for the original Geneva communiqué, and the peace process it imagines, has become a mantra. Moreover, any seeming departures from this plan have proved simply cosmetic in nature. The next section will offer a means through which international peacebuilders can begin to truly transform their practice.

## From linear to ‘perpetual peacebuilding’

This article began by establishing that academics have long-observed the non-linear nature of peace processes. I also demonstrated that prominent international peacebuilding organisations seem to have grasped the need to move past the linearity encouraged by liberal peace theory. Furthermore, the new frameworks of the UN, the World Bank, the EU and the G7+ contain hints at the notion of peacebuilding needing to be viewed as being perpetual in nature, as entailing continuous negotiations and re-negotiations of the web of relationships which constitute societies. To explore this further, this article investigated the responses to the recurring instances of election violence in Kenya post-2007 which firmly support the idea that pathways to peace are rarely linear and that it can be constructive for a multiplicity of efforts, involving an array of actors, to take place simultaneously in different spaces over time. Moreover, the Kenyan case provides further evidence for the notion that peacebuilding certainly can be continual and, relatedly, that concrete ideas of success and failure should be discarded. Lastly, the Kenya case study also provided a glimpse into how a ‘light touch’ international approach can support, and possibly inspire, a diverse set of actors.

However, Section 4 has also revealed how, despite the progress made within academia, and the promise held within new policy frameworks, the implementation of these new approaches has been limited. This article has shown that there seems to remain a fundamental lack of conceptual understanding of these new frameworks, and a largely unshaken belief in the liberal model and the linearity it promotes. The exploration of the UN’s peace efforts in the context of the violence in Syria highlighted this firm belief in the linear problem-solving model with a few adaptations that can be characterised as merely cosmetic.

What might be needed to truly break from the linear approach? Drawing on my own professional experience in peacebuilding and mediation together with the evidence analysed, I suggest that, in order to transform practice, there is a need to change both the way we think and the way we ‘do’ mediation and peacebuilding amidst violence. I propose working according to the following four tenets. Collectively, these form a new paradigm which I term ‘perpetual peacebuilding’.

### (i) *The meaningful acknowledgement of the non-linear, complex reality of peacebuilding.*

Peacebuilding practitioners, diplomats, donors and activists alike need to change their understanding of peacebuilding as a precondition to transforming practice. Moreover, it is insufficient to acknowledge that peace processes are complex and difficult; that which is also required is to understand the true nature of peacebuilding. The reality of peace processes, particularly in the context of recurring violence, involves a series of negotiations, and re-negotiations, of the social and political contract. These take place in different spaces and formats, and across different periods of time in history.

### (ii) *The abandonment of notions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and the understanding of ‘peace’ as subjective and utopian.*

Peacebuilding entails a waxing and waning series of debates, entangled in an array of supporting and resisting interests. The effectiveness of an intervention cannot be judged

by the achievement of an ‘end-point’. For peacebuilders, this might be uncomfortable to face as there is no fixed destination and it is for all societies to assess, and re-assess, the re-orderings and renewals they themselves have made and will continue to make in addressing questions and challenges relating to their society and politics. Fresh tensions and competing interests will always arise. Even societies which have advanced further upon the pathway to peace must nevertheless grapple with societal and political tensions, demonstrating the ever-present need to re-negotiate the social contract. A peace process can only progress, or retreat, along a pathway to a peaceful and just society. Peacebuilders must refrain from speaking of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ and instead adopt new terms and language which capture the perpetual nature of peacebuilding.

What, then, would it mean to ‘achieve’ peace within the paradigm of perpetual peacebuilding?<sup>4</sup> The notion of *striving towards* peace and, more specifically, a subjective and utopian peace, aligns more closely with the understanding offered here. The ‘achievement’ of peace is unending, and societies can only ever reach an approximation. Moreover, it is the ever-changing pathway to peace that defines how societies understand the peace towards which they are striving. This conceptualisation of peace, and of peacebuilding, offers a profound challenge to key concepts which underpin our field. My understanding of peace is therefore close to that of Immanuel Kant; the original German title of *Perpetual Peace* (Kant 1939), *Zum Ewigen Frieden*, might be better translated as ‘to eternal peace’. The focus is thus on moving, incessantly, towards a utopian vision of a peaceful society.

(iii) *The questioning of key peacebuilding terms and concepts.*

To move away from the thinking embedded within linear peacebuilding, there is a need to question the key terminologies associated with the reductive, linear problem-solving model. For example, peace processes, and societies, are too complex to be neatly divided into tracks. Truly ‘perpetual peacebuilding’ would collapse these distinctions. Peacebuilding takes place in multiple spaces simultaneously and in an array of formats, involving a wide range of actors: peacebuilding can be thought of as a spider’s web (Lederach 2005), as constituting a map of relationships (Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad 2020), or as an elaborate ecosystem.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, once we have abandoned the linear model, it becomes clear that peace agreements are not the only key documents that provide guidance for finding pathways to sustainable peace. There are many other such documents which result from a variety of ‘change processes’ (for instance, constitutions, or agendas for political reform). Thirdly, perhaps the very term ‘peace process’ must also be considered to be obsolete and replaced with the notion of ‘transitions’ or ‘pathways’ to inclusive, peaceful and just societies.<sup>6</sup> As we saw in the Kenyan case, peacebuilding took the form of a series of negotiations and re-negotiations over decades, took different forms and titles, and involved multiple actors, organisations and spaces. Nevertheless, these events are not all viewed as a ‘peace process’ by the actors involved. It is also clear that, when adopting a perpetual peacebuilding perspective, peacebuilding will continuously take place, and not only in societies emerging from war. This offers a further challenge to the very term ‘peace process’. What does this mean for peacebuilding practitioners?

