

# Accord

an international review of peace initiatives

INSIGHT 2



**CONCILIATION  
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Editors

**Sophie Haspeslagh  
and Zahbia Yousuf**  
2015

## Local engagement with armed groups In the midst of violence



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**May 2015 // Editors**

Sophie Haspeslagh and Zahbia Yousuf

**Accord Insight** presents cutting-edge analysis and contemporary peacebuilding innovation by re-examining key challenges and practical lessons from Conciliation Resources' Accord publication series



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**Conciliation Resources**

**Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road, London NW5 1AL**

**www.c-r.org**

Telephone +44 (0) 207 359 7728

Fax +44 (0) 207 359 4081

Email [accord@c-r.org](mailto:accord@c-r.org)

UK charity registration number 1055436

**Editors**

Sophie Haspeslagh and Zahbia Yousuf

**Executive Director**

Andy Carl

**Director of Policy and Practice**

Eleanor O’Gorman

**Head of Accord**

Alexander Ramsbotham

**Peacebuilding Editor and Analyst**

Zahbia Yousuf

**Head of Policy and Learning**

Teresa Dumasy

**Policy Analyst**

Sanne Tielemans

**Programme Officer**

Felix Colchester

**Copiedited by Aaron Griffiths**

**Designed and typeset by Soapbox**

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# Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Acronyms   | 4  |
| Foreword   | 5  |
| Accord Insight   | 6  |
| In the midst of violence: local engagement with armed groups |    |
| Expert analysis  | 10 |
| Between fighting and talking                                 |    |
| Case studies   |    |
| Northern Uganda  | 15 |
| Colombia   | 21 |
| Northern Ireland   | 27 |
| Syria  | 30 |
| Key texts  | 35 |
| Further reading  | 35 |
| Key websites   | 37 |
| The Accord series  | 38 |

# Acronyms

**ARLPI** – Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative  
**AUC** – United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia  
**BCB** – Central Bolivar Block  
**CAR** – Central African Republic  
**CINEP** – Center for Research and Popular Education  
**CPA** – Comprehensive Peace Agreement  
**DRC** – Democratic Republic of Congo  
**ELN** – National Liberation Army  
**FARC** – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia  
**FSA** – Free Syrian Army  
**GoSS** – Government of Southern Sudan  
**HSM** – Holy Spirit Movement  
**IRA** – Irish Republican Army  
**IS** – Islamic State  
**JN** – Jabhat al-Nusra

**LAC** – Local Administrative Council  
**LCC** – Local Coordination Committee  
**LRA** – Lord's Resistance Army  
**NGO** – Non-governmental organisation  
**NIACRO** – Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders  
**NRA** – National Resistance Army  
**PDPMM** – Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio  
**PSNI** – Police Service of Northern Ireland  
**RUC** – Royal Ulster Constabulary  
**UNSC** – United Nations Security Council  
**UPDF** – Uganda People's Defence Force  
**UPDM/A** – Uganda People's Democratic Movement/Army

# Foreword

**Michael Semple** is visiting professor at the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice, Queen's University Belfast. He specialises in research, policy and practice of humanitarian assistance and conflict resolution in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He worked in the region from 1988–2008 and was a member of the United Nations political

team that helped implement the 2001 Bonn Agreement. From 2004–08 he was Deputy to the European Union Special Representative for Afghanistan. Michael is a recognised analyst of the Afghan Taliban Movement and his current research looks at challenges facing militant jihadi groups evolving a political role.

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Pioneers of peace talks with armed groups are often figures from communities affected by violence. This Accord Insight, exploring local engagement initiatives, is a timely reminder that conflict transformation often proceeds without a presidential mandate or mediation by a retired international diplomat. National level and formal processes have much to learn from the experiences of tribal elders, clerics or civil society activists who have sat down to talk with their local armed groups.

In my experience, media coverage of conflicts often presents civilian populations as disempowered and at the mercy of armed groups. In Pakistan, estimates of the number of tribal elders assassinated by Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliates are cited to show how militants have subverted traditional authority structures such as *jirgas*. But my understanding of both Pakistan and Afghanistan is that there is intense interaction between armed groups and community figures, in part driven by militants' recognition that their survival depends on maintaining a degree of popular consent.

Communities engage with armed groups on a range of issues: from hostage negotiation, to criminal justice, dispute adjudication and local ceasefires. The degree of agency shown by civilian interlocutors also varies. Representatives may articulate community demands to armed groups. In Pakistan and Afghanistan there are a wealth of informal actors, including clerics and elders, ready to act as intermediaries for the recovery of hostages or to agree truces. In areas where an armed group is the de facto authority, much of the engagement consists of petitioning – civilians approach the armed group's commander because the government-sanctioned assistant commissioner is no longer able to deliver.

The importance attached to civilian engagement by the Taliban is illustrated in cadre training programmes, which in recent

years have increasingly emphasised the need for courteous and non-coercive relations with civilians. The actual behaviour of cadres may differ, but the Taliban's intention is clear enough – recognising that the ability to operate safely in rural areas depends upon maintaining a modicum of community consent. Conversely, the Afghan Taliban perceive *arbakai* (government-backed community militias) as the greatest threat to their influence, which are formed when the Taliban fail to secure consent to their presence. Armed groups know that losing the argument with communities may mean losing the war.

Since 2010 there have been periodic attempts to orchestrate official peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. Early 2015 saw the most concerted attempt yet, as President Ashraf Ghani made a strategic calculation that top-level rapprochement with Pakistan, complemented by Chinese mediation, could bring the Taliban leadership to the table. The initiative started out as a classic example of top-down peacemaking, relying on the persuasive power of state actors to engage with the leadership.

This Accord Insight points to alternative approaches, where communities engage with and influence armed actors in their operational area. By considering grassroots engagement in a range of contexts the Accord Insight usefully draws attention to the richness of experience in dealing with armed groups.

The new data will hopefully help address the top-down bias in official peacemaking, and create space for complementary approaches at multiple levels. The experiences documented are relevant internationally to anyone developing a strategy to bring armed groups into a peace process. Afghan peacemakers may yet embrace the bottom-up approach if they find that high-level talks do not deliver the kind of progress they have been hoping for.

# Accord Insight

## In the midst of violence: local engagement with armed groups

Zahbia Yousuf

Zahbia Yousuf joined Conciliation Resources as Peacebuilding Editor and Analyst in May 2012. Before this she was a Teaching Fellow in Violence, Conflict and Development at SOAS University and Kings College London. She has also been a Research Associate at INCORE at the University of Ulster,

and the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), Berlin. She completed a PhD in Comparative Peace Processes in 2010, looking at Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and Kashmir, and holds a Masters Degree in International Peace and Security from the Department of War Studies, Kings College London.

This second Insight publication in Conciliation Resources' Accord series looks beyond state-centred and international debates over whether or not to engage in dialogue with an armed group. Instead it explores the spaces in which armed groups operate and their relationships with the people who live there.

Local populations are not just passive actors in conflict zones, simply coerced by armed actors. Equally, armed groups do not merely exploit or abuse communities in areas in which they operate. Three in-depth case studies from Colombia, northern Uganda and Syria, as well as a shorter reflection from Northern Ireland, illustrate how communities have tried to influence the behaviour of armed groups away from violence, and the factors that have affected their interactions – most of which took place in advance of more formal negotiations and often in situations of intense violence and embedded conflict.

These local “spaces in between” fighting and talking shed light on the possibilities for more upstream engagement with armed groups and the variety of peace efforts involved in shaping their decisions. The case studies illustrate that reaching out to armed groups does not have to legitimate their tactics or even ambitions. They also show how active community engagement with armed groups can make an important contribution to local human security and peacebuilding.

The experiences documented confirm that local peace actors face huge security risks – unprotected by diplomatic immunity or the security of the state. Armed groups often have a blatant disregard for civilian security, or worse, purposefully target populations. Local populations also face security threats from the state, which often views communities close to armed groups as complicit. Active contact by a community with an armed group risks exacerbating perceptions of association.

**“ Local populations are not just passive actors in conflict zones, simply coerced by armed actors. Equally, armed groups do not merely exploit or abuse communities in areas in which they operate”**

During intense fighting, local efforts to reduce violence and promote dialogue may also be seen as contrary to conflict parties' efforts to gain military advantage. Local actors expend considerable effort to remain both impartial and safe. Maintaining this space is important so that those who can and do reach out to armed groups in order to counter violence are protected.

The case studies presented here are only a snapshot of the complex and at times ambiguous relations between local populations and armed groups – communities can be victims, allies, family members, protesters, or channels of dialogue to armed actors. However it is hoped that these case studies can contribute to discussion and inquiry into a broader range of constructive options to reach out to armed groups to promote peace, as well as highlight the experiences of people who face the daily challenge and risk of living alongside armed groups and who decide to confront their use of violence.



## Peacebuilding insights from local engagement with armed groups

**Community engagement with armed groups can open entry points for peacebuilding when more conventional paths are blocked, through:**

- maintaining and sustaining contact with armed groups when no one else will
- providing practical support for an armed group's transition from violence to non-violence
- embedding engagement with armed groups in broader peace efforts to promote societal change

**Community strategies to reach out to armed groups use existing local institutions and systems, including:**

- building on pre-existing links with armed groups such as kinship and shared ideology
- developing and strengthening structures for non-violent community mobilisation and organisation
- framing discussions in local cultural and social norms

**Local actors face considerable risks when talking to armed groups and develop techniques to reduce these, including through:**

- linking with external networks and support structures
- asserting their impartiality

### Community engagement with armed groups can open entry points for peacebuilding when more conventional paths are blocked

In the case studies presented in this publication the main imperative for local populations to reach out to armed actors was security – to protect themselves from attack. Other immediate reasons included securing access to roads, water and other humanitarian resources. In Micoahumado in Colombia, communities were at risk from crossfire between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and paramilitary forces. Local populations caught up in intense and chaotic warfare in Syria sought to end regime-imposed sieges. In northern Uganda, communities faced the threat of extreme violence as well as the abduction and forced recruitment of their children into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

As the Syrian case study illustrates, armed groups, particularly those without pre-existing links to local populations, may be difficult to influence in the short term, as violent tactics and strategic priorities overwhelm and silence voices for peace. Yet, many initiatives documented in this Accord Insight started as efforts to enhance local human security and subsequently developed broader ambitions. In northern Uganda there was explicit recognition by community actors that protecting local populations from violence required longer term peace efforts – for the LRA to talk to the government. In other cases the transition to peacebuilding was less deliberate and developed as a result of the specific approaches taken.

*Maintaining and sustaining contact with armed groups when no one else will*

Local actors can provide crucial insights into and links with armed groups when conflict parties are unwilling to negotiate

and when there are no discernable entry points for more formal mediation. Through direct contact, local actors in each of the case study contexts gained understanding of the structure and priorities of the respective armed groups. They can act as barometers for when groups might be “ripe” for formal talks – and understand the barriers.

Local actors are also likely to have a long-term view of engagement. This can contrast with international involvement, which tends to prioritise delivering demonstrable results in specific timeframes. When violence explodes, local actors may temporarily retreat from direct engagement with an armed group, but they can maintain reduced contact, ready to reach out again when circumstances allow. In northern Uganda, customary leaders continued to transmit messages to the LRA during periods of heavy fighting between the LRA and the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) when civilian attacks were particularly intense.

*Practical support for an armed group's transition from violence to non-violence*

There are real and practical challenges for armed groups to cease violence and enter negotiations. Community-based groups can provide a trusted space for armed groups to test new ideas or challenge existing ones. They can also help create conditions conducive to encouraging peaceful change within an armed group, and support and facilitate a group's transition from violence to non-violence.

In Northern Ireland, discussions between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and local civil society on restorative justice took place alongside formal peace talks. The IRA had come to realise that its punishment activities – beatings and shootings to enforce order among communities – were at odds with its political ambitions and commitment to a ceasefire. Recognition of this tension incentivised IRA interest in alternatives. Conversations with civil society provided conceptual frameworks, practical advice and training on different approaches. This also opened up space for the republican movement to rethink community security and the role of state police services, and address the key issue of police reform in emerging peace talks.

In northern Uganda, community engagement with the LRA identified concerns regarding reintegration. The peace work of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) fostered community understanding that many LRA members were victims of abduction by the armed group, often when they were children. Communities were sensitised to the potential return of LRA fighters, which opened up a possible demobilisation route. The ARLPI's community work provided incentives for combatants to return to their communities without fear of rejection, and promoted LRA reintegration.

*Embedding engagement with armed groups in broader peace efforts to promote societal change*

Local actors have a fundamental stake in the outcome of engagement with armed groups, which often reflect a community's ambitions for broader societal change. In both northern Uganda and Micoahumado, community activists observed that peace mobilisation and organisation provided strength to, and promoted the agency of, fearful communities facing severe violence and insecurity, encouraging them



to believe in the possibility of peace and work towards it. In Syria this has proved important as conflict dynamics have overwhelmed the possibility of formal peace negotiations.

The Accord Insight case studies show local actors were involved in a range of activities that contributed to the possibility of sustainable peace, including: the return and reintegration of combatants; community security and de-mining; addressing the effects of violence in society; peace advocacy to national and international actors; and efforts to socialise armed groups to be mindful of constituency priorities. In northern Uganda the ARLPI conducts trauma-healing therapy for those affected by violence, and has mediated localised conflicts such as land disputes.

In Colombia, those involved in the Micoahumado de-mining initiative have shared lessons with other communities and national NGOs, leading to national learning and mobilisation on the issue. De-mining has also become a key negotiating topic in talks between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and is likely to feature in talks with the ELN.

### **Community strategies to reach out to armed groups use existing local institutions and systems**

Conflict disrupts the social fabric. For example, as the Syria case identifies, the taking up of arms can give those who have felt marginalised in society an opportunity to exercise power and defy social and cultural expectations and structures. In each of the case studies discussed in this publication, high levels of violence (both state and non-state) reshaped social life, cultural practices, routine activities, and public and personal space.

Engagement with armed groups therefore implies different challenges for local communities who are part of the conflict context than for external actors. Access to and relationships with armed groups, including at leadership level, may already exist. But the ability to influence requires much more active agency, including adaptation of existing networks and development of innovative ways to sway armed actors.

#### *Building on pre-existing links with armed groups such as kinship and shared ideology*

In Micoahumado and in certain areas of Syria, communities relied on pre-existing relationships – kinship and family ties – to engage armed groups in dialogue. Some religious leaders in the ARLPI did not have ethnic links with the LRA, but initial contacts were often made through customary leaders with more historical connections to LRA members.

Many armed groups, at least initially, also had community support for their objectives, for example in their opposition to the state. In Syria, self-defence forces often emerged in areas of mass popular uprising against the Assad regime. In earlier phases of the conflict, the relationship between armed and unarmed elements was akin to a division of labour around shared revolutionary principles.

