Multiparty mediation in a changing world:
The emergence and impact of parallel processes to UN peacemaking in Syria and Libya

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Abstract

Purpose: The article studies new approaches to peacemaking, particularly by Turkey and Russia, in a changing world and their implications for UN mediation. We analyze the factors that allow parallel processes to UN mediation to emerge and discuss their influence.

Design/methodology/approach: The article presents two in-depth case studies of mediation in Syria and Libya where the UN as well as Russia and Turkey were actively involved in peacemaking.

Findings: We find that parallel processes to UN mediation emerge if the UN process does not show progress towards a negotiated settlement and other third parties have leverage over the conflict parties. However, whether they pose a fundamental challenge to the UN-led process depends on how sustained their leverage over the conflict parties is. If it lasts, it puts the UN in a difficult position to either participate in the parallel process and contain it, but to thereby also legitimizing it or to abstain from participating, but to thereby risking to lose control over the mediation process.

Originality: The article is based on original first-hand data gathered between 2018 and 2022 through more than 50 interviews with UN officials, negotiation team members, political and civil society actors from Syria and Libya, (former) state officials and experts from Russia and Turkey, as well as external observers.

Implications: Analyzing different approaches to mediation will help to better understand current dynamics of multiparty mediation, including an increased questioning of the

effectiveness of UN mediation, and provide insights on how it may adapt in order to keep its relevance in a changing world.

Keywords: Mediation, Peacemaking, Negotiation, UN Peace missions, Russia, Turkey, Syria, Libya

1) Introduction

Mediation has become a standard international response to armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War (Gowan and Stedman 2018, Howard and Stark 2017/18). It is commonly defined as a process "where those in conflict seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from, an outsider […] to change their perceptions or behaviour, and to do so without resorting to physical force or invoking the authority of law" (Bercovitch 2009, 244). In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of mediation actors (Whitfield 2019). Indeed, between 1990 and 2016, "almost half of all international mediation efforts have involved more than one mediating entity" (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2016, 17). Authors have coined the term 'multiparty mediation' (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 1999), defined as "sequential, simultaneous and composite involvement of more than one external actor in mediating a dispute" (Vuković 2015, 39). Several authors have analyzed the opportunities and challenges posed by multiparty mediation (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2015, 1999, Vuković 2015, Iji 2019, Spitka 2018, Lanz and Gasser 2013, Lanz 2021, Whitfield 2007).

In this article, we conceptualize multiparty mediation processes as complex systems that "emerge, and are maintained, as a result of the dynamic and non-linear interactions of [their] elements [and] as a result of their interaction with their environment" (De Coning 2016, 168). We define the system's *environment* as the types of conflicts mediation addresses and the system's *elements* as the third parties offering mediation. The complex system of multiparty mediation is of course in constant flux, but some fundamental changes have happened in recent years regarding both the system's environment as well as its elements. Regarding the *environment*, while in early post-Cold War period, civil wars became the main contexts in which mediators intervened, they have increasingly become internationalized in recent years, blurring the distinction between conflict parties and third parties (Cunningham 2010, Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011). Regarding the *elements*, in the early post-Cold War years, the third parties who offered their mediation were composed of mostly like-minded actors with potentially different interests and norms guiding their involvement, but pursuing a similar overall objective of resolving conflicts through negotiated settlements (Gowan and Stedman 2018). This system was dominated by the UN as the main mediator (DeRouen Jr, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna 2011). In recent years, and partly because of the growing involvement of external actors in civil wars related to the changes in the system's environment, the crowded field of mediation is increasingly composed of unlike-minded mediation actors

that have taken opposing sides in a conflict and consequently pursue different overall objectives (Kane 2020, Hellmüller 2022).

The above shows recent changes in both the environment and elements of the complex mediation system. In the words of Theresa Whitfield (2019, 3),"the model for the negotiation and implementation of comprehensive peace agreements that evolved in the immediate post-Cold War period is deeply challenged by the complexity of today's armed conflicts". This article analyses these dynamics. Other authors have started to explore the approaches of new mediation actors, looking at concepts such as illiberal peace (Lewis 2022), conflict management vs. resolution (Badache, Hellmüller, and Salayme 2022), and populist peacemaking (Landau and Lehrs 2022). However, both the conditions for their emergence as well as their impact on UN-led peace processes have not been studied. This article fills this gap by focusing on the factors that enable parallel processes to UN mediation to emerge and on the influence they have on UN mediation.

To discern the characteristics of today's multiparty mediation contexts, we focus on the two case studies of Syria and Libya. Both are internationalized civil wars with a multitude of third parties involved, including unlike-minded ones. While both saw a high UN engagement, other actors, and particularly Russia and Turkey, also offered to mediate while at the same time being militarily involved in the conflicts (Zharov 2020). We explore the dynamics of these parallel processes and how they influenced the UN's efforts to make peace. To do so, we draw on 53 interviews with UN officials, including former UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, negotiation team members and other political actors from Syria and Libya, (former) state officials and experts from Russia and Turkey, as well as external observers. We conducted the interviews between 2018 and 2022 in Arabic, English, Russian, and Turkish.[1]

We find that parallel processes may emerge to the one led by the UN if the UN process does not show progress towards a negotiated settlement and the parties proposing the alternative process have leverage over the conflict parties. However, whether the parallel processes pose a fundamental challenge to the UN-led process depends on how sustained the third parties' leverage over the conflict parties is. If it lasts, it puts the UN in a difficult position to choose between two options: To either participate in the parallel process and to contain it, but to

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[1] We had interpretation when our language skills were not sufficient to understand the interlocutors.

thereby also legitimizing it or to abstain from participating in the parallel process, but thereby risking to lose control over the mediation process.

The article makes two main contributions to the literature. First, we update the literature on multiparty mediation by exploring the latest developments in terms of actors and contexts (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 1999, Böhmelt 2012, Vuković 2015, Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2015, Iji 2019, Whitfield 2007). Situating mediation in its broader structural context, we analyze both the changing environment and elements of multiparty mediation. Second, we contribute to the literature on mediation in internationalized civil wars by studying the role of diverse actors in addressing these types of conflicts and by providing two in-depth cases studies (Jenne and Popovic 2017, Kane 2020, Hellmüller 2021, 2022). The article is also of high policy relevance. Providing knowledge about different approaches to mediation will help to better understand current dynamics, including an increasing questioning of the effectiveness of UN mediation, and provide insights into how it may need to adapt in order to keep its relevance in a changing world.

2) The changing system of multiparty mediation

The system of multiparty mediation has changed in recent years. These changes can be described by distinguishing between its *environment*, i.e. the dominant conflict types mediated, and its *elements*, i.e. the actors involved in mediation. Since the end of the Cold War, we can discern two main phases.

