



Working With **GROUPS** of **FRIENDS**

Teresa Whitfield



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The views expressed in this guide are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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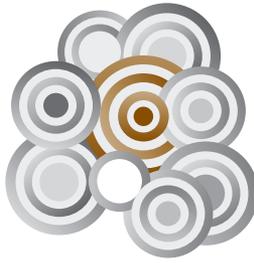
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Introduction

How to work with the many external actors involved in any peace process is a critical issue for peacemakers. As conflict resolution activity has surged in the years since the end of the Cold War, mediators and others have developed a wide array of new arrangements to address this challenge. Most notable among them are informal mini-coalitions of states or intergovernmental organizations that provide support for resolving conflicts and implementing peace agreements—an innovation often referred to as groups of “Friends.”¹

Between 1990 and 2009, “Friends,” “contact groups,” “core groups,” and other such mechanisms—many of them established to support or work alongside UN peacemaking and peace operations—mushroomed from four to more than thirty, a larger than sevenfold increase. Although some groups were formed on the initiative of mediators, others were self-selecting, or even assembled by the conflict parties themselves. They all understood that a peace process would benefit from a unified effort on its behalf. Peacemakers’ experiences of these groups illustrated the elusiveness of such unity among the various external actors—neighbors, regional and more distant powers, donors, and other interested states—but also how important unity is.

With an emphasis on the small groups of states or intergovernmental organizations that are gathered as “Friends” of a mediator or a particular process (but that are not themselves leading the mediation or negotiation), this volume seeks to explore how peacemakers may most productively work with groups of Friends. It takes as a starting point that a group of Friends is an auxiliary mechanism, engaged in the service of a wider strategy for peace—not a substitute for one. As an auxiliary device, a group of Friends cannot create the conditions for peace, but it can contribute to their emergence in a variety of ways.

This handbook draws on the mixed experiences of peacemakers with groups of Friends. It cautions that Friends will not be desirable in every peace process or, necessary, in a similar form at every stage of a peace process. Friends can help marshal leverage, resources, coordination, and expertise in a mediator's support. But there are also circumstances—usually related to a lack of compatibility between the interests of the states concerned and the overall demands of the process—in which Friends may prove a complicating factor. A mediator may, after careful analysis, decide that he or she is better off without them.

Where Friends Are Found

Friends have most frequently been involved in efforts to resolve internal armed conflicts waged between a state and one or more nonstate parties. Beyond this general observation, it is difficult to draw conclusions about their occurrence on the basis either of geography or of the type of conflict with which they have been engaged.

Whether initially convened by a lead mediator or not, Friends are essentially self-selecting: their sustained involvement is the result of their significant interest in a peace process. Perhaps paradoxically, it is also an indication of the absence of an overriding interest in a conflict's outcome on the part of the major powers. These powers are not likely to relinquish a driving role in conflicts at the top of the international agenda to an informal group of states working in support of a third-party peacemaker. Policy toward the Balkans, the Middle East, Iraq, and Afghanistan, for example, has been driven by direct diplomacy by the powers most immediately involved, acting bilaterally, if at times through structures such as the Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia (France, Germany, Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the Quartet on the Middle East (the European Union, Russia, the United States, and the United Nations).

Geography is not the only determining factor in the formation of groups of Friends. Yet certain geographic tendencies can be identified as favoring their formation. The perceived success of the early use of Friends in Central America has made such mechanisms popular in Latin America as a whole. By contrast, a relatively low incidence of UN peace operations in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East made those regions less likely to turn to Friends groups. In Africa, meanwhile, the concerted effort toward a more

collaborative approach to peace and security adopted by the African Union has boosted the popularity of groups of all kinds, not just groups of Friends.

Friends have been present in conflicts recognizably “easier” than others to settle, such as those in Central America. They have also been present in some of the most intractable (Georgia-Abkhazia, Colombia, and Cyprus, for example), involving issues of territory as well as government and sustained by both ideology and illicit resources. Like other peacemaking initiatives they have struggled to exert an impact in circumstances—such as a secessionist conflict—in which the parties pursue a zero-sum option. They have rarely been engaged in the most violent phases of a conflict, nor have they played a prominent role in resolving many of the most deadly conflicts of the post-Cold War period (such as Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], or the Balkans).

A number of the conflicts that have not seen a Friends group form have involved complex regional dynamics or considerable differences among the outside powers that have discouraged the formation of groups. This underlines the fact that whether a group of Friends will be present in a conflict relates less to the internal characteristics of the conflict and more to external actors’ interests and the agency of a few key individuals.

The Challenges of Conceptual Clarity

An attempt to distinguish among the many Friends, Core, Contact, and other groups that have proliferated in the post-Cold War period is complicated by the differences among them that their titles do little to explain. The various groups have differed in the circumstances of their creation, in the mix of their members, and in their functions. Different relationships have formed between the lead mediator and involved states. And different groups have had widely different impacts on the broad range of conflicts with which they have been engaged. In several cases, groups have varied considerably during the period of their engagement as a consequence of changes in their composition and functions or have been complemented by supplementary mechanisms.