Identifying with and understanding the ambitions of an armed group is key to local actors' ability to influence it: to establish trust, to be able to say things that others cannot, and to be

listened to. It was easier to reach a de-mining agreement with the ELN than with paramilitary groups in Micoahumado – and it was more likely that the deal would stick – because of the ELN's roots in the community. In Northern Ireland, local connections between the IRA and communities were less evident, but the restorative justice initiative relied on ex-prisoners formerly associated with the IRA to develop convincing contacts with it.

**“ Identifying with and understanding the ambitions of an armed group is key to local actors' ability to influence it: to establish trust, to be able to say things that others cannot, and to be listened to”**

#### *Developing and strengthening structures for non-violent community mobilisation and organisation*

Community mobilisation, organisation and strategy were key features in all of the case studies. In both Micoahumado and northern Uganda, communities assembled to discuss how to address the violence that was affecting them. The conveners of these local peace conferences went on to represent communities in talks with the armed groups. The fact that consultations were community-wide gave weight and credibility to the individuals who led the engagement.

The presence of pre-conflict networks and informal or formal institutions was also significant. Local representatives brought with them existing sources of status or authority, from both inside and outside the community. The ARLPI, as religious leaders with influential networks nationally and internationally, had access to the Ugandan government and the international community that traditional leaders did not, and so could, for example, promote an Amnesty Law, and advocate for peace. In Syria, civilian administrations in regime-free areas were more effective where there was a previous history of civil society activity or traditional structures.

A reliance on pre-existing community networks and structures can reinforce embedded social, cultural and political power actors and institutions. In the case study contexts, it was largely traditional (male) elders and religious actors who engaged in direct negotiations with the armed groups and governments, and church networks that provided protection.

However, the capacity of conflict to disrupt the social fabric can allow for new or previously muted social, cultural and political sources of agency to come to the fore. In Micoahumado, local leaders were forced to flee, leaving behind a new cohort of community activists; subsequently, the peace commissions included equal representation of women. In northern Uganda, an Acholi mothers' network was instrumental in galvanising support for talks with the LRA and community acceptance of the return of abductees. Acholi women have also been at the forefront of reintegration activities, supporting the particular needs of female returnees.

### *Framing discussions in local cultural and social norms*

As Simon Mason identifies in this publication [see Box 1], local actors work through different normative frameworks than their external counterparts, which can allow for a broader set of rules for engagement. These include more flexible cultural and informal understandings – often shared with armed groups – of issues such as justice.

In Northern Ireland and northern Uganda, legal and justice frameworks grounded in local social and cultural norms played important roles, at times complemented by international standards. Peace initiatives applied lessons from transitional justice such as conditional amnesty, reconciliation and restorative justice, which integrated traditional customs and understandings.

The ARLPI advocated for an Amnesty Act that allowed for the return of combatants, often abductees, to their communities without fear of prosecution, which applied principles of forgiveness rooted in Acholi culture. Restorative justice approaches used in Northern Ireland were grounded in international human rights and legal principles of rule of law, but were developed according to local considerations of legitimacy and reputation.

### **Local actors face considerable risks when talking to armed groups and develop techniques to reduce these**

Communities suffer violence and human rights abuses by non-state and state armed forces alike. Before the ARLPI went into the bush to speak to the LRA, three traditional leaders had been killed while attempting to dialogue with the group. In all cases presented in this publication, contact with armed groups was criminalised, and in Micoahumado, a previous generation of community leaders had been forced to leave the area after state security forces accused them of siding with the ELN.

Even where an armed group is prepared to accept some reduction in violence, strategic military imperatives may subsequently undermine such commitments. The ELN protested that de-mining reduced its military advantage. Government restrictions, including proscription regimes and counter-insurgency tactics, have at times been more disruptive to local actors than the behaviour of armed groups. In Micoahumado and in Acholiland, northern Uganda, efforts by community peace committees were repeatedly held up or threatened by escalations in violence.

### *Linking with external networks and support structures*

Local initiatives have cooperated with external networks and support structures to maintain a secure space in which to operate, and also to gain leverage. In northern Uganda and Micoahumado, local actors looked to national religious networks that had powerful currency within society, and hence with the government, to provide umbrella protection

to initiatives. International human rights and humanitarian organisations that were able to mobilise international awareness and influence also played a beneficial role.

In northern Uganda, the ARLPI was at the forefront of interactions with the LRA, even though some ARLPI members, including a Spanish priest, did not share Acholi ethnicity with the LRA. Various religious establishments in Uganda provided a form of protection against government accusations of collusion with the rebels. In Micoahumado the cover of “pastoral dialogues” was an innovative way for communities to bypass the issue of criminalisation of contact.

External actors also played complementary roles through sharing experiences from other contexts. However, Accord Insight authors from northern Uganda and Colombia assert that the most welcome and effective external interventions were those in which ideas and norms chimed with local priorities and approaches.

### *Asserting impartiality*

Impartiality is important for people working in areas controlled by armed groups. While community peace actors featured in this publication were not necessarily neutral, as they were part of the conflict context and may have had links with an armed group, they strived to act impartially so that they could operate as effective brokers between two sides and avoid perceptions of collusion.

The need to maintain impartiality sometimes required the renegotiation of pre-existing relationships. In Micoahumado, the community rejected either joining one or other of the armed actors, or opposing both of them, as each of these options risked provoking their own displacement. Instead they chose a “third way” of civil disobedience, which meant refusing to support any of the armed actors and maintaining a clear stance of nonviolence.

The ARLPI, in its role as conduit between the LRA and the government, reduced the risk of accusations of either spying for the government or colluding with the LRA by insisting that the parties signed respective messages before sharing them with the opposing side.

# Expert analysis

## Between fighting and talking

Sophie Haspeslagh

Sophie Haspeslagh is a doctoral candidate at the International Relations Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science where she is researching the engagement of armed groups and the effects of proscription on peace processes. Until 2012 she was Head of Policy at

Conciliation Resources. She previously managed the advocacy platform, ABColombia. She has also worked for the United Nations Development Programme in Algeria, the World Food Programme in Rome, and International Crisis Group in Colombia and Brussels.

International policy is ambiguous on whether or not to talk to non-state armed groups (referred to as “armed groups” in this publication). While there is a general tendency to avoid political engagement, experiences from Northern Ireland with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and from Colombia with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) show that there are exceptions.

**“ While states are weighing up whether or how to engage, populations living alongside armed groups may already be in contact ”**

Governments and the international community tend to label armed groups that attack civilians or state infrastructure as criminal, extremist or terrorist – and correspondingly prefer military and security options to other types of response. Recent discussions on groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Boko Haram point to their amorphous nature, uncertainty over their structure, or their lack of a coherent political agenda as major barriers to engaging with them.

Where state actors have embarked on political talks with armed groups the criteria for doing so are unclear. While concrete changes in a group’s behaviour may encourage dialogue, more often the strategic interests of a state at a particular time or tactical calculations dictated by the battlefield are paramount. Yet, while states are weighing up whether or how to engage, populations living alongside armed groups may already be in contact.

This second Accord Insight publication in Conciliation Resources’ Accord series looks at how local actors organise

to enter into dialogue with armed groups and challenge their use of violence. The publication builds on Accord 16 (2005), *Choosing to engage: armed groups and peace processes*. It has been informed by a joint analysis workshop held in November 2013, which brought together over 30 experts with a range of experience, including international mediators and humanitarians, as well as local civil society actors, ex-combatants and others that identify with armed groups.

Case studies from Syria, Colombia and northern Uganda, as well as a shorter reflection from Northern Ireland, explore in depth why and how community initiatives to engage armed groups arise: who are the actors involved and what are the challenges they face? It is hoped that the local and national peacebuilding benefits of these initiatives will help to inform practical and constructive options for policymakers and practitioners to respond to armed groups – and that local actors themselves can learn from the experiences of others who have reached out to armed groups and influenced their use of violence, in the short, medium and long term.

### Engaging armed groups and building peace

Accord 16, published four years after 9/11, made a strong case for contact with armed groups to become the policy norm in efforts to end armed conflicts. Ten years on, governments are still reluctant to allow space for engagement, and discussion of how to reach and influence armed groups constructively has been limited.

The reasons identified in Accord 16 for such reticence still apply – fear of legitimising violence or giving credibility to unreasonable or non-negotiable demands. Framing non-state armed action as terrorist and criminal remains the norm, while the number of armed groups prohibited through international terrorist listings has increased: Marieke de Goede estimated in 2011 that there were 214 proscribed armed groups worldwide.

The space for non-governmental organisations (NGOs – local, national and international) to contact armed groups for conflict resolution or humanitarian purposes has also shrunk. The US Supreme Court ruling of 2010, *Holder vs Humanitarian Law Project*, made it illegal to provide “expert advice”, “services” or “training in human rights enforcement or peaceful conflict resolution” to armed groups that are listed as foreign terrorist organisations. As the US law is extra-territorial it also applies to non-Americans. This ruling has produced a “chill factor” internationally, discouraging unofficial contact with listed armed groups. Even humanitarian organisations, which are usually afforded greater operational space, find their room for manoeuvre restrained.

## “ Talking to and negotiating with an armed group are not the same thing. Talking can simply mean establishing contact and can be a means to understand an armed group, including its dynamics and motivations”

At the same time, groups previously considered “beyond the pale”, such as the Afghan Taliban and the FARC, are today accepted as participants in political dialogue. The listing of the Taliban alongside al-Qaeda under UNSC Resolution 1267 in 1999 was one of many security and military tools used by the international community to try to disrupt and defeat the group. Yet, as the limits of military intervention in Afghanistan have become increasingly apparent, recognition of the need to talk to the Taliban has gained ground. The UNSC Resolution was amended in June 2011 to separate the Taliban and al-Qaeda lists and facilitate dialogue. However, the international community has no clear criteria to indicate under what conditions an armed group will be acceptable for political dialogue.

Accord 16 offered concrete indicators for whether political engagement with an armed group is feasible, including whether it holds territory, has political institutions or agendas, or derives profit from the war economy. It further highlighted the need to think creatively about, and develop a more sophisticated understanding of, engagement options. Talking to and negotiating with an armed group are not the same thing. Talking can simply mean establishing contact and can be a means to understand an armed group, including its dynamics and motivations. It can involve an exchange of concerns and positions and can help to judge whether other forms of engagement are warranted. Negotiating assumes and requires mutual commitment to reaching an agreement through dialogue and bargaining.

There are many options along the spectrum between talking and negotiating. While Accord 16 reflected on how humanitarian dialogue, for example, can facilitate broader contact, there has been little in-depth exploration of how armed groups are nudged into sustained and serious political engagement. This Accord Insight hopes to shed light on the local interactions with armed groups that often take place before formal talks are considered.

## What do we mean by “local” and “armed group”?

“Local” can be a fluid term. It can be used by people outside a specific context to describe those living inside it. Some people might be defined as “local” because of ethno-cultural ties to a territory, or because they have been directly affected by contextual violence; others because they live in the area in which an armed group operates, regardless of any historic or ethnic links.

In this complex picture, this Accord Insight understands “local” as referring to people living in geographic proximity to a conflict. This definition helps to delineate the analysis. The publication does not, for example, delve into the role of diasporas, but may include civil society actors who have played a key role in reaching out to armed groups, even if they are not originally from the area – such as a Spanish missionary based in Gulu, northern Uganda. The definition allows us to map how people immediately and regularly affected by the actions of an armed group react. It also helps us to go beyond the insider-outsider dichotomy to look at synergies between the two, such as how local initiatives have tapped into complementary national and international networks.

Armed groups are diverse. As Paul Staniland argued in 2014, there can be dramatic differences between armed groups, even among those fighting the same government, with regard to their strategies, capabilities and social bases. Accord 16 described armed groups as actors who: 1) challenge the state’s monopoly on coercive force; 2) operate outside effective state control; or 3) are capable of enabling or blocking and endangering humanitarian action or peace initiatives. But groups like Al Shabaab and IS, which have aspirations and networks that are simultaneously local and transnational, challenge these definitions.

The case studies presented here embrace a more fluid and complex understanding of armed groups. They include groups with strong links to local communities, like the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Micoahumado in Colombia; groups that use extreme violence and have transnational agendas, like IS in Syria; and groups that have unclear political ambitions and perpetrate high levels of indiscriminate violence against civilian populations, like the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda.

The cases explore how the relationship between the local community and the armed group is affected by: the nature of the conflict, the response of the state, the type and character of the armed group, and the ability of the community to mobilise. They ask whether particular armed groups are more responsive to local initiatives, and if so why? They also ask how the criminalisation and branding of an armed group as “terrorist” affects the space for local actors to make contact with it.

## Communities and armed groups

An armed group’s relationship with the local population is often portrayed as either predatory – the armed group inflicting human rights abuses, looting and destroying property, and the local population developing coping mechanisms and survival techniques; or symbiotic – local populations enabling armed group violence and hampering counter-insurgency efforts. But the reality is much more nuanced and complex.

Accord 16 noted that the attitudes of communities or constituencies with close ties to an armed group can significantly influence it, especially where they share family, clan, tribal or class connections. Insider mediators [see Box 1] can benefit from “relational partiality” with an armed group – closer links to a particular group based on personal, political or economic ties. Although there is still little precise understanding of the value of partiality to effective peacebuilding.

Armed groups also play important security and development roles, for example delivering everyday services. Zachariah Mampilly’s work (2011) on de facto governance by armed actors highlighted how Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka ran schools and hospitals and collected rubbish. In the Colombia case study in this publication, the ELN, in the absence of the state, provided security and local governance functions. A central motivation to provide services is to secure the acquiescence or consent of the local population, if not its full support.

**“ While local actors may not immediately identify a peacebuilding function in their contact with armed groups, community mobilisation can help to reduce violence or incentivise armed groups’ engagement in political dialogue”**

This Accord Insight looks at proactive actions by local communities to procure delivery of services from an armed group, but also to shape and influence its tactical and strategic decision-making. These types of initiative may be the exception rather than the rule, but they raise important questions: why do certain community members choose to challenge the action of armed groups? How do such initiatives start and develop, and what impact do they have? How do some people challenge armed authority despite substantial personal risk?

In the joint analysis workshop for Accord 16, participants with links to armed groups pointed out that a group’s decision to enter into political dialogue is often portrayed as an option presented from outside. In fact, armed groups, like other armed actors, often have two-track military and political strategies. Findings from the Berghof Foundation’s *Transition Series* challenges assumptions about why armed groups enter into negotiations, identifying more positive and dynamic motivations than simply the realisation of the limits of armed struggle.

Community-based actors must establish trust with an armed group, a requirement often poorly understood or largely ignored by both national and external actors. The three cases in this Accord Insight show how local initiatives succeeded in developing and maintaining trust. In Syria, local citizens in Barzeh were able to influence the armed group’s conduct through establishing neighbourhood committees; in Colombia,

the local population of Micoahumado connected with the ELN by building on deep historical and class ties; and in northern Uganda, Acholi communities used ethnic links to influence the LRA.

### **Mobilising for peace**

Accord 16 pointed out that local communities can often offer the most nuanced, multifaceted and contextualised understanding of armed groups. Drawing on examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, it showed that unofficial engagement can build armed groups’ willingness and capacity to participate in a peace process.