The first one, from the end of the Cold War to roughly 2010, can be described as the *heydays of mediation* (Howard and Stark 2017/18, Gowan and Stedman 2018). Indeed, more mediation attempts took place during the 1990s than in the 44 years from 1945 to 1989 (Greig and Diehl 2012). Regarding the mediation *environment*, the most common conflict type receiving mediation were civil wars. Indeed, the number of civil wars grew compared to the Cold War years with mediation developing as standard non-coercive tool to address them (DeRouen and Bercovitch 2012). At the same time, the *elements* of mediation also saw important developments. The number of actors engaged in mediation steadily increased (Whitfield 2019), combined with a gradual professionalization of mediation with different states,[2] non-

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[2] E.g. Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey.

governmental organizations,[3] and regional and international organizations establishing specialized mediation support structures[4] and publishing policy documents providing concrete guidelines for mediators on how to make their interventions more effective (United Nations 2012, African Union 2014, OSCE 2014). Mechanisms like groups of friends of mediation (e.g. friends of the Secretary-General, friends of a country, contact groups, and implementation and monitoring groups) have grown in numbers and scope in the last three decades, with consequences on the UN-led mediation processes (Whitfield 2007). Thereby, a consensus on a standard approach to mediation emerged, which is best captured by the conflict resolution approach. This approach aims at finding a common ground between the parties' different underlying interests, trying to identify solutions that may have been missed due to entrenched positioning (Marchetti and Tocci 2009, Miall 2004). The approach goes beyond power bargaining between the belligerents, foreseeing a crucial role for third parties to help the belligerents move from their positions to their interests in order to find a mutually acceptable agreement (Wallensteen 2012). While ending the violence lies at the core of this approach and is the main goal in the short-term, its objectives go further in that it also seeks to resolve the conflicts by engendering a political transformation, often in the form of a democratic transition considered indispensable for sustainable peace (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2005). Thus, even if the various actors involved in mediation during this period had different norms and interests that influenced their process choices, such as who should lead the process and who should get a seat at the table (Lanz 2021), most third parties pursued this overall objective of conflict resolution. Peace agreements signed in Angola (1991), Cambodia (1991), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (2002/03), for instance, foresaw elections and a democratic transition aiming at changing states and societies in view of peacefully resolving conflicts in the future (Ottaway 2003, 2002, Paris 2004).

This changed more recently heralding a new phase, which can be described as a *diversification phase of mediation*. While mediation remains an often-used tool to address armed conflicts, its use is declining. Lundgren and Svensson (2020) show that two-thirds of armed conflicts did not receive mediation in the last 15 years. While the exact reasons are still debated, we note distinct changes in both the system's environment and its elements. Regarding the *environment*,

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[3] E.g. The Carter Center, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, swisspeace, Conflict Management Initiative, Dialogue Advisory Group.
[4] For instance, the UN Mediation Support Unit, the European Union (EU) Mediation Support Team, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mediation Support Team, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Mediation Support Unit, and specialized mediation teams in Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, and other countries.

we see an increasing number of internationalized civil wars. Allansson, Melander, and Themnér (2017, 576) report that the number of internationalized conflicts was 20 out of 51 in 2015 (39 percent) and 18 out of 47 (38 percent) in 2016, which are the highest percentages recorded since 1946. This means that conflicts have become increasingly complex with external actors being involved in the fighting (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008, Lacina 2006). This has also influenced the system's *elements* because it leads to a conflation of conflict parties and mediation actors as the external supporters of the belligerents often also seek to be involved in peacemaking. Thus, while in the early post-Cold War years, mediation competition came mostly from like-minded actors who subscribed to the conflict resolution approach and shared the overall goal of a democratic transition, in recent years, competition increasingly comes from actors proposing a different approach to mediation, not least due to their own involvement in the conflict (Rampton and Nadaraja 2017). This approach is characterized by a focus on conflict management rather than resolution. While the two approaches often spill into each other, they have different overall objectives. The conflict management approach mostly aims at ending the violence, but without necessarily engendering a political transformation process (Lewis 2022). This is achieved through bargaining and negotiation between the belligerents (Marchetti and Tocci 2009). The focus is therefore on finding a settlement of a conflict that enables the end of violence, rather than the longer-term resolution of it (Miall 2004). The current mediation field is thus characterized by the parallel existence of both conflict management and conflict resolution approaches and their interaction.

This shift is illustrated by the comparison of the cases of Kenya (2007-2008) and Yemen (since 2011). When violence broke out after the elections in Kenya in 2007 risking to turn into a civil war, a multitude of actors proposed their mediation. However, they all agreed on the overall objective of trying to peacefully resolve the conflict through a negotiated settlement that aimed at strengthening the democratic institutions. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, was hence the undisputed lead mediator controlling the process (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2016, Lanz 2021). In contrast, the Yemen conflict is highly internationalized, due to the involvement of the US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. While being militarily involved, these external states also seek to play peacemaking roles, in addition to the United Nations (UN) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, they have very different approaches and hence do not necessarily pursue the same overall objective of conflict resolution (Hudáková 2021, Asseburg, Lacher, and Transfeld 2018a). This is illustrative of other contemporary mediation cases, such as the ones in Syria and Libya studied in this article. Annan himself, who succeeded in his

mediation in Kenya, failed to broker a deal in Syria and resigned after reaching a deadlock (Bellamy 2022). This shows that the changing environment has rendered multiparty mediation more complex in terms of the increased diversity of the different elements in the system.

3) Empirical analysis

In the following, we analyze this complexity of multiparty mediation in two cases: Syria and Libya. We chose these two cases because they are internationalized civil wars where the UN has led a mediation process and other actors, in particular Russia and Turkey, have acted as both supporters of the conflict parties as well as peacemakers (Zharov 2020). For each case, we first present the UN-led peace process, then we review the parallel peace processes, and finally analyze the conditions and influence of competing mediation processes.

3.1) Case of Syria

The Syrian armed conflict has become a prime example of an internationalized civil war, where external interventions have profoundly shaped the conflict dynamics (Phillips 2016, Hellmüller 2021). This has impacted the peace process, which has yet to bring a settlement to the conflict that has been going for more than a decade. Various international actors and agencies have proposed to bring the conflict to a negotiated end. The UN, the Arab League, regional actors, and different states have all tried to mediate the conflict (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019). The negotiations have taken place in various cities, from Geneva and Vienna, to Astana and Sochi. Yet, no settlement has been reached, but the division and competition have even deepened.

The UN-led Syrian peace process: a mission impossible

Since the early days of the conflict in Syria, polarization amongst external actors has been a salient feature. In particular the permanent five member states (P5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) have been split between Russia and China who opposed any regime change agenda and the so-called P3, being France, the UK, and the US, who advocated for a political transition (Hill 2015). On 4 October 2011, the UNSC failed to adopt a resolution to condemn "grave and systematic human rights violations" in Syria and to warn "of options for action to be considered against the Government of President Bashar al-Assad" over the vetoes of Russia and China.[5] In 2012, the P3 put sanctions on the Syrian government and created the "Group of Friends of the Syrian People" consisting of more than sixty countries supporting the Syrian opposition

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[5] See https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10403.doc.htm (last consulted 22.12.2022). China and Russia vetoed the resolution while Brazil, India, Lebanon, and South Africa abstained.

