

Understanding armed groups

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In the world of violent conflict, parties in dispute do not usually have a shared system for resolving their dispute and consequently there is generally an accepted need for what is referred to as a 'peace process'. Authority and legitimacy are contested, and no judge, court, tribunal, or bargaining process is acceptable to all sides. Hence, there is often an assumed need for a 'third party', an individual or organization outside of the combatant groups, to assist in the establishment and management of the process. These assumptions bring us to the central question for this article: how can a third party understand an armed group well enough to be able to assist constructively in the establishment of a peace process? 'Understanding' such a group means more than merely having information about them. It means developing a deeper knowing, an awareness of their experiences and perceptions, an understanding of their logic or way of reasoning, and some ability to predict or explain what they do. This kind of understanding is dynamic, not static: rather than the gathering of information, this is the development of a process of communication and negotiation, out of which may come a peace process.

The question of understanding armed groups involves two kinds of variables: substantive (the information required) and procedural (the process of interaction with groups in order to gather the information). If an intermediary manages the procedural variables poorly, then there is little chance that the information obtained will have sufficient depth, trustworthiness or usefulness. So before detailing what information an intermediary should look for, it is necessary to flesh out the variables that affect how the intermediary acquires that information.

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Variables that affect 'how' to go about understanding

The trust factor

The first key variable that affects how an intermediary approaches the task of understanding an armed group is trust. Trust is the 'bandwidth' of the connection between an intermediary and the armed group. In technological terms, high bandwidth means that lots of information can flow over a computer network while low bandwidth means that information flows slowly and unreliably. In the same way, if there is a high degree of trust between an intermediary and an armed group, the amount, quality and honesty of the information exchanged is much greater.

Building trust is an incremental process. Often the first level of trust is implied by the fact that an intermediary is meeting at all with an armed group. In order to secure a meeting, an intermediary usually needs to address some basic questions that the armed group will expect to be answered. These include: who is the intermediary (are they trusted by someone we trust)? Who invited them? What is the purpose of the meeting? What are they going to do with our answers? What is their future role? Trust is more likely to be built if the initial meetings are confidential, focus solely on understanding the individual's perspective (as opposed to arguing with it), and allow the individual (or group) to have a say in what, if any, future role the intermediary will play.

Assuming that an intermediary can overcome this initial hurdle of 'gaining entry' to the armed group, the intermediary needs to be true to their word. Ultimately, trust grows and contact continues if the armed group sees it as in their interests to keep talking. Further, groups may decide to use an intermediary to test whether they can build trust in a negotiation process. The intermediary may strive to gain the trust of the group's leaders, in the hope of transferring that trust to other parties or to a specific process. If there are several intermediaries, multiple armed groups, government politicians, plus neighbouring countries or interested international parties, building and sustaining trust among them becomes very complex indeed.

The intermediary as participant in the conflict

A second variable that affects how an intermediary understands armed groups is the fact that, once engaged with the combatants, the intermediary becomes an actor in that conflict system and has an impact (consciously or not) on the conflict dynamics. As Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle tells us, observers influence what they observe. An intermediary brings attention to the conflict and, depending on their profile,

may bring prestige and offer a potential conduit to other resources such as important governments, individuals, or funds. Contact also entails risks for the interlocutor from the armed group. If the group is declared illegal, then it is risky for anyone to speak for the group or be identified with it. Even if not declared illegal, members of an armed group may feel that talking to outsiders can be a threat to their personal safety.

The intermediary also needs to be aware that in the process of understanding a group, he or she may also change the armed group itself and how the group relates to the conflict. The intermediary may be the first to seek explicitly to understand all sides of the conflict, and the armed group may, for the first time, decide to participate in an inclusive process. The process may change how the group thinks about its positions, needs, hopes and fears, and bring internal differences to the surface (or even resolve them). It may be one of a few times the group is in discussion with someone who is neither a supporter nor an opponent. The process of making themselves clear and gaining a basic understanding of the other combatants has potential to influence the group's structure, internal and external communications, and even their understanding of themselves.

Information does not flow in only one direction, from the armed group to the intermediary, but from or through the intermediary to the armed group. Just as the intermediary engages with an armed group in order to develop a better understanding of them, the armed group is seeking to further their understanding of the intermediary, the motivations of other parties and the broader context. All sides in a conflict generally pursue more than one strategy. They prepare for negotiations and for the next offensive at the same time. Their question is: are other parties really interested in negotiations? If they do negotiate, are they able to deliver on their agreements? To be effective, intermediaries must be aware of what their words and actions are telling the armed group in relation to these critical questions.

What information to gather

More than words

Intermediaries need to pay attention to more than the spoken or written positions of the parties. They must also be adept at reading actions and the context within which armed groups operate. Armed groups often communicate in non-verbal ways. They operate in the world of politics, where words are the common currency, yet they often do not trust words used by others, and do not feel that words alone suffice to convey their own meaning and intent. Armed groups are usually closed to outsiders, to control both membership selection and information. An armed

group makes choices about what to reveal about itself, and what to hide. Of course, as with any group, it may 'reveal' information that is exaggerated or misleading in order to make itself appear larger, better-supported or more powerful. A group may create a public image by being mysterious, for example the intent of the masks of the Mexican Zapatistas. A hidden leader such as Prabhakaran of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) may appear mythic, powerful or charismatic. A group may strive to seem very ordinary, just like everyone else, both as camouflage and to give the impression of broad support. Or it may choose the opposite tactic and place itself out of the realm of ordinary human life, particularly by persistently violating taboos or extending the limits of its actions. Thus, the Lord's Resistance Army of northern Uganda engages in mutilation and some LTTE members carry cyanide pellets, all to demonstrate that their cause and commitment go beyond the normal. These choices may be seen, and even dismissed, as tactics. However,

each choice is also a piece of information about the group, and as such will reward careful study. What the group does and says about itself begins to describe and locate at least its aspirations or what it believes suits its interests.