The discussion on the roles of insider mediators below highlights the complementarity of efforts by international and local mediators, in particular exploring how actors at the national level (non-governmental organisations, religious organisations or conflict resolution professionals) have been able to facilitate mediation with an armed group.

How communities reach out to armed groups for humanitarian or development purposes has also been a common area of research. The Geneva Academy’s 2011 report, *Rules of Engagement*, reflected on aid agencies’ reliance on elders and community members to negotiate access to armed groups to promote civilian protection and the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Studies in 2007 and 2012 by Chris Mitchell and Landon Hancock on civilian resistance to militarism, including state and non-state groups “bearing arms”, look at community efforts to establish “zones of peace”. They explore how local actors have been able to develop innovative protection mechanisms and in effect opt out of a conflict through negotiations with armed groups.

There has been much less analysis, however, of how local communities’ interactions with armed groups – with whom they may “live together and even sometimes eat together” – can help to build peace. The case studies in this Accord Insight show that while local actors may not immediately identify a peacebuilding function in their contact with armed groups, community mobilisation can help to reduce violence or incentivise armed groups’ engagement in political dialogue. In northern Uganda, the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative (ARLPI) tried to establish contact with the LRA to help protect the local population; they eventually became a bridge to the Ugandan government and a significant stimulus for the Juba peace negotiations in 2006.

### **Structure of the publication**

In the first case study in this publication, Rt. Bishop Macleod Baker Ochola and James O. Latigo review the efforts of the ARLPI to reach out to the LRA. These led to mediated dialogue between the LRA and the Ugandan government. The article identifies the key points of influence the ARLPI was able to leverage with both the LRA and with national political actors, and explores how the LRA responded to the initiative – from reducing its use of violence, to agreeing to take part in peace talks. It also highlights the challenges of engagement when there are high levels of state and non-state violence, and the approaches that were developed to minimise risks. The article is accompanied by an interview with former LRA

Commander Captain Ray Apire, who reflects on how the LRA viewed the ARLPI.

Second, Mauricio García-Durán and Fernando Sarmiento Santander explore an initiative by the population of Micoahumado in southern Bolívar, one of the most disputed zones in the Colombian conflict. The article identifies how the community was able to convince the ELN to unilaterally de-mine the main arteries connecting the village of Micoahumado in a territory under de facto ELN control. The case study looks at how local actors circumvented a ban on talking to the ELN, which was proscribed as a terrorist group.

The third case study examines the effectiveness of community-based initiatives to engage in dialogue with armed groups in rebel-controlled Syria, a fluid environment with high levels of insecurity and violence. Wisam Elhamoui and Sinan al-Hawat describe how a number of communities living in these areas have organised informally to facilitate relief operations and broader social welfare. Some communities have sought to engage directly with armed groups to reduce violence or coordinate responses. The article looks at the extent of engagement that may be possible, as well as the key factors involved in exerting influence over armed groups.

Brian Gormally reflects on efforts of civil society activists in Northern Ireland to promote alternative approaches to punishment violence within the IRA. The initiative – which became known as community restorative justice – also provided space for the republican movement to open up discussion on community security and justice and the role of formal policing as official peace negotiations emerged.

An Insight article distils lessons from the cases for peacebuilding policy and practice. It suggests the importance of a security imperative – to protect populations from attack – as a primary motivation for local communities to reach out to armed groups. It reflects on how local initiatives to reach out to armed groups often play a crucial role in promoting local human security and peacebuilding, and in some cases can support broader transformation of those groups. It details the real risks local actors face, and highlights the importance of pre-existing links with armed groups, of networks that predate the conflict, of informal or formal institutions, and of the role of external relations and support to gain leverage and maintain space.

## BOX 1

### Local mediators

Simon J A Mason is a senior researcher and head of the Mediation Support Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS), Zurich. As part of the Mediation Support Project (a joint project of the CSS and Swisspeace, funded by the Swiss Federal

Department of Foreign Affairs) he focuses on mediation research, training and process support. He is one of the coordinators of the Mediation Support Network.

There is increasing international awareness of the importance of local mediators. In 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon noted: “There is growing recognition that mediation is not the exclusive purview of external mediation actors. Local mediators who come from the conflict country can usefully lead local mediation efforts or complement regional or international initiatives” (Report of the Secretary-General A/66/811 25 June 2012).

#### Who are local mediators?

Mediation can be understood as a structured process of negotiation and conflict resolution supported by an acceptable, impartial third party. Local mediators – sometimes referred to as insider mediators – help actors from within their own contexts to develop mutually acceptable agreements. Local mediators have credibility with the parties to the conflict and influence in their community, and can include traditional elders, religious leaders, leaders of women’s groups, state officials, security sector actors, and business people. The term “local” is relative, as the delimitation of the context can be village, sub-regional or country level.

#### At what levels do they work?

Typically, local mediators are involved in informal peace efforts, where their mandate is less prescribed and trust is built through relationships rather than through formal institutions. While they usually focus on the sub-national level, there are cases where local mediators have also taken on a facilitating role at the national level.

During the 2007–08 election crisis, a group of eminent Kenyans created a Concerned Citizens for Peace initiative in response to election violence. This brought together Kenyan peace mediators and members of civil society to provide input into the formal mediation process led by Kofi Annan, and help link relevant official and unofficial actors at the national and sub-national levels. In Nepal, the main parties to the negotiations leading to the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement did not accept a formal outside mediator. Instead, local and international actors helped to pass messages between the parties and support the negotiation process in a much less structured and directive way.



## How do they work?

The types of activity undertaken by local and non-local mediators may not differ fundamentally, but the normative framework in which they work is different, influenced to varying degrees by local legal frameworks: modern (formal, domestic); customary (eg regarding collective land use); or religious (eg regarding compensation for damage according to locally prevailing religious standards).

In some cases, there may be tensions between modern formal law, based on individual rights, and customary law, where collective punishment may present a pragmatic option, for example to minimise the use of violence in inter-community disputes, such as regarding cattle rustling. Local mediators are well suited to dealing with such tensions as they have in-depth knowledge of relevant cultural norms. Cultural considerations also shape methods of relationship building, communication style and perceptions of what constitutes a fair process. Local mediators in north-east Kenya, for instance, tend to be influenced by Somali culture that emphasises poetry and storytelling as communication tools.

## Strengths of local mediators

The main strengths of local mediators are the depth of their contextual knowledge and the extent of their local networks. These are built on trust and may derive from holding a particular position and level of authority within their communities. As local mediators are geographically and culturally close to a specific context, they may be more attuned to a conflict's potential for escalation, and so are well placed to step in to prevent violence before it breaks out.

Local mediators can help secure pauses in fighting, longer term ceasefires, or a complete resolution of a conflict through mutual agreement, which may for example include compensation or justice mechanisms. Effective intervention typically requires strong relationships with conflict parties, state and non-state, as well as community leaders. Local mediators also often work on conflicts long before the international community mobilises and are there long after it disengages. They may, therefore, enjoy significant local legitimacy linked to their commitment and relationships, which can help to maintain the social fabric in times of crisis.

## Local mediation and non-state armed groups

Local mediators are often in contact with non-state armed actors, especially in areas where there is a weak or predatory state presence. Local mediation processes have sometimes led to the establishment of "zones of peace" related to specific territories. Local deals do not automatically lead to a nationwide peace agreement, as they may lack authority beyond their immediate context. But they may provide useful lessons and facilitate a more conducive environment for formal political processes.

## Challenges and responses

Local mediators face challenges including threats to their personal security, and lack of technical expertise – for example relating to ceasefire agreements or institutional options for power sharing, such as models of federalism or devolution. They can face accusations of bias, as conflict parties from one location or community may mistrust mediators associated with another. A number of approaches to broaden local mediation through internal and external cooperation have helped to respond to these challenges and maximise local mediators' strengths. These include:

- *Co-mediation*: local mediators can work in teams assembled from across conflict lines to soften perceptions of partiality.
- *Peace committees*: local mediators can become part of a broader "infrastructure for peace" or "peace architecture" – a system for coordinating and supporting peace processes. This can include an established network of local mediators in the form of peace committees that meet regularly (eg once a month) and can react rapidly as tensions arise. The work of peace committees usually goes beyond mediation to include peace education or policy work. This helps to address the structural causes of violence, rather than only the immediate conflict.
- *Regional and international networks*: external support can help mitigate security risks, perceptions of partiality or lack of technical knowledge. Regional and international actors can also provide diplomatic or political contacts that local mediators may not have, provide a different type of legitimacy, and bring comparative lessons from other contexts.



# Northern Uganda

## The Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative: local mediation with the Lord's Resistance Army

James O. Latigo and Rt. Bishop Macleod Baker Ochola

Ojera James Latigo is Program Director of Uganda Historical Memory and Reconciliation Council, and Research Fellow and Academic Coordinator at the Marcus Garvey Pan-Afrikan Institute. He is also a consultant for Conciliation Resources' East and Central Africa Programme.

Rt. Bishop Ochola was formerly Anglican Bishop of Kitgum Diocese. He is a Board member and Ambassador for Peace at ARLPI, and the founder and Chair of the Acholi Education Initiative. He remains a committed peace activist.

For two decades, northern Uganda was ravaged by war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) – an inter-denominational religious network – evolved to support community peace mobilisation. This article traces the development of the ARLPI from its grassroots beginnings to its role as a credible intermediary between LRA commanders in the bush and the government. In the absence of sustained formal peace efforts, the lack of credible intermediaries and the frenzied violence perpetrated by the LRA and state armed forces, the group became an important voice for peace.

The LRA emerged in the years after the overthrow of the military junta in Uganda in 1986 by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA). In Acholiland, northern Uganda, a number of armed groups formed to resist the new regime, including the Ugandan People's Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A), and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) led by the charismatic Alice Auma. The HSM suffered a major defeat in 1987 and the UPDM/A eventually concluded a settlement with the government, but disaffected remnants of both groups came together from 1987 in what would later become known as the LRA, led by Joseph Kony. The LRA claimed it was fighting against economic mismanagement and undemocratic governance by the new government, and the widespread human rights violations committed by the army in Acholiland. This was accompanied by spiritual belief: LRA fighters saw their struggle as a divine cause guided by God through his prophet Kony.

Initial resistance to the NRA was widely supported by the Acholi population. As conflict escalated between the Ugandan Army (the Uganda People's Defence Force – UPDF) and the LRA, both directed their operations as much against local

populations as each other, exposing civilians to brutal violence and fracturing Acholi society; thousands were mutilated, raped and killed.

In 1991, the government initiated a policy of forced displacement of the population into "protected camps" as part of its Operation North counter-insurgency campaign. This effectively sealed off much of the north from the rest of the country – although the camps had in fact been established unofficially since 1986. The LRA became increasingly reliant on the Sudanese government in Khartoum, which used it as a means to destabilise southern Sudan. Kony resorted to the forced recruitment of children, both girls and boys, from Acholi populations, abducting an estimated 30,000 minors by 2006.

### The formation of the ARLPI

Early peace efforts were unsuccessful. The most significant initiative came in 1994, when the State Minister for Northern Uganda, Betty Bigombe (an Acholi), embarked on negotiations with the LRA on behalf of the government. However, talks collapsed when President Museveni asserted that the LRA was using them as cover to re-arm in Sudan and issued an ultimatum for the rebels to "surrender or be crushed".

In 1997, a number of religious leaders, many of whom had been personally affected by the conflict, came together to speak out against the violence. They included the then Anglican Bishop of Kitgum Diocese, Macleod Baker Ochola II; the Catholic Archbishop of Gulu, Archdiocese of Northern Uganda, John Baptist Odama; the Episcopal Vicar of the Catholic Church, Monsignor Matthew Ojara; Fr. Carlos Ludigrie; and Fr. Joseph Genna. The ARLPI, an inter-denominational body, brought together Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-day Adventists and Born-Again Faith Federation worshippers under one umbrella.

In 1998, the ARLPI held its first official public event. *Bedo Piny pi Kuc* (sitting down for peace) drew over 150 Acholis, including parents of abducted children, traditional chiefs and community elders, local council leaders, teachers and community workers, to discuss the effects of the conflict on the community and strategies to overcome it. Their main concerns included the inability of government forces to protect them, forced displacement, LRA and UPDF atrocities and looting, and the return of abducted children.

**“ The ARLPI’s work was key to changing the way the community spoke about the LRA: rather than simply being perpetrators of violence, some were seen as the victims of abduction whom the government had failed to protect”**

There was a general sense of anger that the government had undermined Betty Bigombe’s peace efforts. Despite a decline in support for the LRA, participants were frustrated that the government was not addressing the political issues raised by the rebels. The humanitarian crisis also required urgent attention. Concerned mothers in particular made an emotive plea to be given the opportunity to talk to rebel leaders. A consensus emerged that the war could not be won through military action, that the community should demand a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and that the conflict parties should be brought together in mediated dialogue.

These decisions were influenced by the traditional values and norms of the Acholi people, which emphasised reconciliation and restorative approaches rather than acts of revenge. The ARLPI stressed the importance of non-violence and alleviating the suffering of the people, and argued that most of the rebel fighters did not go to the bush of their own volition and that there was therefore a moral imperative to safeguard the lives of these abducted girls and boys. The ARLPI’s work was key to changing the way the community spoke about the LRA: rather than simply being perpetrators of violence, some were seen as the victims of abduction whom the government had failed to protect.

The ARLPI and other community leaders began to organise peace rallies and prayers. These provided a source of support for communities affected by violence, but were also intended to demonstrate communities’ need and desire for peace to the government and the LRA. Various attempts were also made to build links with LRA fighters in the bush, including by putting peace messages in newspapers and on posters in markets that LRA members were known to frequent. Programmes on the state-run Radio Freedom, and later Mega FM, provided a forum for people to voice their views and raise issues directly with both the LRA (whose members were known to tune in) and state security forces.

The ARLPI also wrote pastoral letters – open letters in the press – to the LRA and the government. The letters highlighted

the urgent need for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and spoke out strongly against forced displacement and the poor conditions within displacement camps. The messages also encouraged the LRA to come to church on holy days, where it was hoped they could be encouraged to return to their communities.

### **Reaching out to the LRA**

Many ARLPI figures were known to the LRA and many traditional leaders maintained informal contacts with LRA cadres, in particular abductees with kinship ties to communities. Kony himself had been a choirboy and had respect and affinity for Catholic Priests. Yet, direct contact with the LRA high command was difficult, especially after the main leadership shifted to southern Sudan. It was also dangerous: the LRA had killed three traditional leaders who, prior to Bigombe’s efforts, had sought to convince it to engage in peace talks.

The enactment of the 1999 Amnesty Law, and the subsequent establishment of an Amnesty Commission, strengthened the ARLPI’s position. It gave them the legal and political space to pursue dialogue and reinforced the moral imperative of forgiveness to those who had been abducted. Members of the diaspora were integral to providing an international spotlight on the amnesty issue in order to convince the Ugandan government. Acholi parliamentarians were also instrumental in ensuring the Act was pushed through the legislature despite reluctance from the government, while broad popular support within the Acholi population further facilitated the process.