(Group of Friends of the Syrian People 01.05.2012). On its side, Russia continued to speak out in favor of the Syrian government, but remained quite cautious since the use of force by the P3 was not off the table at the time (Charap 2013, Gowan 2013, Hill 2015).[6]

In this polarized context, the institutionalization of the UN peacemaking efforts came with the appointment of Kofi Annan on 23 February 2012 as the UN-Arab League Joint-Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. Annan brought long-standing diplomatic experiences as a former UN Secretary-General. He proposed the so-called Six-Point Plan to the UNSC (also known as Annan's Plan), which demanded the Syrian regime to commit to cease fighting, allow for humanitarian aid provision, and address the aspiration of the Syrian people (Annan 14.04.2012). While Russia proposed changes to Annan's plan, it was endorsed in two UNSC resolutions (UNSC 14.04.2012, 21.04.2012).

On 30 June 2012, Annan managed to host a meeting of the Action Group of Syria, which involved all major powers, including China and Russia. It accepted what became to be known as Geneva Communiqué on Syria, foreseeing a Syrian-led political transition (Action Group for Syria 30.06.2012). However, the UNSC resolution containing the Geneva Communiqué was vetoed by China and Russia (Hill 2015, Hellmüller 2021). As such, neither Annan's Six-Point Plan nor the Geneva Communique were implemented. By August 2012, Annan resigned from his position as the UN-Arab League Joint-Special Envoy for Syria (Crocker et al. 2015). Annan heavily criticized what he called the "destructive competition" over Syria between Russia and the P3 (Black 2012).

Meanwhile, the escalation of the violence on the ground put an end to the short-lived UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS). UNSMIS had been established by UNSC resolution 2043 on 21 April 2012, but lasted only for two months when the observers had to be withdrawn from the country due to 'escalating violence' (UNSC 21.04.2012). The mission was officially terminated in August 2012, ending the possibilities of UN peacekeeping in Syria.

Annan was replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi, as the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. Brahimi tried, like Annan, to ensure a reduction of violence between the fighting parties, as a first step to creating the space for political negotiations.

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[6] Interview US Syria expert, 13.08.2018.

However, the parties respected neither of the ceasefires that he suggested (UNSC 24.10.2012, 16.07.2013). The political impasse was clear during the Geneva II conference, which took place between January and February 2014. It was the first direct meeting between the Syrian government and opposition, but it ended with limited results (Brahimi 11.02.2014, Mancini and Vericat 2016, 9). The Syrian regime and the opposition mostly attended due to pressure from their allies, Russia and the US respectively, but came with maximalist demands (Zartman 2015, 489). Brahimi resigned shortly afterwards in a context of a crumbling international consensus, further accelerated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014.[7]

Staffan de Mistura replaced Brahimi as the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria in September 2014. He attempted to negotiate localized ceasefires and consulted different Syrian stakeholders on the way forward (Hallaj 2014, Hilal 2014, De Mistura 29.10.2014). However, new impetus for political talks was given due to changing battlefield dynamics, and especially the Russian military intervention in Syria on 30 September 2015.[8] The main external players in Syria, including the US and Russia, met in Vienna and Munich and created the so-called International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in October 2015. They also expressed their support for renewed political talks. This international consensus was codified in UNSC resolution 2254 adopted in December 2015. It called for a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria" (UNSC 18.12.2015). Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition, which had been accused of being too divided, was regrouped under the umbrella of the Syrian Negotiation Committee (SNC) in a conference held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia from 9 to 11 December 2015.[9] This enabled Staffan de Mistura to relaunch the political talks between the conflict parties – the so-called Intra-Syrian Talks – in early 2016. The mediation process happened in nine rounds of proximity talks between February 2016 and January 2018. However, the talks were regularly interrupted and did not move the parties closer to a political agreement. On the contrary, the opposition and regime delegation failed to achieve any progress. The opposition insisted on a political transition and the regime underscored its priority of 'counter-terrorism' framing of opposition groups as terrorists.

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[7] Interview UN official (1), 09.08.2018.
[8] Interview UN official (1), 09.08.2018; Interview Syrian civil society actor, 30.08.2018; Interview UN official, 27.11.2018; Interview UN official, 21.07.2020.
[9] This body was updated in the Riyadh 2 Conference held in November 2017, where new opposition bodies (Cairo and Moscow Platforms) joined the Committee that was renamed 'Syrian Negotiation Commission'.

The UN-led peace process, as codified in UNSC resolution 2254, can be seen as a conflict resolution approach because it considers a political – and democratic – transformation as indispensable for a sustainable peace. As the resolution states, it encourages a "political process […] that establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections" (UNSC 18.12.2015). As such, the objective of the UN clearly went beyond merely reducing violence, even if this was the main goal in the short-term, and included a political transition process.[10] However, the UN-led process was marred by political impasses and did not move the belligerents closer to a negotiated settlement.

Astanaization of the peace process

Russia and Turkey played important roles in Syria. Russia, a firm supporter of the Syrian regime, intervened militarily in September 2015 because of its worries about the ongoing decline of the Syrian regime and the decrease of its geographical control (Grafov 2019, Kozhanov 2019, Averre and Davies 2015). Moreover, it saw Syria as a platform to show its re-emergence in the international arena (Kozhanov 2019). Turkey had been a firm supporter of the Syrian opposition since the beginning of the conflict. However, pushed by the new dynamics after the Russian intervention, and concerned about the expansion of control by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northeastern Syria, which is perceived in Ankara as a threat to its national security, Turkey also grew more active on the ground (Sazak and Woods 2017). The growing Russian and Turkish activeness in Syria came at a time when the Obama administration of the US was de-engaging from the Middle East, being very wary of any potential slippery slope towards military involvement in the Middle East (Bellamy 2022).

These interests and dynamics on the ground alongside the impasse of the UN-led political process led to the launching of the 'Astana Process'. In December 2016, Russian president Vladimir Putin and Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed to launch talks on Syria, in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana. Iran also joined the initiative a few days later. On 23 January 2017, the first meeting between a delegation of the Syrian opposition and the Syrian regime took place in Astana. The Astana process oversaw the establishment of four 'de-escalation zones' between the opposition and the Syrian regime, prioritizing local ceasefires. Hence, the Astana parties proposed a new framework for the negotiations on Syria based on

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[10] Interview UN official, 27.11.2018; Interview UN official, 21.07.2020; Interview Russian Syria expert, 12.09.2019.

the concept of 'de-escalation' (Sosnowski 2020). The concept does not imply terminating the conflict or permanently ceasing hostilities, but proposes a process of de-escalation. It is thus more closely related to a conflict management than a conflict resolution approach, trying to reduce the violence, but without an accompanying political transformation process. As mentioned by one interviewee, Astana "was conceived as primarily a space for military negotiations […] and not a space for political negotiations".[11] Indeed, the idea was initially to only discuss the most pressing military issues.[12] This was also reflected in the conflict parties' delegations. The Syrian opposition delegation in Astana was formed mainly by representatives of the armed rebels, while the delegation in Geneva consisted of political figures mostly from the Syrian diaspora.

