

Global Essay Competition 2025

Title: Filling the Promise of Failed Liberalism: Localization and Regionalization as a Solution to Conflict

Essay:

“In the end, reconciliation is a spiritual process, which requires more than just a legal framework. It has to happen in the hearts and minds of people.” – Nelson Mandela

Currently, there are more armed conflicts worldwide than at any point since 1946.¹ These conflicts have devastating impacts on health, safety, and welfare, particularly for women and children, with two billion people living in conflict-affected areas.² That is one in four people worldwide. Furthermore, internationalized civil wars have risen over the past decade with the threat of inter-state conflict also increasing. In light of these growing conflicts, UN Secretary-General Guterres proposed that the UN should aim for \$100 million a year in donations for its Peacebuilding Fund.³ Therefore, analyzing mediation effectiveness, and particularly UN mediation effectiveness, is both timely and critical.

Given the fact the confidence in the UN is tepid overall and fairly low in some parts of the world with only 47 percent of the world’s population trusting the UN and 56 percent of Middle Easterners having an unfavorable view of the UN, it is worth also looking towards regional and local actors.⁴ Regional actors are increasingly involved in global affairs. As one mediation expert noted: “Regional and international involvement has stepped up to a completely different level...Regional powers that are ever more assertive and sort of throwing their own weight around...They’re not really wanting to end conflicts through compromise. They want to make sure that their allies win.”⁵ Despite their involvement in conflicts, regional powers are also well-suited to play mediator between warring parties.

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has become increasingly aware of the importance of regional actors. Rather than utilizing the lens of great power politics, an emerging field of scholarship is attempting to analyze regions from the inside-out with an emphasis on local context, particularly in Conflict and Peace Studies. This essay aims to highlight the role of middle and non-state actors in peace efforts via a comparison of local, regional, and international mediation in Yemen. While an increasing field of scholarship is attempting to conceptualize the behaviors and aims of mediators, many studies within international mediation literature focus on third-party capacity via the lens of economic and military resources.⁶ The rationalist-materialist bias within this literature emphasizes material manipulation by third-parties with a high degree of economic and military resources.⁷ Relatively few studies on international mediation analyze the cultural structures in which local and regional mediators operate within. By utilizing critical and constructivist IR theory, this essay aims to challenge assumptions of the discipline that uphold a state-centric and materialistic approach to understanding mediation and peace. By highlighting the nuanced experiences of local and regional mediators, this work aims to expose IR’s failures in conceptualizing mediation through formal structures rather than bottom-up approaches towards

¹ Guterres, War’s Greatest Cost is Human Toll.

² Guterres, War’s Greatest Cost is Human Toll.

³ Guterres, War’s Greatest Cost is Human Toll.

⁴ Trithart and Case, Do People Trust the UN?

⁵ Waldman, Falling Short: Exploring Mediation Effectiveness, 8.

⁶ Sisk, International Mediation in Civil Wars: Bargaining with Bullets.

⁷ Zartman, Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa.

peacebuilding. Since Yemen is an internationalized war with a wide array of military actors and mediators, it lends itself well as an example of an increasing trend of conflict with countries such as Sudan and Libya facing similar dilemmas.

Throughout the eight-year conflict, UN mediation in Yemen has been marked by missteps. Conversely, local and regional conflict mediation has, on several occasions, aided in de-escalation between the warring parties.⁸ This begs the question: *why are local and regional conflict mediation efforts more effective than UN mediation?* While culture is often simplistically depicted as the root cause of conflicts, I argue that culture is a terrain of engagement that allows for conflict-ending dialogue. Rather than being static or inherent to certain peoples, culture is a means of communication and understanding that mediators can utilize to build bridges between warring parties. This can be seen via the mediation efforts of Yemeni tribes and Oman, Yemen's neighbor.

Buzan defines a security complex as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.”⁹ Borrowing from his work, I will utilize regional security complex theory as a framework to analyze Oman's role in Yemen. Buzan describes factors in identifying security complexes, including cultural, religious, racial and ethnic ties. He argues that “cultural characteristics among a group of states would cause them both to pay more attention to each other in general, and to legitimize mutual interventions in each other's security affairs in particular.”¹⁰ By sharing a religion, language, and culture with Yemen, Oman is also invested in the conflict due to a sense of responsibility towards their “brothers,” and is able to operate effectively within the country due to shared customs and cultural literacy. While Oman is a majority Muslim country, it is neither Sunni nor Shia, which bolsters its legitimacy in a region rife with sectarian tensions. Thus, Oman's foreign policy lacks sectarian religious undertones which allows it to intervene in complex, often religiously loaded, conflicts. Furthermore, it is still a Muslim country with Islamic knowledge that facilitates mediation between parties in a religious country.

In contrast, the UN is less familiar with Yemeni culture, which Yemenis are cognizant of. Instead of a generalizable one size fits all approach to mediation, mediators must consider local context and traditions. Each country has its own distinctiveness— so why not use it? Yemen is a traditional and tribal society, yet UN officials are not tapping into these century-old practices to address current challenges. Cultural nuance, understanding, and contextual awareness are necessary for mediations to be successful. Namely, to effectively negotiate within Yemen, it is essential to build relationships to foster compromise, which requires frequenting informal spaces and knowledge of traditions.