This handbook introduces a rough typology (elaborated in Step Two) that distinguishes among Friends of the mediator or process, ad hoc arrangements, contact groups, implementation and monitoring groups, and assistance coordination groups. The first two of these are those of

most immediate concern to a peacemaker involved in the early stages of a peace process. They represent structures or arrangements that will be directly affected by the quality of a mediator's engagement. Clearly, what each group or arrangement may be able to offer will depend on both the specific requirements of the conflict at hand, and the characteristics, capacities, and resources of its membership.

A range of variables may either help or impede the peacemaker's efforts to develop an effective strategy for the involvement of external actors. Whatever structure is deemed appropriate, it will likely involve attention to how to make best use of external partners' leverage, knowledge, and resources; how to block or neutralize unhelpful external involvement; and how to build and sustain broad-based support for an eventual settlement.

Friends and Outcomes

The variety of elements necessary for groups of Friends to form and perform works against assumptions regarding their causal relationship to the outcome of a process. However, a comparative analysis of groups of Friends and other informal structures points to several factors that contribute to the likelihood of their success: the *regional environment* in which the conflict takes place; the *conflict parties'* demands, practices, and interactions with the various third parties mediating or in a group structure; a group's *composition* and the resources that this may bring with it; questions of *leadership* encompassing a group's relationship with the lead peacemaker or mediator, be it a representative of the UN secretary-general, individual state, or nongovernmental peacemaker; and *timing* or the *phase of the process* with which the group is involved.

- The importance of the *regional environment* to the success of a peace process is widely acknowledged.² Indeed, it is difficult to cite examples of the sustainable resolution of a conflict in situations in which regional actors have not lent their support. Unsurprisingly, conflicts at the heart of complex regional conflicts, such as those that take place in the shadow of the pronounced interests of a larger and more powerful neighbor, have generally been without Friends. But where the regional environment is more conducive to the settlement of a conflict, Friends or other groups have been highly effective in engaging regional actors, some of which may also assume responsibilities for mediation.

- In considering the conditions needed for the successful involvement of group structures, the nature of the *conflict parties* emerges as more significant than the type of conflict. Individual members of Friends and other groups are generally representatives of governments with bilateral relations with the governments involved, often with clearly held positions on the issues at stake. As such, they may encounter problems in engaging directly with nonstate armed actors.³ In countering this bias, critical factors for constructive engagement include the nonstate actors' demands (ideological, decolonialist, or secessionist), practices (more or less abusive of human rights, profiting from illicit resources, or identified as "terrorist"), and the degree of international engagement they have pursued in the conflict and efforts to end it (bringing with it the potential for leverage by third parties).
- The *composition* of any group is all-important. As with its formation, a group's composition is directly related to the strategic purposes pursued by its architects, and the distinct contributions made within each process by different Friends and kinds of Friends. In most cases, a small size is seen as key to a group's efficacy. Groups formed at the United Nations have generally been a mix of permanent members of the Security Council, interested regional actors, and midsize donor states or "helpful fixers" with experience of the conflict. Such a mix brings the promise of various resources to the table, which may include diplomatic leverage with one or more of the conflict parties, financial assistance for relief and reconstruction, and the commitment of troops in a UN peace operation or alongside it. In all cases, the essential prerequisite is that group members hold the settlement of the conflict as their highest goal.
- Issues of *leadership* go to the heart of what or whom Friends or other group structures are created for. In cases in which the United Nations has the lead in the peacemaking effort, groups have engaged with differing levels of collaboration with the secretary-general or the senior official representing him in a peace process. In some circumstances, a group has helped to bridge the gap between the fragile independence of the secretary-general and the power politics of the Security Council. In other processes, however, this has not proved possible, and states' conflicting interests have complicated the relationship between the secretary-general or his representative and groups of Friends. Peacemaking conducted outside the United Nations or with the United Nations in a supporting

role—which has become increasingly common in recent years—underlines the importance of having coherent leadership. Indeed, who or what organization exercises leadership is less important than the degree of coherence with which that leadership is exercised.

- The *timing* of a group's formation and/or the *phase of the process* with which it is involved have had a central bearing on both a group's functions and impact in a given process, as distinct operational needs have led to varied relationships among the actors involved. Most obviously, the relationship between the mediator and a group of Friends that has been involved in peacemaking will change with the signing of an agreement and the establishment of a peace operation to monitor or assist in its implementation. Whether the Security Council mandates such an operation or not, peacebuilding will require the allocation, commitment, and coordination of resources that are likely to benefit from structures established in its support.

The Structure of This Handbook

This volume, like other handbooks in the *Peacemaker's Toolkit* series, draws on the lessons to be learned from both more and less successful examples of peacemaking. It introduces five specific steps for mediators considering working with groups of Friends: (1) assess the environment for Friends, (2) develop a strategy, (3) engage with Friends and conflict parties, (4) sustain coordinated support, and (5) prepare for implementation. Although these steps are presented sequentially, once begun, some steps will be ongoing and necessarily overlap with others.