The ARLPI tried to connect to the LRA through traditional leaders in Uganda and certain individuals in Nairobi who claimed to have access to Kony. A breakthrough came in October 1999 when a message was delivered to the then Anglican Bishop, Nelson Onono-Onweng, through Yusuf Adek, a close adviser to Kony. The bishop was taken alone to an unknown location to meet with LRA commanders. Subsequent harassment and surveillance by the UPDF delayed further contact. Eventually, in April 2001, other religious and traditional leaders were able to meet face-to-face with high-level LRA officers. The main focus of talks was the implementation of the 1999 Amnesty Law, which allowed combatants to report to religious leaders.

However, a massive military offensive launched by the government in March 2002, Operation Iron Fist, pushed the LRA back into northern Uganda. Abductions and attacks on civilians intensified as the LRA extended its reach beyond Acholiland into the Lango and Teso sub-regions. Communities, unconvinced by ARLPI calls for negotiations, rallied into self-defence groups called Arrow Brigades, to join with the UPDF in fighting the LRA. This trend was compounded by ethnic tensions as Langi populations attributed atrocities to the “Acholi” LRA.

Yet, opportunities for dialogue still emerged amid the violence and discord. Archbishop Odama received a direct call from the LRA’s second in command, Vincent Otti, who asked religious leaders to mediate between the government and the LRA. ARLPI leaders took advantage of this show of trust to begin dialogue. Selected ARLPI members and traditional leaders trekked unescorted into the bush and met with the

LRA for three days. Discussions took place with high-level commanders but not with Kony: the emissaries thought it would be difficult to extract clear commitments from the unpredictable leader, and that it would be more productive to speak with second-rank personnel.

Initial meetings were dependent on LRA communication. The LRA would contact a particular person through a letter or personal message – often traditional leader Rwot Oywak of Pader District or Fr. Carlos Rodriguez – who in turn would inform the other religious and traditional leaders. The LRA would choose the time, place and the persons who should attend. Archbishop John Baptist Odama, Sheik Musa Khalil, Bishop Ochola II, and Fr. Carlos Rodriguez were those most frequently called upon to meet with senior LRA commanders.

At each meeting, the community leaders appealed to the LRA not to kill civilians, to allow the return of abductees and to pursue peace and reconciliation. The LRA representatives adamantly refused, arguing that they were defending themselves against UPDF attacks and should not be condemned. It was difficult to understand this argument since they were killing innocent people in villages, instead of attacking the military barracks in the Acholi sub-region.

**“ The status of ARLPI founders as religious leaders and their links to church networks have been crucial. Christian churches in particular are formidable institutions in Uganda and can transcend ethnic, geographic and political divisions”**

#### **Maintaining impartiality despite insecurity**

The situation was pervaded by mistrust. The population as a whole faced suspicion from both sides: the government accused civilians of being “rebel collaborators”, while the LRA accused the same civilians of divulging information to government forces about their positions and food supply. Joseph Kony viewed the community as “rebellious” for refusing to support him. The religious leaders themselves were mistrusted by the LRA, which accused them of using the LRA to solicit funding from the international community for their own personal benefit. The LRA tested the ARLPI by allowing the return of girl abductees who had borne children in the bush. The religious leaders reinforced their credibility by taking care of all those released and their children.

The religious leaders also came under pressure from government forces to accept “escort and protection”, but the LRA drew a line on the map beyond which government forces were not allowed to proceed. As a result, the government accused the religious leaders of being “rebel collaborators”. In March 2002, Uganda passed an Anti-Terrorism Act making

membership of the LRA a criminal offence, a year after the US State Department had put the LRA on its “B-list” of “other terrorist organisations”. This exposed the ARLPI to charges of treason.

**“ In meetings with the LRA [the ARLPI] asked that all demands and commitments be written down and signed to avoid accusations of inventing or changing the positions of the LRA or the government”**

The status of ARLPI founders as religious leaders and their links to church networks have been crucial. Christian churches in particular are formidable institutions in Uganda and can transcend ethnic, geographic and political divisions. Because of their power base, it became hard for the government to either ignore the religious leaders or throw them in jail.

Archbishop Odama and Bishop Ochola II met with President Museveni in April 2002 to obtain official permission for religious and traditional leaders to talk to the LRA. This was granted on condition that the bishops would report to government security operatives after each meeting with the LRA.

The ARLPI sought to highlight its impartiality as a “bridge for peace” between the LRA and the government. In meetings with the LRA it asked that all demands and commitments be written down and signed to avoid accusations of inventing or changing the positions of the LRA or the government. The ARLPI had more than 24 meetings with the LRA, with minutes of all meetings recorded and hard copies given to both the Ugandan President and the LRA for transparency and consistency.

However, from the outset, meetings between community leaders and the LRA came under attack from government forces. The second meeting in April 2001, near Pajule, was violently interrupted by the UPDF, and a cultural leader was injured. The fifth round of meetings in Pajule in April 2003 was abruptly halted as a result of direct and heavy bombardment by UPDF troops lasting three days. After the bombing stopped, the three priests present were arrested and briefly held. The army contended that its field operations force had not been informed of the meeting, even though the army senior command had been kept apprised of ongoing dialogue attempts.

The LRA in turn accused the ARLPI of acting as bait for the government. Kony ordered his commanders to kill any religious leaders who attempted to contact the LRA again. Amid increasing violence, the ARLPI sought to clarify its position, arguing that it could not have been complicit, since its own leaders were in the bush to mediate and would not sacrifice their fellow religious leaders, let alone condone any act of violence.



### The road to Juba

As fighting continued, formal attempts to facilitate talks between the Presidential Peace Teams and the LRA faltered in 2003, with the LRA refusing calls to assemble in “safe zones” without wider safeguards. But the ARLPI was able to resume its dialogue role, delivering letters of exchange and liaising with the government through key Acholi members of parliament and religious networks. The LRA began to respond to demands to release captives, although atrocities against civilians were still being committed. The release of abductees one day might be followed by the capture of another group of children the next.

The ARLPI helped to bring national and international attention to the conflict, in opposition to Ugandan government attempts to contain the situation by presenting it as a domestic problem requiring an exclusively domestic solution. In late 2003, ARLPI Chair Archbishop Odama led a ten-person team on an advocacy tour of the United States, Canada and Europe, promoting a research report by the Afrika Study Centre and Human Rights and Peace Centre, Makerere University, *The Hidden War, the Forgotten People: War in Acholiland and its Ramifications for Peace and Security in Uganda*.

The ARLPI also benefited from international state and non-state support and advocacy, which played an important role

in highlighting the issue internationally and putting pressure on the Ugandan government.

For years, young children in northern Uganda trekked long distances to town centres and spent the night in the streets for fear of abduction. They became derogatively called “night commuters”. In 2003 religious leaders led by Archbishop Odama communed with the children and spent four nights sleeping with them in the bus park in Gulu. This attracted mass national and international media attention and spurred many humanitarian agencies and governments to respond and provide support to ease the plight of the suffering children.

The government eventually called a seven-day ceasefire in late 2004 to enable Betty Bigombe to pursue talks with support from the US, the UK and the Netherlands, but hostilities continued.

As the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army edged towards signing a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the LRA’s position in Sudan was becoming more vulnerable. The CPA, signed in 2005, gave southern Sudan semi-autonomous status under the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS). The Netherlands-based NGO IKV Pax Christi facilitated contact with the Vice-President of GoSS, Dr. Riek Machar, who was able to undertake a mediatory role between

the Ugandan government and LRA. Numerous trips were made by delegations, including the ARLPI, to Kony's new bases in the Garamba forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to communicate mutual concerns and positions. These were viewed as instrumental in persuading the LRA leadership to pursue the peace talks that began in Juba, southern Sudan, in 2006 and which would last for nearly two years.

ARLPI members were invited to the Juba talks as observers. On several occasions during the negotiations, both the LRA and government negotiation team reverted to ARLPI members to clarify certain issues pertaining to the negotiating agenda. The ARLPI also played a key role in keeping communities informed, thereby encouraging public support for the peace process.

Five agreements were signed in Juba covering justice and accountability and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration. But Kony failed to show up twice to sign the Final Peace Agreement, citing dissatisfaction with the handling of reintegration and the welfare of his troops, and the refusal of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to withdraw arrest warrants. The UPDF and US military concluded that the LRA had been using the period of talks to regroup, and in December 2008 Operation Lightning Thunder was launched against LRA bases in Garamba forest, dashing further hopes for a peaceful resolution.

Since Juba, the ARLPI has remained a viable channel for communication with the LRA. In an environment where conflict parties have favoured military options, and regional and international influence have been weighty, the ARLPI's ability to move between armed groups, communities and national and international actors has been important.

Since 2008 there have been three calls from purported LRA representatives seeking to revitalise talks, but there has remained a persistent lack of credible contact. LRA operations

and bases are now scattered between Western Equatoria in South Sudan, the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR) and the volatile Darfur region of Sudan. The possibility that the Ugandan government has modern monitoring technology supplied by US advisers has probably made the group wary of using communications devices.

The ARLPI, together with sister churches and traditional organisations in Uganda, South Sudan, DRC and CAR, have formed a Regional Taskforce on the LRA, supported by international NGOs [see Regional community peacebuilding: a conversation with John Baptist Odama, *in* Accord 22, 2011]. This meets regularly to review the LRA situation and continues to seek contact and the possible resumption of peace talks.

## Conclusion

The ARLPI has faced many challenges in its attempts to dialogue with the LRA and promote peace within the community and more broadly. It has encountered suspicion from opposing sides and operated in often volatile conditions. Communities are divided and sometimes resistant to the peace efforts.

A large part of the ARLPI's work has involved supporting traditional Acholi reconciliation processes (*Mato Oput*), preparing the community to receive former combatants, and promoting the Amnesty Law through translating and distributing Luo versions. This has involved overcoming differences in opinion and denomination within the ARLPI, and in-depth and heated discussion on issues of accountability, including the role of the ICC and of traditional justice mechanisms such as truth-telling processes and reparations. While outreach to the LRA has had varied results, perhaps the most significant part of ARLPI's work has been in strengthening community resilience and unity in the face of extreme violence, and building people's confidence and willingness to support peacebuilding activities.

## BOX 2

### Conversation with former LRA Commander Captain Ray Apire

Captain Ray Apire was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in 1993 from his home village of Lamola in Kitgum district, northern Uganda. He served as the LRA's Chief Catechist (faith teacher) until he surrendered to the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) in 2004. Since then he has counselled new LRA returnees at the UPDF Child Protection Unit in Gulu.

In this interview, Captain Apire reflects on how the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) was perceived by the LRA. The interview was conducted by James Latigo in Acholi and translated into English.

#### Why do you think the LRA was willing to talk to ARLPI representatives?

The LRA does not trust anybody. That is why it has survived for so long. When I say LRA, I mean Joseph Kony. He gave the orders and decided for us, although he would often say it is the "spirit" in him talking. For example, when he decided to convene a general parade he would tell us that the spirit had directed him to do so.

We did not know the ARLPI as an organisation. But we knew certain members who were prominent religious leaders. Kony was an altar boy himself when he was younger. He had a respect for religious priests, especially Catholic ones. When operations and ambushes took place he ordered fighters to avoid disturbing the priests.

### Why was that?

We heard that he wanted to become a priest himself. I think that is why he allowed Vincent Otti, his second in command, to call Archbishop Odama [a member of ARLPI]. Kony is a very intelligent man. He would say that the spirit forbids him to talk, and he would get his senior commanders like Otti and later Sam Kolo to speak on his behalf. When Kony does decide to speak, he talks like a machine gun – tatatatata – without being interrupted.

### So what happened after the call by Vincent Otti to Archbishop Odama?

I was not very involved in operations, but I overheard a conversation about dropping a letter to the Archbishop's residence. That was how they gave directions and instructions [to the ARLPI] on where to meet. Because of a lack of trust, Kony did not want the religious leaders to be accompanied by the army. They kept changing the location to confuse the army.

His representatives secretly met with the religious leaders. I don't know who was there [from the LRA] apart from Otti, but they said that a message should be sent to the government that they wanted genuine talks. Numerous secret communications continued in this way. The rank-and-file members of the LRA were not informed of this – I think to keep them loyal. Kony instilled a lot of fear in those who were captured. He also made people believe it was the spirit guiding his thinking and planning.

### In subsequent meetings, the religious leaders did not go alone but were accompanied by other community members. Did the LRA trust the community leaders?

Not at all. Kony used to say the Acholi community is like *dogiryo* – a two-headed snake that changes direction at its convenience. They will speak to you nicely and then say something different to the government. Out of respect for the religious leaders, those who accompanied them were tolerated. In 1996, two community elders, Samson Okot-Ogoni and chief Olanya-Lagony [who tried to broker peace between the LRA and the government], were killed. The LRA felt that everyone disliked them so it became very difficult to trust anybody.

### In its *riyo tal* [mediation] role, the ARLPI communicated the community's concerns to the LRA – that it should stop abducting innocent children and end the conflict that was causing a lot of suffering to the people. How did the LRA react to this?

When that request was relayed to Kony he consulted his close commanders. Kony consults a lot but makes his own decisions. He claims that he is being guided by the "spirit" so no one can question it. Kony called Mega FM [a radio station based in Gulu, which broadcasts a number of peace programmes] to discuss the abduction of children and the suffering of the people. He said that people were aware of the ongoing war between the LRA and Government of Uganda, and if they put themselves in harm's way the LRA was not responsible. He said that government soldiers were doing most of the killing and then blaming the LRA. On the question of abduction, he said that the Acholi people were infected with evil and it was his responsibility to start a new, clean tribe.

### Did the LRA agree it should talk to the government? How was it convinced?

The LRA had all along wanted to talk peace with the government. Even when it was fighting, it said it was fighting for peace. The LRA's argument was that the government did not want peace.

### Did you notice any change in the LRA's behaviour or activities after its interactions with ARLPI?

The possibility of talking peace raised morale in the camps. I think many of them [LRA combatants] were becoming tired of fighting, and increasingly unconvinced by the promise that the government would be overthrown. But they were afraid to express their true wishes; they feared that Kony had the power to know when he was being discussed. It was serious psychological torture on the combatants.

### Did the ARLPI initiative have any bearing on the Juba peace talks?

Juba was another matter. After the UPDF Operation Iron Fist [2002–05] Kony seized on an opportunity for Riek Machar [a Sudanese politician] to contact the Government of Uganda and mediate negotiations with the LRA. The ARLPI had sowed the seeds for peace talks and the LRA built on this. Juba was a very intricate "football match". There were a lot of organisations around Juba at that time and I cannot say much about the role of ARLPI in the actual talks.