The de-escalation approach taken in Astana allowed the conflict parties, mainly Russia and the Syrian regime, to continue their military operations (Meininghaus 2018). Indeed, while the Astana process started with four de-escalation zones, only Idlib remained in 2018 while the other three zones were captured by the Syrian regime forces (Salaymeh and Acun 2018).[13] Despite several escalations and frequent Russian and regime airstrikes, Turkey and Russia succeeded in maintaining a *modus operandi* for Idlib as a last de-escalation zone.[14] However, it gradually fell under the control of the Islamist political and armed organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Meanwhile, Turkey and the military factions it backed expanded their control in northern Aleppo through three military operations (in 2016, 2018, and 2019), but no assaults were launched towards regime areas.

The Astana process competed with the UN-led process in Geneva, not least because it laid bare the impasse in which the latter found itself. However, the official communication of Staffan De Mistura was that the political issues would still be negotiated in Geneva, while Astana was a forum to discuss purely military issues (De Mistura 31.03.2017, 26.01.2018). However, this rhetoric was threatened when Russia convened the 'Syrian National Dialogue Congress' in Sochi from 29 to 30 January 2018, clearly going beyond purely military issues (Tasnim News 22.12.2017). The UN had to position itself rather quickly. The strategy was to make the UN's participation in the Sochi Congress conditional upon keeping the political process under its

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[11] Interview Russian Syria expert, 02.10.2019.
[12] Interview UN official, 21.07.2020; Interview Russian Syria expert, 12.09.2019; Interview Russian Syria expert, 02.10.2019.
[13] Interview civil society actor, 26.06.2018; Interview civil society actor, 28.06.2018; Interview civil society actor, 31.07.2018; Interview civil society actor, 14.08.2018; Interview UN official (1), 09.08.2018; Interview UN official (2), 09.08.2018.
[14] Interview UN official (1), 09.08.2018; Interview UN official, 19.01.2021.

auspices. Russia accepted the deal, reflected in the outcome document of the Sochi Congress. It said that a Constitutional Committee (CC) would be formed under UN leadership in Geneva: "for drafting of a constitutional reform as a contribution to the political settlement under the UN auspices" and that the "final agreement is to be reached in the UN-led Geneva process on the mandate and terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure, and selection criteria for the composition of the Constitutional Committee".[15] However, the Sochi Congress nonetheless engendered a shift away from a conflict resolution approach as the substantive agenda of the political talks shrunk from a comprehensive political transition to constitutional reform (Lundgren 2019). The Astana talks continued after the Sochi congress with the parties gathering under the same format, though focusing mainly on discussing local dynamics. In other words, to some extent, Russia managed to have the best out of two worlds by continuing the Astana process on the one hand, and at the same time reframing the UN-led political process according to its priorities.

Analysis

The above shows the emergence of a parallel process and its impact on UN mediation in terms of its substantive agenda. Two main factors influenced the emergence of such parallel processes and their impact on the UN-led mediation as illustrated in figure 1: The performance of the UN-led process and the leverage of the non-UN third parties over the conflict parties.

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[15] See https://www.mfa.gov.tr/final-statement-of-the-congress-of-the-syrian-national-dialogue_en.en.mfa (last consulted 22.12.2022). Interview UN official, 19.01.2021; Interview UN official, 01.12.2022.
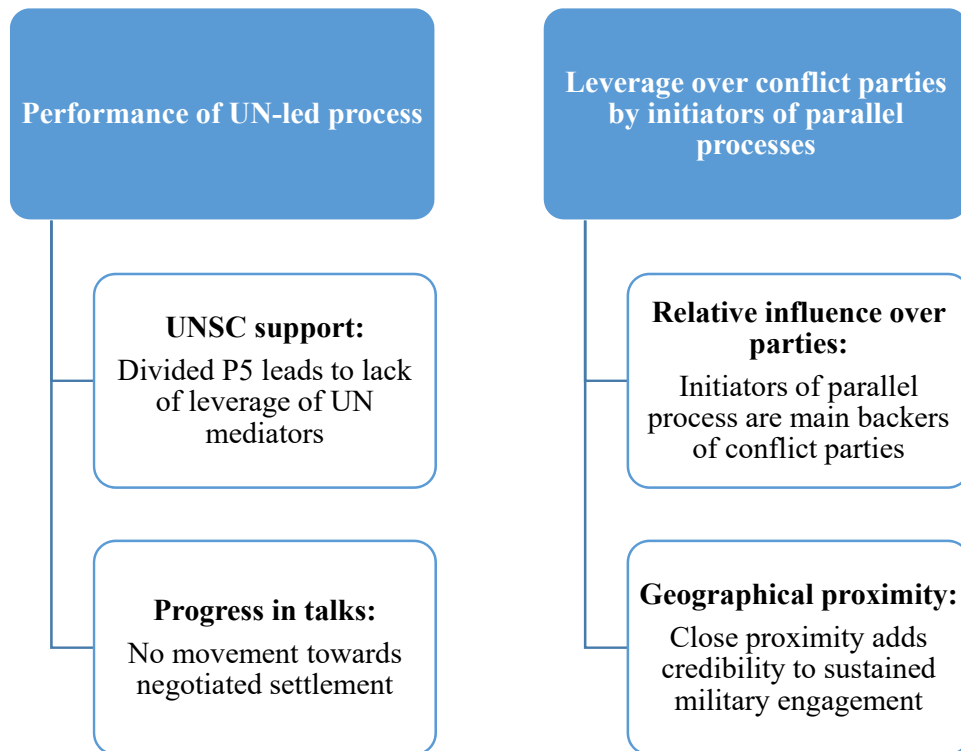
Figure 1. Factors influencing the emergence and impact of parallel mediation processes in Syria

In terms of the performance of the UN-led process, it was hampered by two aspects. First, the division amongst the P5 in the UNSC between Russia and China on the one side, and the P3 on the other, obstructed any possibility of adopting a binding UNSC resolution (Hellmüller 2022). This implied that the UN mediators had no leverage to convince the parties to negotiate in good faith. Indeed, in the words of the fourth Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson: "Kofi Annan resigned because he knew he needed the full support of the P5 and he felt that the P5 members were committed to their own narratives, their own policies, instead of fully supporting the UN process", and Brahimi also felt "that the relationship between the US and Russia was not conducive to finding a solution" (Pedersen 2019, 4). Indeed, compared to Russia and Turkey, "the substantive leverage available to the [UN] mediators over the parties on any level was limited" (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 20). The belligerents only came to the negotiation table if pressured by their respective allies. Second, and relatedly, the political negotiations held under UN auspices were not productive in terms of moving the parties closer to an agreement. While there was some progress at times, any hope for a reduction of violence or a substantive agreement as a result of the talks in Geneva was quickly destroyed by renewed

attacks (Bellamy 2022, Hellmüller 2021, Akbarzadeh and Saba 2019).[16] The UN-led process thus led to a vacuum that other peacemakers could fill.[17]

