PICKING UP THE PIECES:
MEDIATION STRATEGIES IN FRAGMENTED CONFLICTS

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Wars within states are now more common than wars between them, and some of the most violent and protracted of these involve the fragmentation of warring groups. Among the causes of fragmentation are disagreements over whether to continue the violence, insubordination, political clashes when negotiated agreement seems near, differing levels of commitment, and widening of pre-war splits. In such situations rebel factions will accept mediation if they believe the mediator can achieve a better outcome than they can achieve by fighting or through bilateral negotiations. This paper discusses five strategies a mediator can use when called on to deal with a fragmented conflict, here labelled the ‘departing train’, ‘middle of the road’, ‘strength in unity’, ‘ripeness’ and ‘stand aside and wait’ strategies.

Introduction

Wars within states are now more common than wars between them. Cohesion and fragmentation between and within fighting groups are important concepts for understanding intrastate conflict dynamics and mediation processes. It has been conservatively calculated that fragmentation occurred in 50 out of 114 (around 44%) of the internal conflicts recorded in the Uppsala Conflict Database (Cunningham 2013; UCDP, n.d.), examples being Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Northern Ireland, the Philippines and Sudan. Complicating the issue, factions opposing the state are often at the same time challenging one another. The causes of fragmentation between substate actors are an important and under-researched topic in mediation studies, especially given today’s highly fragmented conflicts in, among others, the Central African Republic, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria.

This paper contributes to the literature on fragmentation. I begin by offering a definition. Then, to explain why fragmentation happens during a conflict, I analyse some actual cases and set out some causes and types. I then look at the role of mediation in fragmented conflicts and describe, with examples, five strategies available to mediators in these cases. I conclude by discussing the effectiveness of these strategies.

What is fragmentation?

I define ‘fragmentation’ as:

a process where a faction of a rebel or extremist group formally and collectively exits that group and either starts a new rebel group, joins another existing rebel group, or becomes part of the incumbent government.

Actors who disarm and exit the conflict altogether are not considered in this definition. Further, for the term to apply, fragmentation must be an intended action. ‘Collectively’ is a critical qualifier because it is coordinated effort by a rebel or extremist group that causes fragmentation. My definition excludes an event where members leave the group for personal reasons. Different degrees of fragmentation affect a rebel or extremist group’s capacity differently, but my definition does not distinguish between important and unimportant cases of fragmentation.

Fragmentation sometimes creates multiple factions that act independently of one another during the conflict and the subsequent peace process. They may pursue the same goal, or different goals.

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Why does fragmentation matter?

Fragmentation is connected to patterns of state failure (Woldemariam 2011). Recent examples of rebel splintering have occurred in countries with failing state institutions, such as Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. It has been found that such splits tend to prolong civil conflicts (Cunningham 2013). Fragmentation affects the success of rebel organizations and increases the number of conflicting parties, with the result that mediation efforts can become more complicated or break down entirely.

Why fragmentation occurs

Some of the most violent and protracted civil wars involve the fragmentation of warring groups and the creation and disintegration of alliances between them. In the course of a civil war, warring groups have two primary goals: to win the war and to magnify post-war political gains (Findley & Rudloff 2012). When fighting a strong state, the groups have less incentive to fragment because the government will remain dominant whatever they do. Where the state is weak, however, alliance making tends to be more volatile as leaders strategize ways to maximize their group’s position for the post-war settlement (Cunningham 2006).

The allegiances and alliances of groups fighting against the state tend to be fluid because there is no system for encouraging commitment. Internationally, norms and conventions exist to moderate behaviour, but conflicts between parties at the domestic level do not have such conventions. A stronger party cannot credibly pledge that it will not purge a weaker party during or after the conflict. This can lead to cheating, which may exacerbate pre-war differences and break up a group.