### Did the LRA leadership want to continue dialogue after the breakdown of the Juba talks?

The bombing of the LRA's main base in Garamba forest convinced them, in my opinion, that the government was not sincere about talks. That is why there is complete silence now. You need to talk from a position of strength. I think the LRA is not as strong as it was during the Juba talks. Perhaps in the future, if it gains strength, it will want to talk again. Many other people have entered the conflict in Garamba – the Americans, the armies of the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. I am told that the African Union has also joined and that the UPDF is still chasing the LRA. Which side should be involved in talks with the LRA, or will they all be brought together?

### Finally, do you think the ARLPI can still play a role in terms of dialogue with the LRA?

Personally, I think peace talks can still work. It would be good if someone could find a way to contact the LRA top leadership. But it is very difficult to know what is happening now in the organisation of the LRA. If they are in disarray as reported, then it will be difficult to organise talks again.

The reasons Kony gave for not signing the Juba Agreement need to be considered as well. This [lack of trust] was made worse by Operation Lightning Thunder [2008–09]. Who can he trust, especially with so many forces after him now? It may be a good idea if the ARLPI can find a way to reach him. Perhaps he will still trust them like he did in the beginning. But as I said, it is very difficult to know what is really going on within the LRA.



# Colombia

## De-mining in Micoahumado: from civil resistance to local negotiation with the ELN

Mauricio García-Durán and Fernando Sarmiento Santander

Mauricio García-Durán is a Jesuit priest and currently Executive Director of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Colombia. He has spent the last 25 years researching peace processes and social mobilisation for peace in Colombia. In addition, he has worked with displaced populations for the Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP), where he was Executive Director between 2007 and 2012. He was issue editor of *Accord 14: Alternatives to War – Colombia's peace processes* (2004).

Fernando Sarmiento Santander is a researcher on peace initiatives at CINEP, where he is currently the coordinator for the Citizenship, Development and Peace Team. Since 1997 he has focused on peace mobilisation in Colombia, specialising in social management, political participation, conflict resolution and international humanitarian law. He also has experience in strengthening local peacebuilding initiatives.

On 2 February 2005, the inhabitants of Micoahumado village organised a traditional *cabalgata* celebration – a march with horses. It was attended by community and state representatives, as well as members of the media, the Catholic Church, regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the international NGO Geneva Call. The event celebrated the completion of “the process of social and community de-mining” of the main road, the secondary roads and access routes leading to Micoahumado, by the National Liberation Army (ELN). The village is an administrative subdivision (*corregimiento*) of Morales municipality in the department of Bolívar, north-central Colombia [see map]. It is also part of the geographic region of Magdalena Medio, which stretches across a number of departments, and encompasses the Magdalena River, the biggest in Colombia.

The process – also known as humanitarian de-mining – began after a request by the community to the ELN to de-mine the area, and nearly two years of negotiations. It involved multiple interactions between the community, national and international NGOs, armed actors, and the government. With the support of external actors, the community organised to confront and negotiate with different armed actors, including paramilitary and guerrilla groups.

This article is based on research carried out by the authors as part of CINEP's efforts to document the Micoahumado experience. The research, conducted between 2010 and 2015, included several interviews, two workshops and various peace events involving community leaders and members of supporting organisations.

### The ELN and Micoahumado

Contemporary armed conflict in Colombia began in the 1960s with the emergence of two major guerrilla groups – the ELN and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The other main conflict parties include the Colombian Army and police forces, and paramilitary groups under the umbrella of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). After two decades of low intensity conflict, the violence escalated in the 1980s and reached its peak in the late 1990s.

As a Marxist pro-Cuban group, the ELN was inspired by tactics used by guerrillas led by Fidel Castro in the 1950s in the Sierra Maestra mountain range of Cuba. It had ideological ties with Cuba, as well as Christian roots inspired by liberation theology and notions of social justice. The group has included several priests and religious actors, such as General Commander Manuel Pérez (also known as *El Cura Pérez* – “Pérez the Priest”), and Camilo Torres, who participated in socialist movements before joining the ELN in 1965. The ELN had an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 members at the height of the movement in the 1990s; in 2015 it is estimated to have 1,500 to 2,000 members.

The greatest escalation of violence in Colombia coincided with negotiations between the government and the FARC from 1999–2002. While peace talks developed in a demilitarised zone in El Caguán in the south of the country, armed conflict intensified in the north. During this time the paramilitary AUC concentrated its efforts on attacking areas controlled by the ELN in the Magdalena Medio region, including villages like Micoahumado, located in the Serranía de San Lucas mountain range.



Given its central location and wealth of natural resources, the Serranía de San Lucas became one of the country's most disputed regions, more so after the improvement of the Magdalena Medio Highway during the 1980s, which connected northern and central parts of the country.

The state has historically been absent from the region, with little institutional provision of water, education or health care. The ELN, in many cases with support from the population, maintained social and military control of various municipalities and subdivisions of Serranía de San Lucas and Magdalena Medio. Communities and armed groups developed strong relationships, and individual guerrillas had personal links to inhabitants as family, friends and neighbours. Direct communication between the community and the ELN was therefore normally possible, although the community would look to the Church to help resolve disputes.

The region also has particular political, military and historic significance for the ELN as one of the main areas where the group rebuilt itself in the 1980s after it was militarily devastated in the 1970s. The group then expanded its use of anti-personnel mines as a way of defending territory.

"The elenos [ELN] have played a central role in everyday life in the region. They helped to build the paths and the roads, as well as the soccer field, the health centre and schools, with their own machinery. They also defended the local population from the paramilitary onslaught, which would have been worse without their protection"  
*Interview with a community leader, 2010*

#### Escalation of violence in Micoahumado

There were two cycles of heightened armed conflict in Micoahumado. From 1985–95 the army conducted sporadic counter-insurgency operations in the village. The population was stigmatised as supporters of the guerrillas and experienced a variety of repressive measures. Then, between 1998 and 2003, there was a territorial dispute between the paramilitary AUC's Central Bolivar Block (BCB) and the ELN's José Solano Sepúlveda Front. As part of their broad strategy to gain territorial control in southern Bolivar, the paramilitaries launched a series of raids to establish operational bases in a number of the region's municipalities and towns.

Between 1998 and 2002, Micoahumado was subject to a series of attacks by paramilitaries in an attempt to take control of the zone from the ELN. At the peak of the fighting in 2001–02, the local community started to organise in response to the brutality of paramilitary violence. The BCB attacked the civilian population in order to reach the guerrillas, often with the tacit consent of the army. Many families and most community leaders had to abandon their homes for fear of being charged as accomplices of the guerrillas.

On 2 December 2002, the BCB launched its most severe attack. The population was caught in the crossfire between the paramilitaries and the ELN. Roadblocks limited access to food, medical aid and drinking water as both sides sought to entrench themselves in the village. Paramilitaries established themselves in the school, the sports arenas, and other public places, as well as people's homes. The ELN mined water

supply routes to force the population to leave so they could confront the paramilitaries directly.

#### The community dialogue commission

Adversity and violence in Micoahumado ultimately led to community organisation. The community faced an apparent dilemma: either to join one or other of the groups, inviting direct involvement in the confrontation; or to oppose both, almost certainly provoking their own displacement. Instead, they opted for a third alternative: to declare their "civil disobedience" – refusing to support any of the armed actors, assuming a nonviolent stance, and defending a proposal for peace, coexistence and security.

On 14 December 2002, the inhabitants of Micoahumado and representatives of the local Catholic Church held a meeting on the village soccer field. The new priest of the Diocese of Magangué, Fr. Joaquin Mayorga, and the Director of the Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio (PDPMM), Fr. Francisco De Roux, who had begun to provide support to Micoahumado, also attended.

“ **The community faced an apparent dilemma: either to join one or other of the groups, inviting direct involvement in the confrontation; or to oppose both, almost certainly provoking their own displacement. Instead, they opted for a third alternative”**

The participants voted to remain in the village rather than abandon it, as had happened previously. The assembly elected a dialogue commission made up of eight to ten people, with equal representation of men and women. Their mission was to talk to the paramilitaries and guerrillas to resolve issues such as drug trafficking and de-mining. Because many previous community leaders had been accused of collaboration with the ELN and forced to leave, it was vital that the new commission remain anonymous. At the same time each commissioner also had to be an active member of the community – an evangelical pastor or teacher, for example.

The first round of negotiations began in the middle of armed confrontation. The commission initiated contact with the ELN through the *milicianos* (militias) present in the village and convened a meeting with guerrilla commanders positioned in the mountains.

The paramilitaries moved away from the centre of the village to the neighbouring hills. However, according to a community leader, this was "when the worst fighting started".

Intense violence continued through Christmas 2002 and the New Year, "which kept us boarded up in our houses from 24 to 31 December. We couldn't even poke our heads out." After this, the commission negotiated with the paramilitaries to withdraw from Micoahumado and continued dialogue



An ELN guerrilla de-mining in Micoahumado in January 2005 // © Peace and Development Program in Magdalena Medio

with the ELN to protect the population from crossfire. “On 17 January [2003], the paramilitaries left with just 150 men, after they had arrived with 600 [...] After that, they never came back” (*interview with community leader, 2010*). The ELN then returned to Micoahumado in order to maintain control of the area.

Community leaders’ accounts reveal the risks involved in engaging with all sides in the middle of armed confrontation. They had to be direct and clear with each party and emphasise the unity and resolve of the community. Although both the ELN and the paramilitaries broadly accepted the community’s proposal to avoid involving the population in the confrontation, adherence to this was not constant, and was dependent on the armed actors’ strategic interests vis-à-vis their adversary a particular moments.

“ **Community leaders’ accounts reveal the risks involved in engaging with all sides in the middle of armed confrontation. They had to be direct and clear with each party and emphasise the unity and resolve of the community”**

With the withdrawal of the paramilitaries, however, the army intensified aggression against the population. The community insisted the guerrillas abide by previous agreements and not involve the community in the confrontation. The ELN accepted this and decreased their presence. Encouraged by this progress, on 14 March 2003, the community created the Popular Constituent Assembly of Micoahumado as a humanitarian space for “life and peace”. The Assembly was representative of the whole territory – in the preceding weeks 100 delegates drawn from every village in the administrative subdivision had been selected to sit on it.

The Assembly became the community’s main organisational structure, responsible for all major decisions. It ratified the dialogue commission and created further commissions to deal with other community issues. The Assembly met to prepare for the dialogues with the armed groups, defining the main topics to be addressed by the commission and to establish criteria for the commission to take decisions autonomously during the talks. After each round, the results of the dialogues were discussed and ratified by the Assembly.

The Assembly worked collectively, and no one person exercised more power than another. A religious dimension was always present: meetings started with a Bible reading and ecumenical prayer. Both the Assembly and the commission were driven by the slogan: “In defence of a territory for life, without coca, without military operations, without camps, without mines, with autonomy and freedom”. The issue of de-mining was central to their dialogues with the ELN.

## De-mining begins

A second round of negotiations between the communities and the *elenos* focused on de-mining and took place throughout 2003–04, at specific times and under specific conditions. A guerrilla envoy would announce when the dialogue commission could go up the mountain to talk, and the community would immediately tell Frs. de Roux and Mayorga, who would accompany the commission.

Community leaders attest that the guerrillas at first maintained their position on landmines: “they are what protects us, so we cannot remove them”. The community leaders insisted that they had learned from the ELN how to make demands from the state, and now they had to make demands of the ELN.

On 28 December 2004, after two years of protracted efforts and negotiations with the dialogue commission, the Central Committee of the ELN announced through the Luis Solano Sepúlveda Front its decision to unilaterally de-mine some key roads: from the urban centre of the Municipality of Morales to the administrative subdivision of Micoahumado, and from there to the villages of La Caoba and La Guácima, as well as some secondary roads and paths. The ELN also agreed:

1. not to enter the village in uniform and with weapons
2. to return goods taken from the community as punishment: land, cattle and working tools
3. to cease kidnappings and retentions
4. not to re-mine the territory.

By 20 January 2005, the territory was held to be safe for transit. This event was a historical milestone for Micoahumado. A large part of the community was involved in verifying the de-mining process, given that there was no technical verification either by the government or by national or international NGOs.

The Micoahumado community’s commitment to impartiality vis-à-vis the different armed actors and its refusal to collaborate with any of the groups was key to the ELN’s willingness to accept and comply with the de-mining request. The ELN recognised that its own security was in large part due to the population’s decision to neither denounce the group nor support other armed actors.

## National and international support

Since the escalation of conflict in 1998, dialogue with specific armed groups, including the ELN and FARC, without the authorisation of the state has been illegal under Colombian law. However, the state accepted “pastoral dialogues” whereby members of the Catholic Church (bishops and priests) reached out to guerrilla and paramilitary groups to ensure minimal security for communities or to mediate the release of kidnap victims. The pastoral dialogues, which were developed by the Church across the country, offered a back channel for engagement and were influential with all groups.

When members of the Micoahumado dialogue commission initiated talks with the ELN, they would ask a priest to accompany them so they could be “covered” by the pastoral dialogue provision. The presence of religious leaders during moments of fierce confrontation between the ELN and AUC also provided immediate security to commission members

from the armed actors. Fr. de Roux and the Dioceses played a critical and coordinated mediation role in the advancement of dialogue with the ELN and helped to present the community’s demands clearly to the guerrillas. They also coordinated peace missions to Micoahumado in February 2003 to train and strengthen the assembly and dialogue commissions, and were supported by REDEPAZ (the National Network for Peace).

National organisations were also important in supporting and drawing attention to the dialogue initiative. These included national church networks; human rights and humanitarian groups such as the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), the Colombian Campaign against Mines, and the Popular Women’s Organisation (OFP); as well regional state bodies such as the Ombudsman Office in Magdalena Medio, the local administration of Morales and the regional administration of Bolívar.

International organisations provided similar support by highlighting the issue and endorsing the initiative, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN Refugee Agency. Geneva Call, which is committed to engaging non-state armed actors to improve civilian protection in armed conflicts, played a secondary but important role, offering technical advice and encouraging the government to allow the process. It proposed joint de-mining by the guerrillas and the armed forces, which the latter rejected.

“After a two-day journey we met with the guerrillas on 17 December of 2002, unbeknownst to the paramilitaries. In La Guásima they said to us: we will clear the water supply of mines, we’ll let food come in, but with the condition that the “paras” [paramilitaries] leave the centre of the village. Then the same commission decided to talk to the paras. The paras decided to accept”

*Interview with a community leader, 2010*

## The lack of state recognition

One of the most difficult aspects of the de-mining process was the relationship between the leaders of Micoahumado and the Colombian State. Towards the end of 2003, the dialogue commission travelled to Bogotá to inform the Vice-President and Peace Commissioner, Luis Carlos Restrepo, of the harassment they faced from the army. The government refused the community’s request for official support because, as the Peace Commissioner pointed out, the ELN continued to plant landmines in other areas of the country.

“Faced with high levels of violence and insecurity, the [de-mining] process in Micoahumado was not only empowering for the population but also showed a way to build peace from below with wider social participation”



The army also questioned the ELN's commitment to de-mining and raised doubts about the community's impartiality. It continued to harass the population. Nevertheless, specific units of the army in the area allowed ELN de-mining activities as long as they did not undermine military operations.