- (iv) *A willingness, on the part of practitioners, to leave their ‘comfort zones’, to refrain from providing ‘solutions’, and to become ‘courageous, critical friends’.*

Peacebuilding organisations need to be more courageous and willing to leave their ‘comfort zones’ in order to meaningfully change their ways of thinking and working, and to abandon the linear model. How many lectures have we heard, and how many training courses have we attended, which begin with the recognition that each conflict, and each pathway to peace, are different and that the global context in which peacebuilding takes place has changed, only for the trainers to then embark upon teaching the traditional approaches and models? Peacebuilders, and those who train and offer advice to practitioners, must be willing to transform their approach, even if this feels uncomfortable at first. This echoes the adaptative peacebuilding approach developed by De Coning (2018). However, as shown in particular in the Syria case and other appraisals discussed in this article, there is nevertheless a risk that adaptive peacebuilding could be misused, either intentionally or unintentionally, as an escape route leading to cosmetic adaptation rather than to transformative change.

To this end, supporting peacebuilding must no longer focus on the provision of solutions. Peacebuilders should offer subtle, discreet assistance, providing an array of ideas, options, and possibilities which align with the notion that peacebuilding is perpetual, and which foreground the many opportunities as well as resistance and power relations that might occur in making progress towards a peaceful society. The primary focus of any support offered should be facilitating the envisaging of the society which people want to build and helping them adapt their approaches accordingly. Peacebuilders should therefore assume the role of ‘critical friends’. They can offer solidarity, ideas, inspiration, critical, constructive feedback, and responsive funding on the pathway to peace. Relatedly, peacebuilders, as critical friends, should be prepared to ask questions which empower people and organisations to unearth those approaches and strategies which are needed to create pathways to more peaceful, inclusive societies. These questions could include: how can we take immediate action to support strategies that further pathways to inclusive, peaceful societies and end or prevent violence? How can inclusion be embedded within processes in such a way that it becomes the starting point of long-term, self-reinforcing efforts to build inclusive societies instead of cosmetic add-ons? What are the multilateral, regional, and/or national-level political opportunities that can be leveraged for change? How do we work to identify, mitigate against and overcome resistance to the change we want, assessing power relations and interests systematically?

## Conclusion

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the UN, has called for an immediate ceasefire in all corners of the globe (UN 2020a). Nevertheless, peacebuilding perseveres amidst persistent violence. We must therefore ask: how can we begin upon the pathway to perpetual peacebuilding? Critical rethinking must be the starting point. It remains crucial for those engaged in peacebuilding to participate in critical reflections of their own assumptions, biases, traditions and practices. The tenets outlined above represent a lens through which peacebuilders and their supporters may be

able to meaningfully rethink the ways in which they can contribute to sustaining peace, deploying creative, innovative, malleable and long-lasting approaches grounded in local, national, regional and international realities. The tenets will help to bridge the void between research and policy on the one hand and practice on the other, and to move towards generating a multitude of perpetual pathways to inclusive, peaceful and just societies. Crucially, these tenets shift the focus away from the international peacebuilding 'industry', foregrounding instead the communities facing conflict and the local and national actors that build their peace. Retreating into the background while reconceptualising the very notion of peacebuilding may represent the only means through which international peacebuilders can retain their relevance.

However, further effort will also be required to embark upon this new paradigm. That which is required are formal and informal processes which challenge and disrupt the prevailing system(s). Change-oriented governments, accompanied by think tanks, practitioners and activists, must 'push' until the policy frameworks surveyed within this article become an operational reality. This will demand courage and willingness to transform the dominant discourses at the global level, and will require in-country testing of this new paradigm to gather experiences and evidence to support this new practice of peacebuilding and mediation. Future research must contribute to this endeavour by investigating in-depth case studies, further confirming the non-linearity of peacebuilding, and documenting and assessing alternative approaches in order to continue to develop this new paradigm.

## Notes

1. The 'infographic' can be accessed at the following site: <https://www.peaceagreements.org/visualizing-peace>
2. The author has engaged, over many of decades, with peacebuilding efforts in Kenya, and the reflections here are drawn, in part, from this experience. During these years, the author has conducted in-depth, and repeated, interviews with government representatives, religious leaders, human rights and peacebuilding activists, members of the diplomatic community, and researchers. The author has also participated in a number of the peace processes mentioned here.
3. The reflections presented here on the Syrian case are, in part, drawn from the author's own engagement with the peace process in Syria.
4. I would like to thank the editors for encouraging me to consider the very meaning of 'peace'.
5. I would like to thank Christine Cheng for introducing me to this idea.
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