In terms of leverage of the initiators of the parallel processes, both Turkey and Russia had relatively high leverage over the conflict parties. This was for two reasons. First, both became the main backers of their respective allies over the course of the conflict. While Russia had supported the Syrian regime from the beginning of the conflict, the military intervention on 30 September 2015 was decisive in giving it an upper hand over the Syrian regime and other regime-supporters like Iran (Kozhanov 2019).[18] Turkey on its side supported both the political and armed opposition since 2011. While the opposition received widespread political and military backing also from Western and the Gulf states in the beginning, this support declined over the course of the conflict. Western backers increasingly focused on fighting ISIS and the Gulf States refocused their attention to the Yemen war in their immediate neighborhood (Vuković and Bernabei 2019, 425, Lister 2015). Especially after the western military support to the Southern Front through Jordan ended in 2016, Turkey remained the main supporter of the opposition. Both Russia and Turkey were thus the core backers of their respective allies, giving them important leverage. Second, geographical proximity also played an important role. Syria is relatively close to Russia and a neighboring country to Turkey with a shared 900km border. This geographical proximity added credibility to the continuation of their support to the Syrian regime and opposition respectively, as it facilitated Russian intervention, including troop deployment and rotations of the fighter jets, while the shared border allowed Turkey to carry out cross-border military operations from 2016 onwards. The proximity was also vital when Russia and Turkey agreed on deploying military observers in the framework of the de-escalation agreements reached in Astana. It was also instrumental in convincing public opinions of the importance of the military intervention, and thus, maintaining internal political support.

The combination of these two sets of factors allowed the Astana process to emerge and endure, and hence, to have an influence on the UN-led peace process. It made the UN face a difficult choice between attending and therefore lending legitimacy to the parallel process but also being

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[16] Interview UN official, 01.12.2022.
[17] Interview UN official, 19.01.2021.
[18] Interview Russian Syria expert, 12.09.2019; Interview Russian Syria expert, 02.10.2019; Interview Russian Syria expert, 27.11.2019.

able to control and contain it, or not attending and therefore not accepting the competing process, but also risking to lose control over the mediation process. As mentioned above, the UN opted for the former. Its main fear was to lose control over the political process if it was not present in Astana and Sochi. Moreover, it was difficult to imagine a meeting hosted by one of the P5 members without the presence of the UN.[19] At the same time, it was clear that the UN's attendance would lend legitimacy to the parallel process. As mentioned, the initiative by Russia "wanted to establish a new architecture, and the UN just to stamp it".[20] Hence, the UN looked for a way to 'contain' the Astana and Sochi processes and to retake the lead on the political process. Therefore, Staffan de Mistura decided to join the Sochi meeting, taking into account "Russia's assertion that the outcome of the Sochi meeting, would be brought to Geneva as a contribution to the UN-backed intra-Syrian talks".[21] Indeed, as mentioned above, the outcome document of the Sochi Congress gave the UN the mandate to organize talks on the Constitutional Committee, which subsequently took place in Geneva. Thus, some observers see the UN's attendance and therefore acquiescence to the parallel process as having been the only viable option to keep control over the process. Therefore, to them, "the UN substantially won".[22]

However, this diplomatic victory also came at a price in that it substantively reframed the UN process along the interests of Russia and – by extension – the Syrian regime. Indeed, some observers accuse the UN of having sold out to Russia in Astana and Sochi, and thereby indirectly playing into the hands of the Syrian regime.[23] As one observer said regarding Astana:

> "I was expecting the Special Envoy not to cover Astana. He provided a cover to Astana. He said that Astana is serving Geneva. While, on the ground, in reality, what was happening is that Astana is violating […] all UN resolutions. […] We are seeing Russians and Iranians and the regime taking more territories".[24]

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[19] Interview UN official (2), 09.08.2018.
[20] Interview UN official, 10.10.2022.
[21] See https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/01/1001371 (last consulted 22.12.2022).
[22] Interview UN official, 10.10.2022.
[23] Interview civil society actor, 02.08.2018; Interview UN official, 11.12.2018; Interview expert 24.08.2018; Interview civil society actor, 30.07.2018.
[24] Interview civil society actor, 02.08.2018.

Similarly, the Syrian main opposition body, the SNC, boycotted the Sochi conference, and criticized De Mistura's decision to attend.[25] Even though the UN tried to mitigate the damage and contain the parallel process, the reframing of the political negotiations around the question of constitutional reform, and away from the initial objective of a more comprehensive political transition, was heavily criticized. As mentioned: "we, in the Syrian Negotiations Commission, were not enthusiastic about the Constitutional Committee and its launch in Geneva, we did not think that negotiating the constitution, instead of a political agreement, would lead us to a political solution in Syria".[26]

The above shows that Turkey and Russia managed to create a lasting parallel process to the UN-led mediation due to the lack of performance of the UN-led process and because of their sustained leverage over the conflict parties. This created a dilemma situation for the UN and made the process move away from a conflict resolution approach aimed at a comprehensive political transition.

3.2) Case of Libya

In Libya, the set-up of the UN-led peace process was different as in Syria as the mediation attempts were integrated into a more comprehensive peace mission. The UN Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL) was established on 19 September 2011 through UNSC resolution 2009, following the toppling of the Qaddafi regime. It continued previous UN efforts, mainly in mediation, protection, and humanitarian relief under former UN Special Envoy Abdul Ilah Khatib (Martin 2022). The UNSC, acting under the Chapter VII of the UN, mandated UNSMIL not only to "undertake inclusive political dialogue and promote national reconciliation", but also to "restore public sector and order and promote the rule of law", amongst other tasks (UNSC 16.09.2011). Hence, UNSMIL had a more comprehensive mandate, compared to the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria. However, while UNSMIL was "to be the sole coordinating body of all international policy towards Libya", different parallel processes nonetheless emerged (Pack 2021, 35).

The UN-led Libyan peace process: an unfinished job

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[25]   See   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/28/un-envoy-attend-russia-backed-syria-peace-talks-sochi-despite-opposition-boycott (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[26] Interview member of the Syrian Negotiation Commission, 13.12.2022.