General information

Intermediaries generally need to know similar things about the various groups in the conflict, including: 1) their political profile, including their history, ideology and allies; 2) their military capabilities, including the effective size of each grouping, their arms, degree of training and territorial influence or control; 3) their degree of constituency support, including any geographic or ethnic limits to their support; 4) their economic activities, including funding from abroad, from neighbouring states, from trade or from illegal activities such as drugs, kidnapping or extortion. The answers to these questions can give some early

Figure 1. Indicators regarding opportunities for and constraints on armed groups' engagement.

Negative indicators ←————→ Positive indicators	
Political power	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disregard for rule of law and elections Political assassinations Intolerant of differences, change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are or have been in political power Respect rules of law, provide services Have political institutions, agenda, candidates
Territory	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in ethnic cleansing, destruction or Have no territory or control over it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold territory over time Set up systems within the territory Allow freedom of movement
Social and economic support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Isolate themselves from wider society Derive substantial profit from the war economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoy support of public constituency See settlement of conflict as delivering economic benefits to their region or constituency
Use of military force	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indiscriminate, high civilian casualties No or little effective command and control Troops undisciplined Troops, force used to sustain illegal activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possess without necessarily using force Observe humanitarian law, proper treatment of civilians Troops disciplined

indications of the opportunities for and constraints on political engagement, as the matrix (figure 1) suggests.

When analysing such information it is of course crucial to factor in the profile and behaviour of the other conflict protagonists; this will play a significant role in shaping the group's strategies and attitudes towards political engagement. It is also important to consider how any future process of engagement will fit into the broader history of attempts at political dialogue. Finally, perhaps the most obvious and revealing area of enquiry can be to explore the group's understanding of the current conflict and its possible solutions.

Groups usually want everyone to know what they think is wrong and what should be done about it. This topic has the added advantage that one can begin discussing it with anyone, without needing to know whether the interlocutor is actually a member of the armed group, a sympathizer or an analyst. Asking for suggestions of people who can help one to understand a given group generally progresses imperceptibly from those who say 'they' to those who say 'we'. The group's analysis of the problem and their range of possible solutions reveal a great deal about them, their aims, and how they wish to be seen.

One critical factor linked to the group's perception of the origin of the conflict is how the group accounts for the fact that it is armed (an area of discussion requiring considerable tact). Has it been an armed group since its inception, or did it begin with political campaigns or social organizing before it took up arms? Has it caused many casualties, and are they steadily increasing? Does it limit the use of arms to specific situations? This helps to clarify its aims and priorities, and also helps others to interpret its actions. If an armed group is to engage in a peace process, both the group and the society will need to understand whether, how and when it might decide to prioritize strategies other than arms.

Are they willing and able to negotiate?

It is not clear that all armed groups want to participate in peace processes or can bring themselves to do so. At the same time, it is likely that many other groups will resist including armed non-state actors in negotiation processes. As with building trust, the understanding of whether a group is serious about negotiating may need to develop over time, based on actions rather than words.

In general, what a group does is the best predictor of what it will do. When this is extended to become a process of communication of intent and interpretation of events, it offers the best chance to understand whether a given group will engage in a peace process in good faith. Even at an early stage, however, the

following questions can reveal indicators of likely future actions (positive replies suggesting that fruitful negotiation may be possible):

- Does the group have a positive vision for a peaceful future or just a vision of what they do not want to happen? Do they have a realistic understanding of the value of negotiating versus the value of not negotiating? Do they have a nuanced understanding of their own group's needs, interests, hopes and fears – and those of the other side? Do they have a clear vision of what it means not to negotiate a solution, and do they think that scenario is better than any conceivable negotiated solution?
- Do they feel it is legitimate to talk to the other side(s)? Believe that it is in their interests to talk? Do they envision possible negotiated solutions?
- Do they have the resources (finances, expertise, communication channels) and ability to negotiate – including the ability to manage internal divisions, deliver on commitments, problem solve, understand the other side(s), etc?

Conclusion

For all parties to a peace process, the development of understanding about and between all the actors is an essential prerequisite for political progress. Without understanding it is difficult to identify common interests, build confidence, or resolve differences – all of which are vital steps in reaching an agreement capable of ending violence and addressing the causes of conflict.

Much of an intermediary's success comes down to interpersonal and contextual factors, which will be different in each conflict setting and even each interaction. Above all, it is crucial to remember that armed groups are dynamic organizations whose strategies change in response to evolving circumstances. Different elements in the group will enjoy prominence at different historical moments, in response to internal tensions or external influences. Intermediaries need to remember that their assessment of a group and its attitude to political engagement is not definitive; at a different moment, possibly with a different interlocutor, an intermediary with a different approach may find openings that were previously undiscovered.

Despite attempts to define or systematize the task of understanding armed groups, it is still a healthy mix of art and science. The issues outlined above, and those raised in the following case studies, can provide some useful starting points and helpful signposts that intermediaries can use in the difficult but essential task of understanding armed groups.