To achieve their two goals, groups have the choice of joining together against a common foe or remaining separate. Facing extinction, a weaker group may join a stronger group to ensure survival, or a stronger group may take over a weaker one that is struggling. Fragmentation may occur when groups are unclear about the power dynamics of a conflict and what kind of settlement would suit them.

The following two sections describe external and internal causes of fragmentation. I acknowledge, however, that it may not always be easy to make a clear distinction between the two.

External causes

Presented with an opportunity for mediation, substate groups may believe either that it is time for a settlement or that they can gain more by continuing to fight. Groups may actually fracture over this strategic or political question. Leaders will weigh up whether fighting on will improve their chances of winning outright or whether they can gain more leverage during negotiations if they accept mediation.

Fragmentation can occur when a group wants to end the conflict. The 1994 ceasefire and 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland are a case in point. After a Joint Declaration on Peace by the British and Irish governments in December 1993, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) declared a ceasefire (Byrne 1995). The ceasefire was objected to by a hitherto dormant splinter group on the republican side, Continuity IRA, which strongly opposed a peaceful approach to resolving the Northern Ireland conflict. Two years later, the ceasefire also caused a split in the loyalist UVF, after the Mid-Ulster Brigade killed a Catholic taxi driver and was subsequently forced out of the organization (Boyce & O’Day 2001). The Brigade, having opposed the ceasefire and formed the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) to continue the paramilitary campaign against Irish republicanism, later began attacking UVF forces. The Good Friday Agreement also caused a further republican fragmentation once the anti-agreement Real IRA split from the PIRA (Frampton 2010).

Groups may fight one another to gain local power and control at the expense of a uniform policy against the government. This can happen when competition for national power seems elusive or unrealistic. Groups then split and focus on establishing local control. Several groups may fragment to maximize individual utility in the absence of a strong state. For example, in Libya the National Transitional Council’s inability to assert national sovereignty
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throughout the country has led to local tribal and militia schisms (Kirkpatrick 2012). Militia commanders in the oil-rich eastern region of Barqa have called for a semi-autonomous statelet (The Guardian 2012).

Fragmentation may increase or decrease in response to a shift in a government’s policy. An increase in state repression may reinforce a weak alliance. Conversely, a state may gain advantage from fragmented opposition. In Sudan the government capitalized on tension within the Dinka-dominated Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). In 1991 Riek Machar split from the SPLA and by 1997 the SPLA was accusing him of allying his ethnic Nuer army with the Khartoum government (Costello 2011). Machar argued, however, that it was not a matter of switching sides but of fighting in a different way from the SPLA in order to pursue the real interests of southern Sudan. Regardless of these nuanced views, the Khartoum regime supported Machar against the SPLA and this led to some of the most violent fighting of the civil war. A government can thus exploit rebel divisions to create counter-insurgency forces and undermine rebel resistance.

In a protracted conflict, groups may disagree on whether to change tactics when the current tactics have apparently failed. Such a disagreement magnifies the strategic question of whether to continue fighting or negotiate. In February and March 1996, Palestinian extremists detonated a series of bombs in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. These attacks were designed to undermine the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which extremists deemed embarrassing and mistaken. Within three months, the Israelis consequently chose the more combative Benjamin Netanyahu to replace the then Prime Minister Shimon Peres. Shortly after this appointment political negotiations stalled. A small fringe faction used terrorist tactics to disrupt the peace talks and convince the leadership on both sides to abandon political means of ending the conflict.

Fragmentation can also be caused by territorial gains and losses. Such shifts in the battleground can change rebel groups’ incentives to cooperate with one another. When rebel groups form an alliance it is often because they see this as a way to guarantee survival. Yet if a rebel alliance faces territorial setbacks, its leaders may decide to break the alliance because it no longer guarantees territory for the individual rebel units. The basis for cooperation disappears and the rebel groups return to pursuing their individual interests. For example, in the early 1960s during the Eritrean secessionist movement from Ethiopia, the leading Eritrean rebel organization, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), carried out several successful offensives against the Ethiopian army, enabling the ELF to recruit more men and control larger parts of the disputed territory. However, by 1967 the ELF’s advance had been reversed and the Ethiopian army was able to wrest back control of half of Eritrea. As a result, the ELF’s territory was reduced to a remote and sparse district of the country and cooperation between its members broke down almost immediately, leading to infighting along sectarian lines. In the wake of the organization’s setback, suspicions led to a torrent of factional infighting. The ELF never fully recovered from the 1967–1968 loss of territory and ensuing fragmentation (Woldemariam 2011) and eventually lost out to the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front.