The director of the national landmine observatory acknowledged the importance of the process and the need to provide technical support for verification, but could not act against government decisions. The state's solution was to provide unofficial support without granting administrative

certification for de-mining activities; this made the process more complex and difficult, although paradoxically more autonomous and sustainable in the long term.

The government's reaction suggests that, at the national level, the logic of armed conflict determined institutional decisions and undermined the ability of local actors to promote security and peace within their communities. The potential role of the state was also limited by the ELN's mistrust of official participation in the process. The group insisted on carrying out



the de-mining process itself and would not allow the armed forces access to the zone.

Faced with these tensions, the local population insisted on describing their interactions with the ELN as “social and pastoral dialogues”, highlighting that their actions were independent of any armed group and supported by the Church. In order to avoid official and international language, the community called the process “social and community de-mining” instead of “humanitarian de-mining”. Their objective was to emphasise a bottom-up process that had been carried out after the refusal of official support.

“ **The local population insisted on describing their interactions with the ELN as “social and pastoral dialogues”, highlighting that their actions were independent of any armed group and supported by the Church”**

#### **Sustained impact of the Micoahumado model**

In the face of high levels of violence and insecurity, the process in Micoahumado was empowering for the population and demonstrated a bottom-up approach to building peace with broad social participation. The community’s social organisation (the Popular Constituent Assembly) developed as an effective conflict resolution mechanism. Some peace activists have called the Micoahumado experience a de-mining process for “life and development”. It allowed, for example, communication and transportation between different parts of the municipality, and the resumption of economic activity including cultivation

of agriculture and its export out of the region. Since 2005 there have not been any armed confrontations in the village.

The Micoahumado experience held symbolic meaning for other peace initiatives. For example, members of the Micoahumado community shared experiences with counterparts in Samaniego (in the department of Nariño), and subsequently, representatives of Samaniego travelled to Havana, Cuba, during exploratory talks between the ELN and the Colombian government to discuss the de-mining of their territories.

Key factors in the development and sustenance of the initiative included the ability to maintain momentum in the midst of continuing armed conflict and a refusal to compromise with armed actors. The community also learned the importance of external support as government policy prioritised national strategic objectives over local needs. The community required the backing of regional, national and international organisations to strengthen its ability to negotiate with both government and “illegal” armed groups. Above all, it was essential for the community to be consistent in its interactions with different actors in order to maintain trust and legitimacy in their dialogues.

De-mining is a key issue in formal negotiation discussions in the country. It has been made one of the main topics in talks in Havana between the FARC and Colombian government as a way to de-escalate the armed confrontation. It is likely to feature prominently in any talks between the ELN and the government. Colombian civil society has been vocal in ensuring the issue is on the table and has been pushing to be involved in any de-mining process that takes place. While de-mining can act as a confidence-building measure between conflict parties, de-mining as a process also recognises the effects of violence on the population and its role in overcoming conflict. The participation of local communities will be crucial to ensure a peace agreement has broad societal support and can be implemented in practice, as well as to ensure that any post-conflict peacebuilding strategy is feasible.

# Northern Ireland

## Background

When Ireland was partitioned in 1921, Northern Ireland remained part of the UK. The Protestant majority living there largely supported remaining within the UK (unionists), while the Catholic minority largely considered itself Irish, with many desiring a united Ireland (nationalists). The Northern Ireland state was characterised by structural sectarian discrimination and political manipulation of electoral boundaries to minimise the nationalist vote, as well as draconian “Special Powers” that were used almost exclusively on the minority population.

In the late 1960s a peaceful civil rights movement involving both unionists and nationalists was met with violence from police, and in August 1969 British troops were deployed to try to maintain control. There was also a rapid growth of paramilitary activity, including the nationalist Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the unionist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) – referred to as ‘republican’ and ‘loyalist’ respectively to distinguish them from the non-violent nationalist and unionist movements – and over the next 30 years Northern Ireland was marked by repression, sectarian hostility and violence. Armed groups committed appalling violence against civilians and the state used imprisonment without trial, organised and sanctioned torture and extrajudicial executions.

Loyalist and republican paramilitary groups announced a cessation of hostilities in 1994, and although the IRA ceasefire collapsed in 1996, it was reinstituted in 1997. Multi-party talks began the same year, and included the political wing of the republican

movement, Sinn Féin, and representatives of loyalist armed groups. The negotiations led to the Belfast Agreement, or Good Friday Agreement as it is also known, in 1998. The agreement devolved reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to an independent commission, which led to huge changes in the composition and oversight of the new police body, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

During the conflict the RUC was widely mistrusted by both loyalist and republican communities, only entering republican areas for conflict-related operations. Both communities instead looked to “community policing” by armed groups, which relied heavily on punishment violence to suppress what they regarded as anti-social behaviour.

The article below offers first-hand reflection on civil society activists’ efforts in the 1990s to reach out to armed groups in order to promote alternative approaches to punishment violence – which became known as community restorative justice. Initially this was through a local non-governmental organisation, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO). However, while loyalists were broadly amenable to the intervention, republicans were at first very reluctant. A civil society activist involved in this process explores how the republican movement became open to restorative justice approaches, and reflects on the broader impact of the initiative.

# From punishment violence to restorative justice in Northern Ireland

**Brian Gormally**

Brian Gormally is director of the Committee on the Administration of Justice, a human rights NGO in Northern Ireland. Before that he was Deputy Director of the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) for 25 years and an independent

consultant working mainly in the community and voluntary sector, specialising in justice, community policing and human rights. He has also been involved in international peace-related work in South Africa, Israel/Palestine, the Basque Country and Colombia.

## **Restorative justice – a civil society perspective**

In the mid-1990s there was widespread “punishment violence” in both republican and loyalist communities in Northern Ireland, even after the 1994 ceasefires. This was due to: a perceived policing gap, particularly in republican communities; a desire by armed groups to serve the community to fill this gap; pressure from communities to deal with anti-social behaviour and more serious crimes; and a perception that young criminals were used as informers by state forces, and that state forces were also encouraging drug taking and drug dealing as a counter-insurgency measure designed to destroy communities.

“ **NIACRO recruited an ex-life sentence prisoner to consult with community activists and armed groups in loyalist areas on an acceptable community alternative to punishment violence”**

Punishment violence ranged from public humiliation (tarring and feathering), to maiming (“knee-capping” – often of multiple limbs) and execution. However, during the 1990s, both before and after the ceasefires, armed groups sought to reduce their involvement in such activities. This was due to the negative political impact of the practice in spite of local popularity, the exposure of members to possible identification and arrest, and distaste within the broader ranks – including the units tasked with carrying out punishments.

The Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), a major non-governmental organisation set up in 1968 to “work for the welfare of the offender” and provide services to help prevent crime and rehabilitate non-political offenders, felt there was an opportunity to propose peaceful alternatives to punishment violence through mediation and restorative justice. Restorative justice refers to community-based measures designed to heal the harm done by crime through the offender taking responsibility, making reparation and being reintegrated into the community. It must be exclusively peaceful and voluntary.

As well as receiving state money and having a good working relationship with statutory agencies, NIACRO had a well-established presence in many local communities, working with young people and armed groups. It was also working with the families of imprisoned members of political armed groups and some of those released on conditional licence.

## **Reaching out to armed groups**

One of NIACRO’s projects that began in the early 1990s, Base 2, helps those under threat of violence from armed groups and maintains contact with the groups to establish the actual level of threat to individuals. The project offers a verification and mediation service to help individuals remain within their homes, or gives practical support for safe relocation out of the area. The association therefore had a reasonable level of credibility with armed groups by the mid-1990s, yet also had positive links with government agencies and officials who had accepted, for example, that Base 2 had to negotiate confidentially with armed groups in order to minimise violence.

In 1996, as a way to reach out to loyalist groups, NIACRO recruited an ex-life sentence prisoner to consult with community activists and armed groups in loyalist areas on an acceptable community alternative to punishment violence. There was no direct engagement between NIACRO staff and the armed groups. A report outlining the outcome of the consultations proposed all the relevant elements of restorative justice, even though the term was not in wide use in Northern Ireland at that time. This process eventually led to the establishment of a restorative justice movement called “Alternatives” in communities affected by loyalist paramilitary violence.

Engagement with the republican movement was more challenging. An initial attempt in 1996 came to nothing – possibly because the republican movement was unwilling to cooperate on a sensitive issue with an initiative that had not originated within its own ranks. However, shortly after this, members of the republican movement initiated contact with individual NIACRO staff members through a trusted intermediary – an employee of NIACRO who was an ex-combatant and state torture victim. This resulted in direct dialogue between civil society activists and republicans involved in “policing” and punishment violence; senior members of the movement were kept informed.



This dialogue involved discussion on the “spectrum of legitimacy” (the extent to which elements of due process and proportionality affected the legitimacy of informal punishment) and training in human rights and the principles of restorative justice. It also shared comparative lessons from other contexts – aboriginal populations in Australia and the transitional process in South Africa.

The engagement with the republican movement was seen to be more politically sensitive and was not an official NIACRO project. It involved four civil society activists who had all been employed by NIACRO, but at this stage one was an academic and one worked for a human rights NGO. There was no formal negotiation with the republican movement about who should be involved, but those who decided to participate were known and trusted by the republican communities from their previous work.

Acceptability did not mean sympathy with the aims or tactics of the movement, but that the movement had reasonable confidence that information from the meetings would not be passed to the authorities and that the encounters would not be used in a politically negative way. Sectarian identity was not necessarily an issue, and the work histories of the individuals involved overcame any hostility. Although the individuals benefitted from the respect NIACRO had built up with the republican movement, particularly from the Base 2 project, in the end it was individual trust that counted.

A series of weekly meetings took place in areas and premises where republican activists felt safe and on home ground; this culminated in a weekend residential. After a six-month silence, a report detailing the discussions and a framework for future work was accepted by the republican movement and published. Practical work to establish an organisation that could deliver restorative practices began, but was fiercely opposed by the government and the leadership of the then RUC, although it was supported by mid-level police officers on the ground.

#### **Validating vigilantism or promoting community justice?**

Some saw the restorative justice project as sanctioning terrorists undertaking vigilante justice; civil society members involved saw it as local communities practising peaceful justice and building a potential future bridge between communities and the police.

Communities were at first bemused by the abandonment of punitive responses to crime but quickly came to accept the concepts of restorative justice, and there was a high level of voluntary participation. Republican punishment violence did not disappear immediately, although it did reduce considerably, but it was a condition of the civil society activists’ participation that neither restorative justice mechanisms nor any of the people involved had any connection with the violence.

The project began to cooperate with the police in certain ways, especially after the 1998 agreement. This helped to dispel suspicion on both sides and demonstrated the practical benefits of cooperation, and thus helped pave the way for republicans to formally support the the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Eventually, the state accepted the legitimacy of the projects, and in 2007 it agreed to certification by the Criminal Justice Inspection – one of the new

independent oversight mechanisms established by the Belfast Agreement. The republicans agreed to the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. For both loyalists and republicans, the projects are today the most effective method of communication and cooperation between communities and police – and the police are their most vociferous champions.

“ **Some saw the restorative justice project as sanctioning terrorists undertaking vigilante justice; civil society people involved saw it as local communities practising peaceful justice and building a potential future bridge between communities and the police”**

#### **Broader impact and conditions for success**

In the long term, the mainly informal engagement between the restorative justice project and the police undoubtedly contributed to Sinn Féin’s eventual support for the PSNI. During the Belfast Agreement negotiations, it was clear that punishment violence could not continue on a large scale while republican representatives were claiming to be pursuing a peaceful way forward. For political reasons, the movement had to end or almost end the violence, while maintaining the clear public support for their policing role.

A number of conditions contributed to the success of the initiative with the republican movement. First, civil society participants, whether organised in a group or not, benefitted from a history of relevant work (in the case of the author and his colleagues, work with prisoners’ families and ex-prisoners), a lack of overt political involvement or perceived bias, as well as links to and credibility with both broader civil society and the state. The people involved in the initiative also had something to offer the armed group, namely a new perspective, knowledge, contacts and training: they understood and were sensitive to the armed groups’ and also the state’s positions as combatants in a conflict, and so could “translate” between them.

Second, it helped that the trusted intermediary, who played a key role in initiating and maintaining dialogue between the armed group and civil society, had nothing to prove to the armed group (in this case being an ex-prisoner and ex-combatant), and had no current involvement in conflict – ie was not under the discipline of the armed group and had demonstrated credibility to the civil society organisation.

Third, it is unusual for such engagements to be successful unless the broader conditions for a peace process are beginning to emerge. These included, in this case, the recognition on all sides that military victory was unlikely if not impossible, the move towards ceasefires by armed groups, some prospect for political participation by ex-combatants, and some possibility of state reform including reform of political and security institutions.

# Syria

## Civilian interaction with armed groups in the Syrian conflict

Wisam Elhamoui and Sinan al-Hawat

Wisam Elhamoui is a Syrian civil society activist focusing on emergency practice and conflict transformation. He is currently working in Gaziantep, Turkey, on a project to empower local emerging governance structures in non-regime held areas of Syria. He holds an MA in Development and Emergency Practice. He has written and contributed to research on the Syrian crisis, with a focus on ceasefires and conflict prevention.

Sinan al-Hawat is a London-based researcher specialising in complex emergencies and humanitarian aid. He holds an MSc in Development Management from the London School of Economics and Political Science, as well as a postgraduate degree in Islamic Studies and Humanities from the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London.

Conflict has ravaged Syria since 2011, when President Bashar al-Assad's regime responded severely to nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations. Some protestors began to take up arms to defend themselves and, as fighting escalated, the country descended into civil war. The peaceful protest movement was overwhelmed by violent encounters between the Syrian regime and its loyal militias, and forces opposed to Assad's rule. Civilians and civil society groups have since struggled to represent their views and interests in the face of multiple armed factions.

The armed rebellion has evolved significantly since late 2011. Initially, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose coalition of armed anti-regime groups, played a prominent role in military operations. Today, a proliferation of independent armed groups with distinct modes of organisation and stated goals are fighting in Syria, estimated at up to 1,000, including local remnants of the FSA, umbrella groups such as the Islamic Front and the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, "jihadist" groups including Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), as well as Kurdish military factions. All share the goal of removing Assad, but also represent a diversity of other objectives and motivations.