At first, under the leadership of Ian Martin and then Tareq Mitri, UNSMIL worked closely with the newly formed Libyan government bodies, including the National Transitional Council (NTC) and the General National Congress (GNC) established in 2012. Yet, the role of the UN became more complex in 2014, when the situation escalated on the ground due to the intensification of internal fighting, and hence, UNSMIL's work became more controversial.[27] Khalifa Haftar, a former military officer, opposed the transitional government bodies (NTC and GNC) and formed the 'Libyan National Army' in the east of Libya. He launched 'Operation Dignity' under the pretext of fighting extremists and jihadists and took over Benghazi, the second largest city in Libya, in May 2014. This escalation of the conflict into a civil war reflected the regional power struggle in the aftermath of the Arab Spring between an alliance of Qatar and Turkey on the one side and an alliance of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and the Sisi government in Egypt on the other side.

In September 2014, the then UN Special Representative and Head of UNSMIL, Bernardino Leon, initiated talks between the GNC based in Tripoli and the newly elected House of Representatives (HoR) based in Tobruk in eastern Libya. At the same time, the integrity of the UN process became questioned during this period, especially after leaks showed that the UAE had offered a highly paid job to the former head of UNSMIL, Bernardino Leon.[28] Shortly after the scandal became public, Leon was replaced by Martin Kobler, "who pushed for a rapid conclusion of the negotiations despite shaky support in the Tripoli and Tobruk parliaments" (Lacher 2020, 45). By the end of 2015, the UN achieved a breakthrough by reaching the 'Libyan Political Agreement'[29], which foresaw a power-sharing deal between the rival parliaments in Libya, the GNC and HoR, to form a United Government, the Government of National Accord. Yet, the HoR, which claimed to be the sole parliament in Libya, eventually refused to ratify the agreement. Hence, the dispute thereafter evolved into one between the UN-backed Government of National Accord and the HoR. The malfunctioning of the Libyan Political Agreement and the lack of legitimacy of the Government of National Accord put the UN mediation in a delicate situation. On the one hand, it "came to be seen as partial because it supported the unity government, which had essentially become one of the parties to the conflict" (Watanabe 2019, 3). On the other hand, the UN was accused of not doing enough to

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[27] Interview former Libyan official, 23.11.2022.
[28] See https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/13/world/middleeast/leaked-emirati-emails-could-threaten-peace-talks-in-libya.html (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[29] See https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf (last consulted 22.11.2022).

implement the Libyan Political Agreement and to stand against Haftar's attempt to take over Libya by force.[30]

Ghassan Salame replaced Martin Kobler in June 2017. He launched an 'Action Plan for Libya',[31] which consisted of three stages. The first stage included the conflict parties' returning to the negotiating table and agreeing on amendments to the Libyan Political Agreement. The second stage was to organize a national conference under UN auspices. The last stage foresaw the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections, and a referendum on the constitution (Pargeter 2017). Salame aimed to achieve this plan within 12 months and preparations for the national conference took place. However, Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) attacked Tripoli in April 2019, while the UN Secretary-General was himself in Tripoli, which led to the collapse of Salame's plan and eventually to his resignation (Pack 2021). Haftar's attack happened with "tacit diplomatic backing of some members of the international community, as well as the US" (Watanabe 2019). Salame later angrily revealed that "important countries not only supported the attack against Tripoli, but they were plotting exactly against the holding of the National Conference".[32]

Throughout the UN mediation processes in Libya, the UN lacked the much-needed support from the UNSC. As mentioned, even "members of the international community have at times been working against the UN-mediated deal, and the UN political process has lacked a means of changing their positions" (Watanabe 2019, 3). More broadly, regional and international competition over Libya was fierce. Egypt, the UAE, Russia, and France attempted to boost Haftar's position by supporting him on the ground, but also through diplomatic initiatives (Watanabe 2019). France and Russia prevented strong statements, let alone measures, by the UNSC condemning Haftar's attack that had sabotaged the UN-led effort (Lacher 2020, 54). On the other hand, Turkey and Qatar backed the UN-backed Government of National Accord. Meanwhile, the US under Obama's doctrine of 'leading from behind' and Trump's disengaging foreign policy under the slogan of 'America First' limited its interference, and hence, its leverage in Libya.

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[30] Interviews with Libyan experts 05.12.2022 and 19.12.2022.
[31] See https://unsmil.unmissions.org/step-step-un-action-plan-successful-transition-takes-hold-libya (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[32] See Ghassan Salame speaking to the Mediator Studio on 30th of June 2020, https://hdcentre.org/podcasts/ghassan-salam-on-the-failures-of-the-international-community-to-stop-wars/ (last consulted 22.11.2022).

The conflict then took a new turn with the Turkish military intervention. After a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Ankara and Tripoli in November 2019, which took many capitals by surprise, Turkey intervened on the ground. Its intervention shifted the power balance, and stopped Haftar's attempt to storm the Libyan capital to topple the government. This shift succeeded in reconfiguring the balance of power between the conflict parties in east and west Libya, as it turned down Russia-supported Haftar's military campaign to take over Tripoli.

The international interest in Libya was alive again following the rapid Turkish intervention. This paved the way for an inclusive international conference on Libya in Berlin in January 2020. The conclusion of the 'Berlin Conference' called for implementing a ceasefire, continuing the arms embargo, and reviving the political process, among others.[33] However, like the former Libyan Political Agreement in 2015, the conflict parties did not comply with the roadmap and the UN lacked the leverage to convince them. The escalation reached another peak with Russia sending fighter jets to Libya to back Haftar's forces in May 2020. Since it seemed to be a unilateral step by Russia, lacking any diplomatic preparation, it alarmed the US and other European powers.

After Ghassan Salame resigned in March 2020, the UN struggled to replace him. Salame's deputy Stephanie Williams became the acting Special Representative for Libya and acting head of UNSMIL. Williams succeeded in brokering a ceasefire in October 2020 that officially ended the war on Tripoli, and in convening the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in November 2020, which drew a new roadmap for Libya foreseeing an interim government that would terminate with national elections.

Overall, the UN-led peace process in Libya, like in Syria, can be seen as a conflict resolution approach because it considers a political transformation as indispensable for a sustainable peace. Indeed, the UN's ultimate goal in Libya was a power-sharing agreement and elections (Asseburg, Lacher, and Transfeld 2018b) to form a government through the replacement of "rival parliaments and associated governments with one set of political institutions acceptable to all" (Watanabe 2019, 1). As such, the objective of the UN clearly went beyond stopping the violence and included a political transition process. However, despite good intentions, the UN

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[33] See https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/berlin_conference_communique.pdf (last consulted 22.11.2022).

lacked the political power to implement the roadmaps it produced based on the high divergence of interests amongst regional and international actors. In the end, the UN-backed process remained an 'unfinished job', but also marked some progress especially under the leadership of Williams.