A struggle against a weak state that no longer holds the monopoly of power to determine territorial or political stakes can bring about competition between groups freed from authoritarian rule. Whether the state collapses or manages to cling to power, fragmented groups will operate in areas the state no longer controls. Where the initial uprising against the state tended to unify the groups, now unity may be abandoned in the competition for power. The Iraqi Kurdish civil war of the mid-1990s provides an example. The two most powerful Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), fought a long struggle against Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime, and Iraqi Kurdistan won de facto independence after the US established a no-fly zone over the area in 1991. Shortly thereafter, Iraqi Kurdistan held parliamentary elections. Clashes flared up in 1994, leading to a brief Kurdish civil war. Although there were several causes of this conflict, including personal animosity between the leaders of the two parties, the main cause was the KDP’s access to and taxation of illegal petroleum exports to Turkey, which earned it several million dollars a year (Lawrence 2008). The two parties competed for control over the area’s petroleum exports in an attempt to assert greater authority over Iraqi Kurdistan.

Once freed from authoritarian rule, groups may also turn on one another, making a coalition impossible. In Syria, local and transnational dynamics continue to fragment the armed opposition. The fighting tends to be very localized, with mainstream rebel groups behaving like warlords as they continue to fight against the state, the extremist jihadists and one another. In 2013, the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) tried to pursue a ‘big-tent’ strategy
with other groups fighting against President Assad, on the principle that ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ (Pizzi 2013). The FSA formed a tentative alliance with Jabhat al-Nusra and groups of Kurdish fighters and signed a ceasefire pact with ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Since then, infighting between rebel groups has started again, exacerbated by US involvement in Syria. The civil war in Syria is a prime example of the volatility of rebel alliance-making and fragmentation during civil wars.

Internal dissension and cleavages may also occur along political lines when an agreement seems near. During a peace process, clashes between ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ can create an impetus for separation and exacerbate the ideological conflict. Certain political goods may incentivize relatively moderate leaders to break away and take advantage of a settlement. In the first Liberian civil war (1989–1995), several rebel groups existed relatively peacefully alongside one another while fighting against the government. However, in 1994, towards the end of the conflict, groups split over the question of nominations for the transitional government. For example, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) split into ULIMO-K and ULIMO-J because of political and ethnic differences (Nygard & Weintraub 2014).

Geography can exacerbate principal-agent problems within rebel organizations and make it more difficult to police defection (Gates 2002). Rebel groups operating over large and difficult stretches of land can struggle to get their members to remain loyal because the costs of applying sanctions are higher. Philippine geography affected the conduct of the Filipino insurgency in 1899–1902 (Deady 2005). This country consists of over 7,000 islands, with few roads and dozens of languages. The insurgency was strongest when the ilustrado oligarchy, the controllers of local politics (chieftains, landowners and businessmen) and the peasants, who provided the bulk of the guerrilla manpower, were unified against American annexation (Deady 2005). But ethnic and geographic fragmentation made unity difficult for the insurgency leaders. Resistance varied from island to island, causing it to fragment. Local deals were made at the expense of a single strategy, leading to the splintering of groups and the eventual success of the American counterinsurgency campaign.

Rebel organizations may split when they have suffered significant asymmetric losses that create dissatisfaction with the organization’s leadership. In both the Afghan jihad (1979–1989) and the intra-mujahedin war (1992–1998), splits and takeovers were generally triggered by poor battlefield performance or relative power losses across subgroups. The warring groups fought among themselves almost as much as they fought against their stated ideological enemy (Christia 2012).