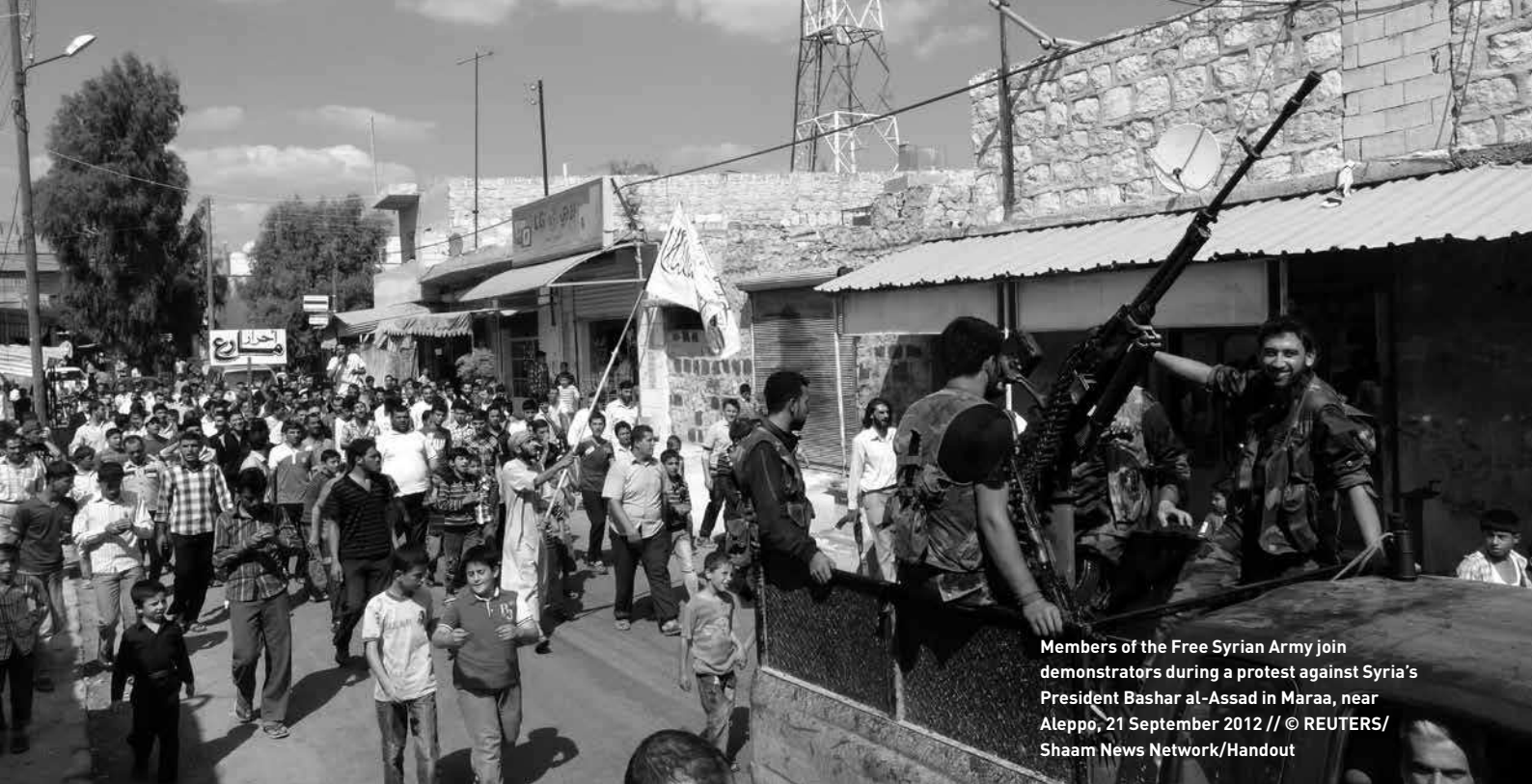
The conflict has further acquired sectarian dimensions between Muslim Sunni and Shia/Alawite sects. Sunni jihadist groups, IS in particular, have proved formidable in their ability to mobilise resources and control huge swathes of territory, albeit through the use of brutal tactics. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has estimated that over 200,000 people have died in the war as of December 2014, with more than three million refugees flooding the region and over seven million people internally displaced.

One of the most significant developments of the conflict has been the emergence of areas that lie outside regime control – often referred to as liberated areas. In the absence of the state, different actors, armed and unarmed, live in the same space; they cooperate, coexist or compete to fill the vacuum.

This article looks at how civilians interact with armed groups, including through informal channels and more organised civil society groups, and the factors that affect this interaction. It focuses on areas where the absence of the regime has allowed particular armed groups to emerge as the sole military power. It excludes areas controlled by Kurdish military factions, which are beyond the limits of this article. Nor does the article cover regime-held areas, where the state, although weakened and challenged by autonomous local defence groups, is still able to control civilian life to a large extent using police forces and militias funded by and loyal to the regime.

The case study includes information from interviews with activists in Syria – in the cities of Daraa and Homs, and the Damascus districts of Yarmouk camp and Barzeh – and researchers outside Syria, as well as the authors' own experience of working on humanitarian and peacebuilding responses to the Syria conflict.

The composition of the article distinguishes four areas of relationship between armed groups and communities. These help to identify general observable trends based on available data, although in reality of course they inter-connect and overlap. The article looks first at how structured civilian organisation, including administrative councils in liberated areas, have in some instances developed relations with armed groups. Second, it explores contexts in which civilian



Members of the Free Syrian Army join demonstrators during a protest against Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in Maraa, near Aleppo, 21 September 2012 // © REUTERS/Shaam News Network/Handout

organisation has been less established, yet modes of informal organisation have developed to pressure armed groups. Third, it identifies some specific factors that influence interaction between civilians and armed groups, such as personal links. Fourth, it reflects on the impact of the changing nature of the conflict and shifts in the typology of the armed groups.

#### **Armed groups, civilian organisation and local legitimacy**

After decades of oppression, civil activism emerged in the public space in Syria in 2011. At the start of the uprising, activist groups developed into Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) as platforms for mobilising and coordinating protests and campaigning. As areas were liberated from regime control the subsequent governance vacuum was filled by a multitude of actors, both armed and civilian. Armed groups continued to fight the regime and hold territory, and provide security and protection to the population. Civilian actors, including LCCs where present, took on responsibility for delivering services, and providing aid and administration.

The intensification of the armed conflict saw many civilian structures dismantled; some were restructured and only a few survived. Syrian civil society has been through many changes and faced many constraints, as Rana Khalaf documented in 2014. And as Doreen Khoury (Accord 25, 2014) has mapped out, new civil society groups emerged in non-regime controlled areas, most notably Local Administrative Councils (LACs) that provided governance functions in rural regions.

Research by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue published in 2014 showed how most Syrian anti-regime armed factions acknowledge the need to maintain popular support for the uprising. They cooperate with local councils and encourage their creation, and also maintain vested interests in their structure, especially their welfare function. LACs were officially acknowledged by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a coalition of opposition groups created in November 2012. In 2014, the opposition government estimated there were over 750 LACs in liberated areas.

Many civil society groups use the legitimacy gained from their administrative, governance and service delivery function to engage armed groups. For example, activist groups in Yarmouk, Damascus, have since the arrival in their neighbourhood of armed groups in summer 2012 – the FSA and the Democratic Liberation Front of Palestine (DLFP) – used their activist heritage to become a reference point for civilians to contact local armed groups. Similarly, in Aleppo, some civil activists explain their good relationship with certain armed groups by the camaraderie that had brought them together prior to emergence of the armed rebellion, at the time when the regime was systematically repressing human rights activists.

“ **Many civil society groups use the legitimacy gained from their administrative, governance and service delivery function to engage armed groups**”

LACs have derived legitimacy from basic democratic tools such as public reasoning and elections as well as through consensus amongst influential community actors. Funding from foreign donors for LACs that deliver services and humanitarian aid in their local areas is often conditional on their independence from any armed groups. One of our interviewees describes how: “armed groups understand this; and they know that they will face opposition from the local population if they interfere in the work of LACs”. Civil society groups that do not deliver services are more vulnerable to armed group interference.

In Barzeh, relationships that were channelled through the neighbourhood committee were more effective than direct interaction between civilians and local FSA brigades. This is because the neighbourhood committee was formed through an agreement between local armed groups and local civilians. It was headed by representatives of local *katibas*

(fighting units) and civilians (such as doctors and lawyers), and was consequently given executive powers that all parties committed to respect. As Turkmani et al (2014) describe, the Reconciliation Committee played an important role in representing local armed groups and activists in Barzeh in negotiating a ceasefire with the regime in early January 2014.

In Saraqeb, a predominantly Sunni populated city of 30,000 in Idlib Governorate, revolutionary activists and armed groups cooperated to form legislative and administrative bodies. An example is the Revolutionary Front, an alliance formed in December 2013 by FSA brigades and now one of the strongest local armed groups in Saraqeb, which has worked with activist groups and the LAC to set up an independent civil judiciary body. This was a shared effort to limit violations by security brigades operating in the area.

#### **Informal civilian interaction with armed groups**

In many instances, cooperation is not feasible and relations between civilians and armed groups are more confrontational. Since March 2014, the Islamic Council for the Administration of Liberated Areas, backed by JN and the Islamic Front, has endeavoured to establish local Islamic councils in order to challenge the role of independent LACs.

In areas under IS rule, civilian life (relief, education, justice, and behaviour in public spaces) is under strict control. Despite limited venues for expression, lack of protection and fear of retribution, civilians actively engage in campaigning and mobilisation to counter the control of armed groups and to voice their concerns. There are numerous examples of civilians and activists replicating the same non-violent techniques in non-regime-controlled areas that had previously been used against the regime, including protests, leaflets, graffiti or disobedience.

**“ Despite limited venues for expression, lack of protection and fear of retribution, civilians actively engage in campaigning and mobilisation to counter the control of armed groups and to voice their concerns”**

In the besieged governorate of Rif Dimashq, communities have become frustrated with the conduct of Jaysh al-Islam, the dominant local armed group. The group, which is part of the Islamic Front and is made up of local fighters, emerged in 2011 and became an umbrella for a number of factions in the area. Communities, protesting against the stockpiling of food reserves while people starved, broke into food stores. In Maaret al-Numan (Idlib Governorate), civilians protested against JN interference in their daily lives, such as imposing dress codes for women and schoolgirls. JN responded by loosening restrictions. In another case in Aleppo, a high profile activist was arrested after refusing to wear *hijab* as requested by a local armed group. A network of activists reached out to political bodies and donors supporting and funding the group.

The activist was released after the group was warned it would lose its funding.

However, despite the abundance of cases of extreme violence against civilians by armed groups, and the efforts that civil activists invest in highlighting their cause, these stories rarely gain interest or support from international activists, international non-governmental organisations, donors or politicians. An exception is the case of Razan Zaytouneh, co-founder of the LCCs, which has generated wider attention. Razan and three other civil activists were abducted in Douma (an eastern suburb of Damascus) in December 2013 by members of a local Islamist militia, and remain in captivity.

#### **Personal relations**

Personal links, such as those deriving from kinship, tribal affiliation and solidarity between friends and neighbours, play a key role in how communities reach out to armed groups. Whether armed groups and civilians are from the same locality is of particular – often paramount – importance in relation to their interaction, building on existing social capital and encouraging the development of networks for civilians and armed groups to trust each other and work together.

**“ In Aleppo, civil activists explain that their good relations with armed groups developed from solidarity prior to the armed rebellion, when the regime had systematically repressed human rights activists”**

This is especially the case in urban centres. The Barzeh district of Damascus, with a population of 50,000, has been under a regime blockade since spring 2013. The FSA unit controlling the area is made up of fighters from the neighbourhood and it has positive relations with local civilians that are more significant than blood ties; the FSA has been responsive to civilian influence and interests. Pressure from members of the Barzeh population who had been displaced to the rest of Damascus and wanted to return home was a key reason why FSA fighters struck a ceasefire deal with the Syrian army in January 2014. The influx of returnees made the ceasefire irreversible – any military action would cause large number of casualties and a new displacement crisis for Barzeh locals.

Solidarity from shared experiences during initial phases of the uprising further strengthens links based on locality. In Aleppo, civil activists explain that their good relations with armed groups developed from solidarity prior to the armed rebellion, when the regime had systematically repressed human rights activists.

Tribes, and large family networks in rural areas including rural Aleppo and Idlib, assert a hierarchical structure, which emphasise the importance of, and respect for, notables and social leaders. They also promote solidarity and cohesion as essential for their survival. Tribal connections extend to cities.





In Homs, one interviewee explained that in areas under FSA control civilians have tried to influence the extent of fighting in their locality, and in some cases have prevented family members from fighting in their areas.

For LACs, tribal and familial relations have been relevant where such relationships are highly valued and respected, such as rural and tribal communities. Membership of local leaders in the LAC plays an important role in affecting and, if needed, pressuring local armed groups. In rural Daraa, for example, the tribal affiliations of members of LACs and *Shura* (consultative) councils are used to influence local armed groups. This role is not limited to LACs, but to any civil body that includes community leaders, such as the Council of Wise Men in rural Idlib.

The negative side of such organic solidarity is that local communities pay a high price for supporting their local armed group. After two years of an intensive army siege of Homs, the city centre was completely destroyed and more than 2,200

citizens lost their lives. When defeated FSA fighters and Islamic brigades agreed to leave the Bab 'Amr district of Homs in June 2014, most civilians fled the city in fear of army reprisals.

Personal and competitive agendas can also emerge in conflict contexts, which can undermine social and cultural structures that support community cohesion. In Barzeh, an interviewee explained how illiterate fighters find in war an opportunity to gain influence and respect, as well as earn a living. The possession of arms provides them with power that might not be accessible to them otherwise. This weakens the influence of personal relationships and kinships. In Manbij, Aleppo Governorate, armed factions from outside the region accused the local council of supporting the regime, causing it to lose legitimacy, and afterwards took the opportunity to replace it with a submissive *Sharia* (Islamic laws) committee in November 2013.

The strategic conflict priorities of armed groups can also reduce the influence of personal relations. Where militants possess the upper hand militarily, personal links are superseded in favour of military necessity. In the long term, this damages the social bonds that previously allowed civilians to resist or support opposition groups. Several interviewees explained how during truce periods, civilian neighbourhood committees consisting of respected neighbourhood individuals have been able to influence militia decisions through traditional leadership or ad hoc elected authority. However, during periods of intense fighting war, armed group actions are determined by conflict priorities.

### **Civilian interaction and the changing nature of Syrian armed groups**

The armed movement in Syria started with small, local and loosely organised groups that were largely composed of local fighters and dependent on the support of their communities. The intensification of fighting and the need of armed groups to increase their capabilities in order to sustain resistance to the regime and gain or maintain territory created demand for larger and more organised fighting formations. The availability of resources, access to funding and weapons, and clarity of organisation and chain of command, all played essential roles in creating the larger armed groups prevalent today.

Clarity of military goals, political vision, or “ideology”, affect armed groups’ coherence and organisation, their ability to mobilise and recruit like-minded individuals, and their legitimacy among populations in territories they mean to liberate from regime rule. Groups that did not adopt a political programme failed to attract foreign funding earmarked respectively for either “democratic” (pro-Western) or “Islamist” groups, and consequently lacked the resources to achieve military progress. The discourse of democracy, citizenship and the rule of law held by some armed groups linked to the FSA in the initial stages of the Syrian uprising was soon weakened by the paralysis of Western powers and interference from regional states with their own geo-political interests.