Unsuccessful 'Astanaization' of the peace process

The Turkish and Russian military intervention in Libya paved the way for the question of a possible 'Astanaization' of the Libyan political process with Turkey and Russia launching their own political processes on Libya. This expectation was reinforced by news about bilateral communications between Moscow and Ankara before and after the UN-backed Berlin Conference.[34] The Astanization attempt was symbolized by the fact that Russia organized talks on Libya in Moscow just a few days ahead of the Berlin Conference in January 2020.[35] Russia aimed at sealing a deal in Moscow to mark a point and show its increasing influence in Libya.[36] In Moscow, Russia and Turkey both called for a ceasefire. However, after lengthy negotiations, the head of Libya's Government of National Accord signed, while Haftar left for Libya without signing the agreement.[37] This showed Russia's limited leverage over Haftar. Nevertheless, Russia's attempt to underscore its influence in Libya continued. In September 2020, Russia hosted the Libyan Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq and Haftar's son in Sochi with the objective of resolving the conflict and resume the oil export that had been blocked by Haftar's forces. This was yet another attempt to create a parallel process to the one UNSMIL was invested in (Pack 2021). However, overall, the main process remained in the hands of the UN and neither Turkey nor Russia managed to create a sustained parallel process.

Analysis

Compared to the Astana and Sochi process in Syria, the Russian-Turkish attempt to take a leading role in the Libyan negotiations was not realized. This is due to differences in the UN performance, but mostly to the much lower leverage over the conflict parties by Russia and Turkey in the case of Libya. This is illustrated in figure 2.

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[34] See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/13/turkey-and-russia-to-hold-talks-on-libya-syria-wars (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[35] See https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/berlin-conference-libya-conference-conclusions-19-january-2020 (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[36] See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/13/libya-talks-moscow-diplomatic-coup-vladimir-putin (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[37] See https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/moscow-talks-on-libya-prep-for-berlin-conference/1702996# (last consulted 22.11.2022).

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┌─────────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Performance of UN-led   │          │ Leverage over conflict  │
│        process          │          │ parties by initiators   │
│                         │          │ of parallel processes   │
└─────────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────────┘
        │                                    │
   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────────┐
   │ UNSC support:      │              │ Relative influence     │
   │ Divided P5 leads   │              │ over parties:          │
   │ to lack of         │              │ Conflict parties have  │
   │ leverage of UN     │              │ more decisive long-    │
   │ mediators          │              │ term backers than the  │
   └────────────────────┘              │ initiators of the      │
                                       │ parallel processes     │
                                       └────────────────────────┘
   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────────┐
   │ Progress in talks: │              │ Geographical           │
   │ Political          │              │ proximity:             │
   │ agreements, but    │              │ Not in close           │
   │ unfinished         │              │ proximity              │
   │ implementation     │              │                        │
   └────────────────────┘              └────────────────────────┘
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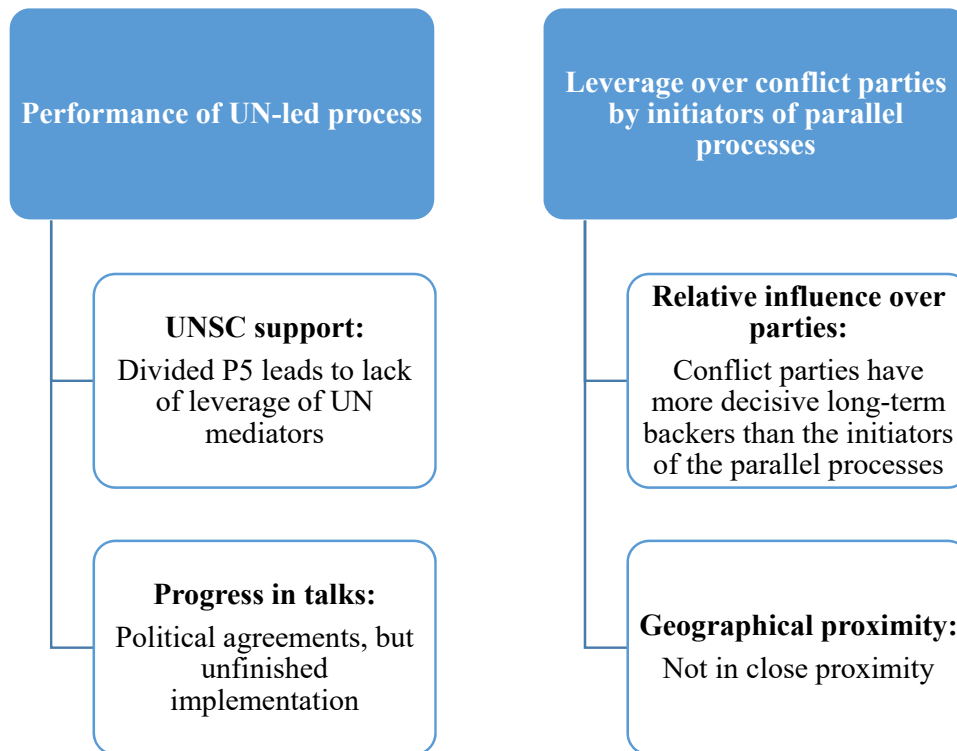
Figure 2. Factors influencing the emergence and impact of parallel mediation processes in Libya

Regarding the performance of the UN-led process in Libya, it was questionable, but achieved some advancements. Similar to Syria, the UNSC was divided. As shown above, some of the P5 supported initiatives that went against the UN's peace process in Libya. UNSMIL was therefore torn between countervailing agendas of UNSC member states.[38] Salame himself pointed this out, and underlined the necessity to distinguish between the UN peace mission (UNSMIL) and the UNSC dynamics.[39] However, the nature of this division was structurally different from the one in Syria. In Syria, the division was along the common rift between Russia and China versus the P3. In Libya, in turn, the division was more equivocal and driven by temporal national interests with Russia and France sharing similar stances at critical moments in the conflict. In terms of progress in the talks, UNSMIL managed to achieve political agreements in Libya, at least in 2015 and 2020. However, the mission lacked the leverage to force the rival parties to comply with the agreements and to implement the foreseen roadmaps. This also meant that UNSMIL lost the trust of the Libyans on the ground.[40] The difference between Libya and Syria was that the UN reacted rapidly following the Turkish and Russian

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[38] Interview Libyan experts 05.12.2022 and 19.12.2022.
[39] See Ghassan Salame speaking to the Mediator Studio on 30th of June 2020, https://hdcentre.org/podcasts/ghassan-salam-on-the-failures-of-the-international-community-to-stop-wars/ (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[40] Interviews Libyan experts 05.12.2022 and 19.12.2022.

military interventions to maintain control over the political process and thus no vacuum was created that other actors filled. Indeed, Williams "was instrumental in resuscitating the UN peace process" as she provided the technical conditions for Haftar to lift the oil blockage not letting Russia take credit for it in the Sochi meeting in September 2020, brokered the ceasefire agreement in October 2020, and completed the LPDF in early 2021 (Pack 2021, 289).