Fragmenting can be tactical – the Bosnian ethnic civil war provides an example. The Muslim-Croat alliance and Serb-Croat and Serb-Muslim cooperation broke down when power considerations led the leaders to believe that their interests in post-war political spoils would be better served by fighting alone (Christia 2012). Alliance reconfiguration only ended when NATO intervened on the side of the Muslim-Croat alliance. Christia (2012) argues that groups in ‘all-out’ civil wars will manoeuvre to become part of a winning coalition and increase their share of post-conflict authority.

A group’s evolving objectives can lead to conflict not only with the state but also within the group, causing fragmentation. When several groups unify in a rebel cause, their alliance may eventually break down along earlier internal fault lines. This may lead to a particularly complicated case of both external and internal causes of fragmentation. For example, in 2012 Tuareg separatists in the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad rebelled against the Malian state. They initially formed an alliance with several local and regional Islamist groups to occupy the northern region of Mali. Shortly after the uprising, these Islamist groups, including Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, sidelined the Tuareg nationalists, imposing a strict set of Sharia laws over the territories they controlled (Pham 2013).

Internal causes
Fragmentation can be precipitated by insubordination. In these cases it is usually an after-effect rather than an intentional result. We may take an example from occupied Greece during World War II. Aris Velouchiotis, the leader of the Greek People’s Liberation Army (ELAS), the military wing of the National Liberation Front (EAM) (Ganser 2005), refused to abide by the 1945 Treaty of Varkiza that aimed to end fighting between the EAM and
the British Army and pro-government forces supported by the Greek government in Athens. Velouchiotis saw the treaty as a betrayal of the guerrilla forces. He was subsequently expelled from the Communist Party of Greece. He attempted to create a new ELAS, although most of his associates had abandoned him, and continued to conduct guerrilla attacks until his unit was ambushed in June 1945 (Ganser 2005).

Fragmentation due to insubordination is also evident from the 2014 situation in Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over leadership of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006 (Laub & Masters 2014). The leader of the overall al-Qaeda network, Ayman al-Zawahiri, urged AQI, which had rebranded and changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq, and later Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), to stay out of Syria and leave the territory to Jabhat al-Nusra, the designated al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. ISIS ignored this order and, reflecting strategic and ideological differences that had broadened due to the 2011 uprising in Syria, took over the provincial capital of Raqqa in northern Syria. Zawahiri would not allow this local insubordination by Baghdadi and disowned ISIS from the al-Qaeda network, and this resulted in brutal clashes between the two groups (Laub & Masters 2014).

Another cause of internal fragmentation is diverging political opinion according to generation or age, which Zartman terms the evipolitical element of infighting (Zartman 2010). The internal pressures caused by new generations joining a rebel group in the course of a prolonged conflict and clashing with older, established members over how to manage the conflict are under-researched in the current conflict literature. An example of intergenerational fragmentation may be seen in the 1970s conflict between Tamil separatists and the Sri Lankan government. Several militant groups, such as the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), engaged in minor raids against the government. As tensions flared in Tamil-dominated areas in the north and east of the country, the sons of these former groups filled the ranks of the newly founded Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), successor to TNT, to renew the struggle against the Sinhalese government (Tambiah 1996). The emergence of the LTTE signified not only a revolt against the Sinhalese-dominated status quo but also intergenerational tensions in a highly traditional society. Youth organizers of the LTTE criticized their elders for indecisiveness at a time when they felt that the existence of their ethnic community was in danger.

Another example of intergenerational conflict can be seen in Mali’s 1990 Tuareg rebellion, caused partly by unexpected disobedience to parental authority by militarized Tuareg youth returning from Qadaffi’s Islamic Legion, who refused to conform any longer to the rigid structure of Tuareg society in which age was the determining factor in social decision-making (Keita 1998). Rebelling against this traditional system, the young ex-combatants formed their own rebel groups in an attempt to defeat the Malian regime that their parents had not been able to defeat in previous rebellions.