This handbook—which is about working with groups of Friends—may appear to assume the presence or formation of such a group, but it does not advocate for their creation. Rather, this handbook seeks to help mediators both weigh the pros and cons of Friends, as one among the options that may be before them, and work more productively with them, whether they have a hand in selecting Friends themselves, or find Friends wished upon them.

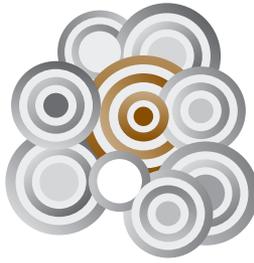
The Peacemaker's Toolkit

This handbook is part of the series *The Peacemaker's Toolkit*, which is being published by the United States Institute of Peace.

For twenty-five years, the United States Institute of Peace has supported the work of mediators through research, training programs, workshops, and publications designed to discover and disseminate the keys to effective mediation. The Institute—mandated by the U.S. Congress to help prevent, manage, and resolve international conflict through nonviolent means—has conceived of *The Peacemaker's Toolkit* as a way of combining its own accumulated expertise with that of other organizations active in the field of mediation. Most publications in the series are produced jointly by the Institute and a partner organization. All publications are carefully reviewed before publication by highly experienced mediators to ensure that the final product will be a useful and reliable resource for practitioners.

The Online Version

There is an online version of *The Peacemaker's Toolkit* that presents not only the text of this handbook but also connects readers to a vast web of information. Links in the online version give readers immediate access to a considerable variety of publications, news reports, directories, and other sources of data regarding ongoing mediation initiatives, case studies, theoretical frameworks, and education and training. These links enable the online *Toolkit* to serve as a “you are here” map to the larger literature on mediation.



STEP ONE

Assess the Environment for Friends

Just as the first step in any mediation effort is to assess the conflict, so, in thinking about groups of Friends, the first step must be to assess the environment for Friends within the broader exercise of conflict analysis. This will involve critical reflection upon a mediator's own strengths and weaknesses as well as considered attention to the potential Friends, external actors from which the mediator may seek support in his or her interactions with the conflict parties.

Consider the Mediation's Strengths and Weaknesses

Track-I mediators become involved with a conflict on the basis of different levels of visibility, legitimacy, and authority. They bring with them varying capacities for engaging with conflict parties, as well as quite distinct relations with other external actors with an interest in, or influence over, a given conflict. The nature and provenance of the mediator will therefore have a direct effect on whether a group of Friends is desirable and, if so, how it should be formed.

Different Mediators

Recent years have seen both a dramatic growth in mediation and an unprecedented diversity of mediators. This reflects two distinct shifts. One is a move away from mediations that are led exclusively by the United Nations and great powers and a move toward an increase in responsibility on the part of regional organizations and states. The other shift is a growth in the involvement of independent international mediators (such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Community of Sant'Egidio) and prestigious individuals. These individuals sometimes run their own organizations (former president of Finland Martti Ahtisaari heads the Conflict Management Initiative; former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, the Carter Center; and former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, his own foundation).

Different mediators—the United Nations, regional and subregional organizations, individual states, private peacemakers, and prestigious individuals—will engage with external actors, and can contemplate working with groups of Friends. Each of these mediators will have a distinct perspective.

- A UN mediator works with the advantages of the organization's legitimacy and operational breadth. The support of UN member states is a critical element of the organization's efficacy as a mediator. Without it, the leverage and resources of the secretary-general would be limited. However, a UN mediator is also subject to pressures from individual states, both when they are parties to a conflict and when they are external actors with strong views about how a given conflict should be approached.
- Regional and subregional organizations mediate with the advantages of proximity to the conflict and knowledge of (and sometimes leverage with) the parties. However, these strengths can also be these organizations' greatest weakness: they are open to pressure by member states and vulnerable to differences among them.
- Individual states can mediate from positions of relative power and influence over the conflict parties (the United States at Dayton or in the Middle East; and Nigeria, South Africa, Libya, Egypt, India, and Malaysia in their respective regions). Unlike established facilitators, such as Norway and Switzerland—which maintain impartiality regarding the conflicts with which they engage—their own clear interest in a conflict's outcome may be a problem for some parties.
- Private peacemakers are "weak mediators," and so must borrow leverage from others. They can engage early and with discretion with conflict parties that are viewed as pariahs by others or that are reluctant to engage with official actors. Yet the support and cooperation of official actors (states or organizations) will be required to reach and sustain a lasting agreement.
- Prestigious individuals, whether engaged (as with former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria) as a UN envoy (in the DRC) or working independently, have the advantages of personal stature and extensive prior relationships. Their authority—as seen in the case of Kofi Annan's mediation in Kenya in 2008—can help impose discipline upon the external actors and instill a sense of urgency within the conflict parties.

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