In 2015, “Islamist” ideology is the most prominent dogma amongst armed groups in Syria. The largest anti-regime armed groups and formations currently in Syria include JN, Jaysh al-Islam, al-Jabha al-Shamia, Jaysh al-Mujahideen and IS. These groups claim to be governed by specific variations of (Sunni) Islam. They often try to impose their convictions on communities around them, including by setting up religious courts and committees. Civilian reaction to this varies depending on the context, but communities that try to influence armed groups will make reference to the same religious corpus to counter or reject a ruling of a court or committee. For example, a community in rural Idlib, outraged by JN’s stoning of a woman accused of committing adultery in late 2014, used religious sources to provide “evidence” that the stoning was “un-Islamic”. One interviewee, who opposes JN’s views, commented that, “we have to use the same language they [JN] use”.

Many people believe it is not possible to defy ideologies outside of this framework. Groups like IS and JN impose a radical and exclusive implementation of *Sharia* in regions and cities they rule over, such as Ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor Governorate. Even some human rights activists or secularists have resorted to arguments from the same ideology, although this can be

problematic as it limits their capacity to contradict or condemn violations and impositions perpetrated by armed groups.

Inevitably, armed groups that have adopted an Islamist ideology are less accountable to the community. An activist from Yarmouk quoted a response he was offered from a local armed group: “Our role is to raise the word of God. This is more important than human life.” The activist subsequently had to leave Yarmouk to evade persecution.

The majority of non-Sunni communities living in areas under the control of Islamist groups have faced severe treatment. For example, in January 2015, religious minority Druze communities from 14 villages around Idlib were forced by a JN Emir to demolish their shrines and renounce their faith. Civilians from these communities usually lack the capacity to engage with Islamist armed groups, which often leads to their displacement or physical harm. Similarly, activists that do not conform to the views of Islamist armed groups, such as those who are openly secularist, pro-freedom or pro-democracy, have also been forced to flee.

### **Conclusion**

As the conflict map in Syria grows increasingly complex, it would be wrong to assume that civilians are always capable of engaging armed groups in dialogue or resisting their demands. In the face of extreme and sustained violence, Syrian populations have undoubtedly struggled to assert their peacebuilding agency to influence conflict dynamics and the behaviour of armed actors.

The most significant channels remain kinship, local and social relations. Civil society activists have also developed influential relationships with armed groups having previously organised and participated in anti-regime protests together. This helps them to mediate between civilians and armed groups. At the political level, activists have also been involved in several local ceasefire agreements concluded between anti-regime groups and regime forces.

The tactics of non-violent resistance used against the regime, including organising protests, campaigns, and general civil disobedience, have been adapted to engage with armed groups with varying success. Relationships between communities and Islamist armed groups are particularly complicated. In most cases, civilians do not have strong counter-arguments to *Sharia*-based rulings to negotiate their positions. It is also important to assist civilians’ peace efforts by pressuring states and donors that support Syrian armed groups to in turn compel groups to stop encroaching on civilian space.

As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, it is important not to lose sight of the significant roles played by unarmed, non-state actors to develop structures for promoting local security and peace, and to adapt to the constantly changing demands of the conflict. Huge efforts have been invested in maintaining a civilian voice by activists and locals. They have shown courage and resilience and an incredible capacity to sustain their efforts and aspirations despite huge challenges and lack of support.

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# Key websites

### **Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative**

[www.arlpi.org](http://www.arlpi.org)

### **Beyond Juba**

[www.beyondjuba.org](http://www.beyondjuba.org)

### **Berghof Transitions Series**

[www.berghof-foundation.org/publications/transitions-series](http://www.berghof-foundation.org/publications/transitions-series)

### **CINEP**

[www.cinep2015.org/Old/2014\\_V1](http://www.cinep2015.org/Old/2014_V1)

### **Committee on the Administration of Justice**

[www.caj.org.uk](http://www.caj.org.uk)

### **Geneva Call**

[www.genevacall.org/country-page/colombia](http://www.genevacall.org/country-page/colombia)

### **NIACRO**

[www.niacro.co.uk](http://www.niacro.co.uk)

### **Northern Ireland Alternatives**

[www.alternativesrj.org](http://www.alternativesrj.org)

### **Security in Transition**

[www.securityintransition.org](http://www.securityintransition.org)

# The Accord series



## INSIGHT ISSUE 1 (2013)

### Women building peace

Most peace agreements do not address the specific concerns of women, and women are still excluded from political processes. The first Accord Insight presents nine articles and new analysis drawn from the Accord series from 1998 to 2010, which examine the roles women have played in addressing violence and building peace – from Bougainville and Sierra Leone to Aceh and Northern Ireland.



## ISSUE 25 (2014)

### Legitimacy and peace processes: from coercion to consent

Accord 25 focuses on the practical ways that legitimacy can contribute to building more sustainable peace: national dialogue; constitutional reform; local governance; and transforming coercive actors. It looks at 15 country case studies, including the Philippines, Syria, Afghanistan, the Basque Country, Somaliland, Yemen and Burma.



## ISSUE 22 (2011)

### Paix sans frontières: building peace across borders

War does not respect political or territorial boundaries. This twenty-second Accord publication, edited by Alexander Ramsbotham and I William Zartman, looks at how peacebuilding strategies and capacity can 'think outside the state': *beyond* it, through regional engagement, and *below* it, through cross-border community or trade networks.



## ISSUE 24 (2012)

### Reconciliation, reform and resilience: positive peace for Lebanon

Accord 24 includes more than 30 articles and interviews on peacebuilding in Lebanon: from diverse perspectives and from inside and outside the country. Together they show that the Lebanese are not passive victims of a violent fate determined beyond their country's borders. Many are actively pursuing opportunities for change.



## ISSUE 21 (2010)

### Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and international peacemaking

Edited by Mark Bradbury and Sally Healy Accord 21 contains over 30 articles including interviews with Somali elders and senior diplomats with the African Union, the UN and IGAD, and contributions from Somali and international peacemaking practitioners, academics, involved parties, civil society and women's organisations.



## ISSUE 23 (2012)

### Consolidating peace: Liberia and Sierra Leone

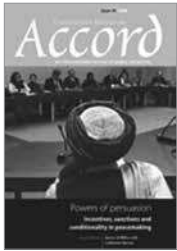
A decade after the official end of wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Accord 23 draws on respective societies' experiences and insights to ask what headway has been made to consolidate peace, what challenges lie ahead and what lessons can be learnt. It argues that policy needs to focus on people, on repairing relationships and promoting inclusion, and that traditional mechanisms can play a crucial role.



## ISSUE 20 (2008)

### Reconfiguring politics: the Indonesia-Aceh peace process

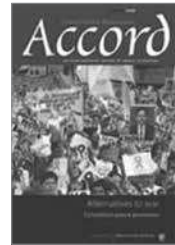
In 2005, the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) agreed a settlement ending 30 years of armed conflict. Accord 20 explores how that agreement was reached and subsequent challenges to its implementation.



#### ISSUE 19 (2008)

##### **Powers of persuasion: incentives, sanctions and conditionality in peacemaking**

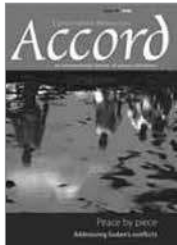
International policymakers frequently use incentives, sanctions and conditionality as tools to influence intra-state conflicts. Using a range of case studies, Accord 19 asks whether and how these tools can constructively influence conflict parties' engagement in peacemaking initiatives.



#### ISSUE 14 (2004)

##### **Alternatives to war: Colombia's peace processes**

This Accord publication provides an overview of more than 25 years of peace initiatives with Colombia's guerrilla and paramilitary groups. It includes analysis of civil society efforts at local, regional and national levels and identifies the necessary elements of a new model of conflict resolution.



#### ISSUE 18 (2006)

##### **Peace by piece: addressing Sudan's conflicts**

This Accord publication reviews the peace process that led to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan. It also explores questions that remain to be tackled, arguing that future Sudanese initiatives must be more inclusive and better coordinated.



#### ISSUE 13 (2002)

##### **Owning the process: public participation in peacemaking**

This first thematic Accord publication documents mechanisms for public participation in peacemaking. It features extended studies looking at how people were empowered to participate in political processes in Guatemala, Mali and South Africa. It also contains shorter pieces from Colombia, Northern Ireland and the Philippines.



#### ISSUE 17 (2005)

##### **The limits of leadership elites and societies in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process**

Since the 1994 ceasefire, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorny Karabakh has remained deadlocked. Accord 17 explores the dynamics of polarisation, the obstacles to a sustainable agreement and the challenge of overcoming resistance to compromise.



#### ISSUE 12 (2002)

##### **Weaving consensus: the Papua New Guinea - Bougainville peace process**

This Accord publication documents efforts leading to the Bougainville Peace Agreement of 2001. It describes an indigenous process that drew on the strengths of Melanesian traditions, as well as innovative roles played by international third parties.



#### ISSUE 16 (2005)

##### **Choosing to engage: armed groups and peace processes**

Non-state armed groups, key actors in many internal armed conflicts, have participated in peace processes across the world. Accord 16 draws on these experiences to explore the case for engaging with armed groups, and the different options, roles and challenges for such engagement.



#### ISSUE 11 (2002)

##### **Protracted conflict, elusive peace: initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda**

While a meaningful peace process in northern Uganda remains elusive, Accord 11 documents significant peacemaking initiatives undertaken by internal and external actors and analyses their impact on the dynamics of the conflict.



#### ISSUE 15 (2004)

##### **From military peace to social justice? The Angolan peace process**

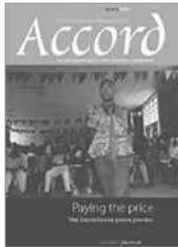
The Luena Memorandum of 2002 brought an end to Angola's 27-year civil war. Accord 15 reviews the history of peacemaking efforts in Angola, and analyses challenges that remain if the absence of violence is to develop into a sustainable and just peace.



#### ISSUE 10 (2001)

##### **Politics of compromise: the Tajikistan peace process**

This publication describes the aspirations of the parties to the conflict in Tajikistan. It documents the negotiation process leading to the General Agreement of June 1997, looking at the role of the international community, led by the UN, and of local civil society.



#### ISSUE 9 (2000)

##### **Paying the price: the Sierra Leone peace process**

The Lomé Peace Agreement of July 1999 sought to bring an end to armed conflict in Sierra Leone: one of the most brutal civil wars of recent times. Accord 9 explores the Lomé process and earlier attempts to resolve the conflict, and draws lessons for Sierra Leone's transition.



#### ISSUE 4 (1998)

##### **Demanding sacrifice: war and negotiation in Sri Lanka**

This publication documents the cycles of ethnic/national conflict that have blighted Sri Lanka since 1983. It analyses negotiations and other peace initiatives, and outlines fundamental concerns that need to be confronted in future peacemaking efforts.



#### ISSUE 8 (1999)

##### **Striking a balance: the Northern Ireland peace process**

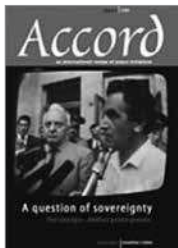
This publication examines the factors that led to the negotiations resulting in the 1998 Belfast Agreement. It describes the complex underlying forces and the development of an environment for peace. (2003: Supplement Issue – see online index)



#### ISSUE 3 (1998)

##### **The Mozambican peace process in perspective**

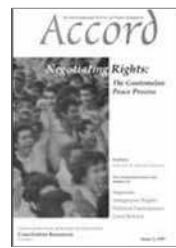
This publication documents the diverse initiatives that drove the parties to a negotiated settlement of the conflict in Mozambique. It further illustrates the impact on the country of changing regional and international political dynamics.



#### ISSUE 7 (1999)

##### **A question of sovereignty: the Georgia-Abkhazia peace process**

This publication explores the background and issues at the heart of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, providing a unique insight into a political stalemate and pointing towards possible avenues out of deadlock.



#### ISSUE 2 (1997)

##### **Negotiating rights: the Guatemalan peace process**

The signing of the peace agreement in 1996 brought an end to 36 years of civil war in Guatemala. Accord 2 analyses issues of impunity, indigenous rights, political participation and land reform.



#### ISSUE 6 (1999)

##### **Compromising on autonomy: Mindanao in transition**

The GRP-MNLF 1996 Peace Agreement was a milestone, as all previous peacemaking attempts over 24 years had failed. Accord 6 analyses elements of peacemaking in Mindanao and examines the challenges of implementation. (2003: Supplement Issue – see online index)



#### ISSUE 1 (1996)

##### **The Liberian peace process 1990-1996**

This first Accord publication documents the lengthy and fractious Liberian peace process and provides insight into why thirteen individual peace accords collapsed in half as many years.



#### ISSUE 5 (1998)

##### **Safeguarding peace: Cambodia's constitutional challenge**

This publication documents issues around the signing of the 1991 Paris agreements that officially ended Cambodia's long war, and the subsequent violent collapse of the country's governing coalition in July 1997.

Conciliation Resources is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We're there for as long as we're needed to provide advice, support and practical resources. We take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

We work mainly in the East and Central Africa on the Lord's Resistance Army conflict, the South Caucasus, the Philippines, Kashmir, Fiji, Colombia and West Africa, in partnership with local and international civil society organisations and governments. We also publish *Accord: an international review of peace initiatives*. Our funding is through grants from governments, independent trusts and foundations.

**We aim to:**

- » **Promote** understanding of peaceful ways to resolve conflicts
- » **Create** opportunities for dialogue between divided communities
- » **Strengthen** peacebuilding policies and practice
- » **Support** people to build peace

Please visit our website or contact us for more information about what we do and how you can support this work:

Conciliation Resources  
Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road  
London NW5 1AL  
United Kingdom

Web **[www.c-r.org](http://www.c-r.org)**  
Twitter **@CRbuildpeace**  
Facebook **Conciliation Resources**

Email [cr@c-r.org](mailto:cr@c-r.org)  
Tel +44 (0)20 7359 7728  
Fax +44 (0)20 7359 4081

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International policy is ambiguous on whether or not to talk to non-state armed groups. But while states equivocate, local populations may already be in contact.

This second **Accord Insight** looks at how local actors organise to enter into dialogue with armed groups and challenge their use of violence. It builds on Accord 16 (2005), *Choosing to engage: armed groups and peace processes*. Case studies from Syria, Colombia, northern Uganda and Northern Ireland document the experiences of communities who choose to reach out to armed groups – often in advance of more formal negotiations and in situations of intense violence and embedded conflict – exploring why and how they interact and the challenges involved.

The case studies highlight the risks communities take, but also the resilience and innovation involved in trying to influence armed groups apparently set on violence. They show how active community engagement makes important contributions to local human security and peacebuilding, and to armed groups' transformation.

**Conciliation Resources** is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. **CR's Accord publication series** informs and strengthens peace processes by documenting and analysing practical lessons and innovations of peacebuilding.

**Accord Insight** presents cutting-edge analysis and contemporary peacebuilding innovation by re-examining key challenges and practical lessons from our Accord publication series.



Conciliation Resources  
Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road  
London NW5 1AL

[www.c-r.org](http://www.c-r.org)

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