In exceptional cases, a lethal rivalry can lead to the kind of ethnic defection known as ‘fratricidal flipping’ (Staniland 2012). This typically has little to do with ideology and more to do with access to turf or power. It will occur if one section of a group believes victory can be best achieved by attacking competing factions in order to consolidate power and the faction ends up fighting against their co-ethnics. For example, al-Qaeda came into conflict with Sunni nationalist groups in Iraq over smuggling routes and control of ongoing insurgency (Staniland 2012). In an attempt to impose power, al-Qaeda started targeting these groups. This fratricidal strategy led to ethnic defection where Sunni tribal communities broke away and formed an alliance with the US for supplies and protection. Here, survival was the priority leading to intra-insurgency fratricide.

**Mediation strategies**

I now turn to the role of mediation in fragmented conflicts and describe five strategies available to mediators in these cases. Rebel groups accept mediation if they believe the mediator can achieve a better outcome than they can achieve by fighting or through bilateral negotiations. To persuade groups to engage in mediation, the mediator must offer some kind of added value. In the following sections I suggest ways this can be done and draw on cases to examine each strategy’s strengths and weaknesses.
The ‘departing train’ strategy: persuading ‘holdouts’ to join.
The ‘departing train’ strategy can be applied when the demands and behaviour of certain factions are disrupting
the peace process. It pictures the process as a train leaving the station and any party not on board will be left
behind. At the outset, the mediator makes it clear that the process will go forward regardless of whether a party
joins or not, emphasizing that if a party excludes itself it has only itself to blame, and that the excluded party may
find itself reassessing its outside position when peace has been achieved and the benefits of participation become
clear. For the strategy to be successful, the mediator must make it clear to all parties that the peace process will
go forward irreversibly, ensure that the participating parties are protected and prevent spoilers from derailing the
process (Stedman 2000). If the process creates new opportunities, the spoilers may lose constituent support. In
fear of being left out of the process they may alter their initial deviant behaviour. However, this strategy can backfire
if a powerful faction remains permanently left out and is dominant enough to destabilize the process.

In the Northern Ireland conflict, the mediation that led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement used this strategy.
American Senator George Mitchell became the key facilitator of this agreement and, as a result of the agreement,
the British and Irish governments, and parties across the divide, agreed on a new political framework for Northern
Ireland. The strategy worked because Mitchell was able to co-opt the Irish Republican Army (IRA) as the process
was creating a snowball effect for all parties to participate. Many of the IRA’s constituents began to support
Mitchell’s talks. Fearing that it would be left out permanently, Sinn Féin, which many allege to be the political
voice of the IRA, decided to take ownership of the agreement, which brought the peace process to a successful
conclusion. Had the IRA been permanently excluded, the agreement would have been neither comprehensive nor
successful.

The mediators’ use of the departing train strategy was successful in Northern Ireland because they understood
the spoiler’s intentions. The strategy requires mediators to decide whether meeting the spoiler’s demands would
compromise peace between participating parties. The mediator should also try to gain international consensus to
convince all parties that the peace process will go ahead even without everyone on board. Finally, credibility is
crucial in order to convince the spoiler that the window of opportunity is closing.

The departing-train strategy has two limitations (Stedman 2000): its success depends on the parties involved in
the peace process being strong enough to deal with the spoiler after the mediator has left, and it can make the
mediator dependent on the parties that get on the train.

The strategy will succeed only if the mediator emphasizes from the start that there is no desire to exclude any
party, nor will any party hold it hostage. Without this emphasis, a spoiler will not understand that it can cease being
a pariah and participate. Further, the strategy requires active measures to convince the parties ‘on the train’ that
the process will continue without the spoiler on board and that they will be protected.

