



THE DITCHLEY FOUNDATION

Non-state actors and the changing nature of conflict

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The nature of armed conflict is changing and the current generation of civil wars is becoming more difficult to resolve. Their number has tripled since 2007. They have also become more deadly, with a six-fold increase in battle deaths in the past five years. Civilian casualties are also high as the fighting tends to take place all around them. International peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts are struggling to advance what the UN Security Council has called “sustainable peace”. In particular the international community seems to have become significantly less effective at finding and enforcing solutions and compromises, reflecting in part the deep divisions inside the Security Council about intervention and the international enforceability of human rights standards.

A key factor in the increased intractability of armed conflicts is the rise of non-state actors. Globalization, the spread of the internet, and the growth of illicit flows of people and goods have made it easier for violent non-state actors to acquire weapons, raise funds, recruit fighters, and publicise their claims. The spread of Salafi ideology has fuelled the rise of violent extremist groups which are difficult if not impossible to engage in peace processes. There is often a reluctance on the part of states to engage with such groups for fear of appearing to condone their aims and tactics, or giving them political credibility. Distinctions which could be drawn between groups with specific aims and those pursuing global jihad are often not made, for example between Hamas and so-called Islamic State. The terrorist label is easy to apply, and can quickly limit political options. Meanwhile the growth of war economies blurs the lines between ideology and criminality, fosters a fragmentation of armed groups and tends to lower incentives to enter peace agreements.

In these circumstances the international community needs to take a clear-eyed look at its conflict management toolbox and explore how it can be adapted to meet this changing nature of armed conflict, and the new actors. How should international peacemakers grapple with the importance of non-state actors in many conflicts? How can third parties engage with these non-state actors while respecting their own principles and avoiding any appearance of validating their claims or taking sides against established states? To what extent should policy-makers look to the UN to take the lead in conflict resolution, or to the relevant regional organization, rather than individual states? What have we learned from the last two decades of intervention and nation-building about what works and what does not, and how should we be applying these lessons? What is the role of technology and technology providers – how can technological advantage be denied to those who misuse it for violent ends? What will be the impact on cyber space and the internet of things? What are the broader responsibilities for business, from banning the import of conflict diamonds to control of exports and denial of financial networks? How do these issues look from the point of view of the non-state actors themselves?

This conference will aim to bring together policy practitioners, experts, technologists and business leaders from a wide range of countries, businesses and organisations around the world to look at where we are today, and explore better options for the future.