Regarding leverage, Turkey and Russia had contested and relatively lower influence over the conflict parties than in Syria. Their involvement in Libya was less decisive than their intervention in Syria. While Turkey became the main supporter of the Tripoli government together with Qatar, the Libyan Government of National Accord in Tripoli had more political agency compared to the Syrian opposition, given that it was recognized internationally and that it controlled high amounts of hydrocarbon resources that guaranteed its financial independence. For Russia, although it was backing Haftar and the HoR in Tobruk, its intervention was through the Wagner Group and later through the symbolic deployment of fighter jets, which was lower than the more generous military support Haftar already received from France, Egypt, and the UAE (Lacher 2020).[41] Therefore, Haftar was not entirely dependent on Russia, diluting Russia's leverage because it was shared with other actors.[42] This partial leverage was illustrated by Russian President Vladimir Putin's call on Egypt and the UAE to demand Haftar to "halt military operations and support efforts for a political solution" ahead of the Moscow talks on the ceasefire in January 2020.[43] Turkey did not have any notable military involvement in Libya before 2019. Moreover, the two states' military involvement was also more recent than in Syria. They started their direct military support to their respective allies less than one year before the Moscow Conference in January 2020, which is a "short period for the two parties to secure their influence over the conflict parties".[44]

Regarding geographical proximity, the physical distance was greater than in Syria and required a higher level of coordination for the military intervention, especially when taking into consideration the arms embargo imposed on Libya. For Russia, Libya was a step forward in North Africa and far from its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, which may have impacted the decisiveness of its support. For Turkey, while Libya is also a littoral state of the

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[41] Interview Libyan expert, 19.12.2022.
[42] Interview former Libyan official 08.12.2022.
[43] See https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/putin-calls-egypt-uae-push-haftar-towards-political-solution (last consulted 22.11.2022).
[44] Interview Turkish Libya expert, 09.01.2023.

Mediterranean which potentially facilitates access, Turkey was in conflictual relationships with other littoral countries, including Syria, Greece, Egypt, and the Republic of Cyprus at the time of its intervention, and thus, needed to navigate difficult seas to reach Tripoli. At the same time, the physical distance of Libya makes it harder for the governments to legitimize their interventions and secure public and domestic support.

3.3) Comparing the two cases

The comparison of the two cases shows that the emergence and influence of parallel processes depend on the performance of the UN-led process and the leverage of the initiators of these parallel processes. The polarization among the P5 at the UNSC led to difficult political missions in the case of Syria and Libya. In Syria, the UN Special Envoy's Office was not able to convince the two parties (the Syrian regime and the opposition) to reach a political agreement, mainly, due to the lack of leverage over the Syrian regime, which was shielded by Russia at the UNSC. In Libya, UNSMIL was able to facilitate the signing of a political agreement, but it lacked the power to implement the foreseen roadmaps, resulting in an unfinished political process. On the ground, the local dynamics became more fragmented overtime in the two countries with increasing regional and international interventions, at the expense of the national agencies and hampering the people's trust in the UN processes.

Against this backdrop, parallel peace processes emerged, led by actively participating external actors, mainly Turkey and Russia. These two actors enjoyed relative leverage over the conflict parties, and hence, took advantage of the shifting dynamics and the unproductivity of the UN-led process to push for their own processes. However, where their relative leverage was contested, as in the case of Libya, it was more difficult to set up a parallel process and sustain it over time. In Libya, the Russian-Turkish attempt to strike a truce and establish themselves as peacemakers did not bear fruits. Turkey was the main supporter of the Libyan Government of National Accord, but the latter had considerable political agency, thus not being fully dependent on its external backers. Russia, in turn, was not the sole nor the main supporter of Haftar, and hence, its leverage was limited. In Syria, Russia and Turkey had more leverage over their respective allies also because of the geographical proximity of the conflict and thus managed to run competing processes in Astana and Sochi. While the UN was able to contain this process and mitigate its impact, this containment came at the expense of the reframing of the political process and the re-ranking of its priorities. The positive impact of the geographical proximity factor on the success of parallel mediation processes indicates that the UN may find

it more challenging to carry out mediation in areas that great powers have declared as their "spheres of influence". Thus in an increasingly multipolar world order marked by geopolitical competition, we are likely to see flourishing of parallel peace processes as a means of the great powers to control the path of conflict in their neighborhoods.

4) Conclusion

In the last decade, the complex system of mediation has changed, characterized by the shifting nature of conflicts into more internationalized conflicts and the proliferation of actors involved in both the course of the conflict and its mediation. While the mediation field was composed for a long-time of like-minded actors with the same overall approach of conflict resolution, the conflation of conflict parties and third parties has led to the emergence of a higher diversity of actors proposing their mediation. This has posed serious challenges to UN-led peacemaking, as these actors do not always pursue the same overall approach. This paper examines the two cases of parallel mediation processes in Syria and Libya to analyze this emerging phenomenon. In particular, it studies the conditions for the emergence of such parallel peace processes and their impact on the UN-led mediation.

Syria and Libya have been experiencing an internationalized civil war for more than ten years, where the UN-led peace processes have yet to bring about stability and peace. Against the backdrop of this internationalization and lack of productive UN-led peace processes, Russia and Turkey directly intervened and increased their share of influence, not only on the ground but also on the negotiation table. The two countries have partnered in launching the Astana peace process in Syria and attempted to strike a truce and influence the peace process in Libya.

Based on rich empirical data, we show that two factors impact the emergence and the impact of parallel processes: the performance of the UN-led mediation process and the leverage of the actors initiating the parallel process over the conflict parties. The lack of productivity of the UN-led processes due to the division amongst the P5 at the UNSC and the inability to either broker or implement a political agreement presented an opportunity for parallel mediation processes in both Syria and Libya. However, these parallel processes were influenced by the level of leverage that the non-UN actors had over the conflict parties, which is determined by their relative influence over the conflict parties and the geographical proximity of the conflict. Hence, the alternative Astana process challenged the UN-led process in Syria, while the UN maintained its domination over peacemaking in Libya.

The article makes two contributions to the literature. First, it adds to the literature on multiparty mediation by showing both the changing environment and elements of peacemaking (Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 1999, Böhmelt 2012, Vuković 2015, Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2015, Iji 2019). Second, it provides insights on mediation in internationalized civil wars by providing two in-depth cases studies on the role of diverse actors in addressing these types of conflicts (Jenne and Popovic 2017, Kane 2020, Hellmüller 2021, 2022). While the article constitutes a first attempt at conceptualizing the conditions and impact of parallel processes to UN-led mediation endeavors, further research could delve more deeply into the questions of how the UN can deal with the changing complexity of the mediation system and what these parallel process mean for the future global order. In some instances, parallel processes can contribute to the UN-led mediation if there is a clear lead mediator and division of task. In other instances, as in Syria and Libya, they can compete with the UN-led mediation with the risk of hampering its legitimacy. In all cases, however, it seems to be important to have a clear understanding of the overall objectives of the different processes and to ideally re-create a common vision amongst the different peacemakers so as to make sure not to work at cross-purposes.

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