The ‘middle of the road’ strategy: seeking agreement with the moderates, thus isolating radicals.
In this strategy the mediator focuses on the demands of the moderates at the centre in order to first exclude the
extremists and then make them feel obliged to join, or leave them out if necessary. Mediators should be aware
of the risks of legitimizing radical groups while undermining moderates. The mediator should not engage if the
demands of the armed group are so radical that there is no possibility of finding common ground. ‘Total spoilers’
pursue total power and exclusive recognition of their authority, opposing any peace agreement that involves
compromise and treating the peace process as a tactical manoeuvre for their own ends. Moderates are easier to
engage because they represent the central interests at stake in the conflict. They will often seek to build relations
with other moderates to develop a ‘centring’ dynamic, with mutual recognition that a settlement must be achieved
and that compromises are needed if a peace process is to take hold. However, the mediator may not have time to
co-opt the extremists. If they are the necessary ‘ticket for peace’, then the mediator will need to modify the strategy
and engage the extremists, aiming to coerce or entice them into a settlement.

At the time of implementing an agreement, moderates may lack the capacity to keep radical groups at bay. And
moderates tend to seek continuity so as not to disrupt the existing system. Radicals may take advantage of this
to renew their demands and the conflict will start up again. Northern Ireland did not have a strong centre until the
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1990s. In prior peace attempts, radicals demonstrated that they could exercise a veto over the process through violence. With the formation of a strong moderate centre, comprising the Ulster Unionist Party and the Socialist Democratic and Labour Party, the more extremist IRA was brought into the process and a settlement was achieved (Democratic Progress Institute 2013).

During the second Tuareg rebellion in Mali (1990–1996), President Moussa Traore recognized that Mali could not achieve a military solution to the conflict and he accepted offers of mediation by Algeria. Algerian mediators employed the ‘middle of the road’ strategy to bring together Tuareg groups before a milestone agreement was reached through direct talks between the Malian government and a Tuareg coalition. The mediators started by using ‘strategic sequencing’ to gather leaders of moderate rebel groups in an attempt to form a unified Tuareg voice to negotiate with the Malian government. Although not all Tuareg combatant groups were represented, after a series of discussions the Tuareg military leaders and the government signed the Accords of Tamanrasset. This led to the signing of the 1992 National Pact, a comprehensive agreement to form regional and local councils with a real devolution of power, as well as a Tuareg coalition that would later sign a milestone agreement with the government that greatly reduced violence and created institutions to change the climate of fear and distrust between all parties (Keita 1998).

The ‘strength in unity’ strategy: persuading the factions to unite.
This strategy seeks to bring fragmented groups together so as to remove the complications a mediator faces when dealing with fragmented groups. The opposition then becomes a united front with a clear voice and a set of cohesive demands. At the negotiation table, the groups are able to negotiate from a position of strength. This strategy offers a quick fix to prevent the conflict escalating further.

Macedonia avoided an all-out civil war with the brokering of the Ohrid Agreement Framework by the US and EU in 2001 (Pearson 2002). This conflict began as a struggle for power between ethnic Albanian militant groups and then spread to engulf all of Macedonia. The US saw Macedonia as the lynchpin of the Balkans and sought a quick political solution before the country plunged into civil war (Pearson 2002). US special envoy James Pardew brought the Albanian factions together and persuaded them to moderate their demands. Although the agreement was imperfect, it prevented the outbreak of total war and mandated Macedonia to implement reforms to decentralize the government and increase ethnic minority rights.

This strategy will succeed only if the fragmented groups are enticed or coerced into unifying. They must be made to see that the benefits of unity outweigh the costs of continued fragmentation. If there is division between external sponsors of the conflict, the groups will not be faced with the necessary sanctions and incentives that will persuade them to moderate their demands and form a unified opposition. And in extremely fragmented conflicts there may be no dimension of the conflict that the groups can rally around. In Macedonia, the inter-ethnic dimension of the conflict became the exit strategy for co-ethnic Albanians at war with one another (Pearson 2002).