Mediation requires connection with others, which cultural ties and understandings facilitate. There are no shortcuts when it comes to mediation. There is a wealth of literature on process design and strategies, but at the end of the day mediation is about engaging with human beings. We can build highbrow theory about this process, but that is only further divorcing us from the inherent humanness of mediation. Fundamentally, mediation is person to person dialogue. This entails meaningfully talking and connecting to people to understand their perspectives and concerns. Culture facilitates this communication via shared experiences or knowledge of a country's history and customs to build the trust necessary for compromise. By solely focusing on

⁸ Mokdad, It's Time for the UN to Regain Some Credibility in Yemen.

⁹ Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 190.

¹⁰ Miller, *The United Nations and Middle Eastern Security*, 4.

theory and high-level politics, the UN is unable to properly engage with the human side of mediation, which requires cultural literacy.

Furthermore, international level negotiations are not inherently respected by local communities, unlike local level agreements. Violating a tribal rule can result in killing, shunning, or reduced social standing within the tribe. Other examples include blocking roads or not allowing people from a tribe to marry anyone in the violator's family. These punishments vary depending on the infringement and often are successful at holding people accountable. As such, not only is their extreme distrust towards the international level of mediation, but also an understanding that Yemeni-led efforts are more sustainable. Due to tribal leaders being respected and a tight-knit social fabric, it is difficult for Yemenis to violate local rules and agreements. As Yemen is a tribal society, violating a tribal agreement is not only taboo, but can hurt the entire tribes social standing which ensures accountability. However, there are no mechanisms for Yemenis to hold the international community accountable. Furthermore, Yemeni-led deals result in what the interlocutor described as an "ownership of peace" which makes communities more likely to abide by the outcome.

These Yemeni-led mediation efforts often occur in informal spaces, such as majlis. A majlis is an informal forum for socializing and politics in which community members gather. Oftentimes, important decisions in Yemen are not made in offices, but rather over qhat. As Wedeen argues, qat chews are "lively public sphere activities are analogous to Habermas's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European salons and coffee- houses in the sense that they work to produce important forms of political engagement and critical debate."¹¹ These informal spaces are the cornerstones for political debate and thought in Yemen. However, entry to these spaces requires cultural literacy due to the unwritten rules of a majlis and community buy-in to participate in them.

When considering power in mediation, scholars often refer to clear cut carrots and sticks (examples: information sharing and sanctions), yet culture is also a form of power in itself. The trust and dialogue that culture builds can result in warring parties making compromises that they would otherwise be reluctant towards. The UN has sanctioned Ansar Allah, and the US has offered to pay salaries, but the group has remained steadfast in their positions. Only Oman has been able to reach compromises with the de-facto government and this is due to an understanding of the group and how to interact with them that Western governments and international institutions are yet to achieve. In contrast to the tried and failed system of rewards and punishments by international actors, local and regional efforts have made progress by simply engaging in culturally sensitive dialogue. This entails historical and anthropological approaches to mediation that employ people with a deep understanding of the relevant cultural context. Rather than focusing on mediation theory and material objectives of parties, engaging with traditional tools such as religion and tribal institutions can facilitate meaningful understanding between warring parties. Through employing culture as a form of power, local and regional actors are attempting to move beyond surface-level peace deals and instead build trust between warring parties.

This essay does not argue that material factors do not influence mediation, or does it deny that conflict parties are goal-seeking actors who engage in costs-and-benefits analysis. However, it argues that culture also influence the prospects of mediation success. Mediation literature tends to emphasize material sources of power for mediators such as military force and intelligence

¹¹ Wedeen, *The Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen*, 60.

capabilities. However, peace requires local buy-in to be sustainable. It is not just a signed piece of paper, but rather local sentiment and relationship building.

International organizations are facing high levels of distrust and regional powers are filling this gap. As such, “regions and their powers therefore need to be analyzed more carefully to better understand their global reach.”¹² Rather than analyzing regions from the outside-in, a growing scholarship is studying local context and the relevance of a regional level of analysis. Yet, there remains a gap in understanding how states fit into the increasingly multipolar order to better understand the new power dynamics underpinning world politics. Systemic arguments have famously described the Middle East as the most penetrated subsystem since external powers constantly intervene to promote their own regional interests and visions of regional order.¹³ But as Bilgin argues, “there is not one Middle East but many.”¹⁴ As such, the regional lens provides a more accurate and interesting landscape of the security in the Middle East. However, strong states and international institutions still shape the region. Despite UN missteps in Yemen, the UN is still a source of legitimacy in itself. While their actions in the Global South are met with much criticism, the UN is still *the* international institution to address conflict. A UN mediated deal is more likely to be seen as legitimate by the world at large. As such, we cannot exclude the UN from the peace process. Rather, we must link bottom up and top down approaches. This entails regional powers filling the vacuum of promised liberalism. While much literature on regional powers considers economic and expansionist ideals, this power is also based on culture, so let’s bring it to the table too—or the majlis.

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¹² Fawcett and Jagtiani, *Regional Powers, Global Aspirations: Lessons from India and Iran*.

¹³ Binder, *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East*.

¹⁴ Bilgin, *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*.

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