The ‘ripeness’ strategy: making parties believe there are no more options.
According to the notion of the ‘mutually hurting stalemate’ (MHS), parties will seek to resolve their conflict only when they believe they have no other option – ‘when each party’s efforts to achieve a unilaterally satisfactory result are blocked and the parties feel trapped in an uncomfortable and costly predicament’ (Zartman & de Soto 2010, 5). The fragmented groups must believe they have reached a stalemate – and it only needs to be a perceived stalemate. The mediator’s role is to convince them that the situation is one of stalemate and that a way out exists through negotiations towards a peace process (Zartman & de Soto 2010).

Some mediators may argue that nothing can be done until this perception of an MHS exists alongside an avenue for the parties to get out of their current situation. However, simply because the moment is not ripe does not mean the mediator should remain inactive. Rather, if the mediator believes there is an MHS, the mediator can work to bring about the perception of ripeness. This can be done by explaining the importance of ending the conflict and getting the groups to consider the costs of escalating the conflict. Or it can be done through a third party, such as a media outlet or an external sponsor of one of the groups (Amson & Zartman 2005). The mediator should analyse
previous attempts at reaching a settlement or draw parallels from other fragmented conflicts to find an innovative way to convince the parties that the time is ripe to negotiate.

If mediators believe they have adequate leverage, they can threaten the conflicting parties by warning them that their relationship with a country or organization may be affected. In 2003, France brought the warring Côte d’Ivoire parties to an agreement in Marcoussis because their long-term interests with Paris outweighed the potential benefits of the conflict (Bovcon 2009).

The mediator can also apply military measures or economic incentives or sanctions. Few mediators are willing to use force to induce ripeness, but they can strengthen the weaker parties to help them defend themselves. A mediator or a ‘Group of Friends’ can extend or withhold military support. A military presence can be established to bring the parties to negotiations. In 2005 the UN and France established a Zone of Confidence in an attempt to separate the conflicting Côte d’Ivoire parties. When it comes to using economic measures to deal with fragmented rebel groups, the mediator does not have as many options. Trade agreements do not apply and general sanctions would be ineffective. But incentives such as tying economic assistance to a disarmament and demobilization, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration process can increase the attractiveness of an agreement. In Bosnia, for example, from 1996 to 1997, mediators got the international community to continue wartime sanctions on the Bosnian Serbs until they fulfilled the terms of the demilitarization outlined in the Dayton accords (Forman & Patrick 2000).

The ‘stand aside and wait’ strategy: delaying mediation until a winner emerges and ends fragmentation by defeating the other parties.

Since fragmented opposition movements create acute information and credibility problems, it may be in the mediator’s interest to stand aside and wait for them to come together before proceeding with the mediation. Where opposition movements are internally divided, the various groups will have different demands that they want met for the fighting to end. Some might, for example, demand independence and others greater political autonomy. It is in the interest of each group to overstate its demands and capabilities in order to negotiate from a position of strength. This leads to misinformation problems and uncertainty for the mediator. To further exacerbate the problem, it is difficult for opposition groups to make credible promises about the behaviour of other groups, and the groups can and do act independently of one another.

The military defeat by the LTTE of other Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups left it the only remaining armed Tamil nationalist group. Numerous organizations had claimed to represent the Tamil self-determination movement in Sri Lanka since fighting broke out in the 1970s. The ‘Tamil Five’ armed groups engaged in localized clashes over recruits, turf and influence. By 1986 the LTTE had begun eliminating rival armed groups and non-violent organizations and within a few years had sole claim on the Tamil nationalist movement. Its dominance reduced the infighting and brought the LTTE into temporary strategic parity with the Sri Lankan government (Bakke et al. 2012). Norwegian mediators then capitalized on this ripe moment and their mediation efforts led to the signing of a ceasefire agreement as a major step towards continuing peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE had become strong enough to represent Tamil interests and, having consolidated power, could drop the long-standing demand for a separate Tamil state (Destradi & Vullers 2012). This positive step led to both sides agreeing to explore the possibility of a federal solution.

The ‘stand aside and wait’ strategy seemed to have been successful. But by April 2003 the Norwegian mediation efforts had begun to crumble and the LTTE withdrew from mediated talks. The strategy worked to bring a strong LTTE and the government together but ultimately the mediation was unable to resolve the fragmentation. According to analysts of Norway’s mediation, the peace process itself exacerbated LTTE cleavages and power was dispersed between the northern and eastern leaderships (Destradi & Vullers 2012). High-profile LTTE members such as Colonel Muralitharan split from the movement, leading to a general wariness toward the peace process. The fighting that followed eventually led to the LTTE being driven from the east in 2007 and finally defeated in 2009 (Destradi & Vullers 2012).
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Conclusion

Mediators who seek to bring fragmented conflicts to an end must anticipate the reactions, possibly violent, to their strategies. They must assess and reassess which internal or external groups pose threats to the initiation or continuation of the peace process. Key factors in the mediation process are the fragmented groups’ motives, internal and external sources of power and levels of influence and support. Mediators must diagnose each group’s motives for attacking the process or refusing to implement an agreement. Identification of spoilers is essential to the formation of an effective strategy. In cases of fragmentation the mediator must choose the strategy that is appropriate for the type of conflict and the demands of the conflicting groups. It may be necessary to use more than one strategy, either combining strategies or using them in sequence. And the mediator may need to modify a strategy as the conflict progresses.

The ‘departing train’ strategy achieved a positive settlement in Northern Ireland. Only the most powerful mediator can use this strategy because a great deal of leverage will be needed. All the parties must feel represented and protected. If the mediator fails to stop a spoiler destabilizing the process, then the process comes to a halt and the train crashes.

The ‘middle of the road’ strategy depends on the time available to the mediator. It will not succeed if fragmentation is too acute and diffuse or if the moderates do not wield adequate power or continue to buy into the status quo. In those cases the peace agreement will not be implemented or, if it is, the original causes of the conflict will flare up again.

The ‘strength in unity’ strategy offers a quick solution where a conflict may escalate. The US and EU were able to employ this strategy in Macedonia in order to bring the various Albanian factions together and ultimately prevent the outbreak of war in that country. But if there is no way to bridge the divide, the mediator will fail to unify the groups.

The ‘ripeness’ strategy requires an active mediator. In the case of Côte d’Ivoire, France had the necessary leverage to bring the warring factions to an agreement. This strategy was also used in Bosnia in the lead-up to the Dayton Accords. But it will not succeed if the mediator does not have the diplomatic, military or economic resources to persuade the conflicting groups that the situation is ripe.

The ‘stand aside and wait’ strategy can be used only if the mediator believes that one warring group is likely to defeat the others, thus ending fragmentation. This strategy is particularly risky because it entails moral dilemmas and could even spark a humanitarian crisis. The LTTE’s consolidation of power in Sri Lanka enabled Norway to begin mediating between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, but the mediation eventually failed because of fragmentation within the LTTE. The strategy will not succeed if it sparks a humanitarian crisis, if one party is guilty of crimes against humanity, or if the strongest party is deemed inimical to the international community’s interests. For example, even if ISIS were able to coerce or co-opt all the other rebel groups in Syria, the international community would pressure the mediator to find a different strategy to end the conflict.

The decision on whether to use the ‘ripeness’ or the ‘stand aside and wait’ strategy will depend on the trade-off between mediation and the rising costs of the conflict. It will be a difficult choice between actively ‘ripening’ the conflict or passively waiting for the warring groups to reach a ‘plateau’ on their own.

The vicious circle of alliance shifts and fragmentation is likely to go on until a mediator can provide an avenue for settlement. Thus, sustained engagement by constructive mediators is essential for managing highly fragmented conflicts.
References


