

Scratching below the surface: what can local peace agreements tell us about armed groups and conflict fragmentation, writes Juline Beaujouan, Tim Epple, Robert Wilson and Laura Wise

The call for an immediate global ceasefire launched by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on March 23, 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been backed by some 70 states and answered by conflict parties in at least 9 countries around the world. In some of the most protracted contemporary conflicts, such as in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the global call was briefly touted as a possible opportunity to re-energise stalled or struggling national peace talks. However, this optimism was short lived following sustained clashes in Idlib (Syria), escalated confrontations in Tripoli (Libya), and continued advances by Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic is the latest threat to already-struggling Track 1, national-level peace processes, locally-led attempts to mitigate or end violent conflict in contexts across MENA and sub-Saharan Africa remain ongoing, albeit under extremely difficult circumstances. The prevalence of local peace processes in the absence of sustained progress of national mediation efforts has led to more focussed attention on this phenomenon in recent years, and in this post we draw on a new collection of local peace agreements to reflect on the state of contemporary conflict management and peacemaking in an increasingly fragmented world.

The fragmentation of conflict management and peacemaking

A closer look at conflict and socio-political dynamics in MENA and sub-Saharan Africa reveals the multi-level fragmentation of conflict-affected countries: the geographical and identity fragmentation where the state and society are divided in times of conflict and peace. The discord of those countries can be understood as where the state itself is not only fragmented but it is also only one fragment within a complex constellation of groups positioned by geography and identity – groups who bargain for peace at the national and the local level. As such, both theatres – the national and the local – are sites of conflict and peace where groups' motivations, strategies and affiliations shift over time. The vacuum of power and legitimacy left by this fragmentation results in the multiplication of warring parties – often in the form of armed groups – which impose their rule over parts of the national territory.

These dynamics of localisation and fragmentation of conflicts echo a development that can be observed not only in Syria, Yemen and Libya in the MENA region, but also in the Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and South Sudan in sub-Saharan Africa. We suggest that these conflicts could be better described as sets of complex conflict systems that are nested within the local, regional, national, and international levels. These dynamics are also mirrored in processes of conflict management and peacemaking, which sometimes respond to this complexity by brokering and signing agreements between locally-based and other actors within a part of the wider conflict-affected area. Researchers, peacebuilders and policymakers are increasingly interested as to whether locally brokered commitments could provide a necessary complement, if not an alternative approach, when national peace initiatives have stalled, to foster an all-encompassing and more inclusive peace.

Introducing the PA-X Local Peace Agreements Database

At the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) we are investigating the fragmentation and localisation of conflict management and peacemaking through a collection of almost 300 local peace agreements. PA-X Local is the first open-access database of publicly available written local peace agreements from across a global set of conflict-affected contexts. The agreements, which span from 1990 to 2019, were signed between locally-based and other actors to address local conflict-generating grievances only within a part of the wider conflict-affected area, rather than the entire conflict zone. PA-X Local offers a glimpse into the processes and outcomes of local peacemaking, including information on how it relates to any national peace process.

This collection of local peace agreements raises the potential for analysing patterns in local peacemaking over time and across varying contexts, as well as exploring any links between local, regional and national-level peace processes. It also helps us to better understand the practices of highly localised actors, their influence on wider conflict dynamics, and their interactions with actors more embedded in the national-level process whose wider conflict agendas ultimately shape conditions at the local level. PA-X Local exposes the diversity of local peace agreements, that are highly dependent on the local settings where the conflict takes place and is managed between local parties. This includes the emphasis on categories of substantive issues addressed by local agreements: use of rituals and prayer; acknowledgement of grievances; references to cattle rustling or livestock theft; and, removal of social cover.

Here are three initial observations on dynamics of conflict and peacemaking that have emerged from our review of local peace agreements.

Observation 1: The diversity of actors in local peacemaking

The diversity of actors involved in the signing of local peace

agreements echoes the plethora of contextual settings in conflict-affected countries. It also highlights how those settings shape the nature and scope of local commitments to cease hostilities. For instance, the negotiation and signature of local peace agreements often give a prime role to representatives – such as religious leaders, community elders or civic society groups – whose credentials and legitimacy are grounded within the local community. The Resolutions of the Marsabit-Moyale District Peace Committees' Civic Dialogue in Kenya in 2006 is a good example of the diverse inclusion of local actors within a peace process that aimed to resolve issues around cattle rustling and communal insecurity in the district. This diversity also raises the question as to whether local peace processes may offer greater inclusion of women, or if women still face different and contextual barriers to participation than they do to access national negotiations.

Within this diversity of local peacemakers, there can also be a duality of role which is highly contextual. In Yemen, the title of Sheikh is often synonymous with leadership and tends to be listed alongside other prominent societal or community figureheads in agreements. Their role tends to convey a sense of civic responsibility, calling for agreements and representing the interests of the communities, tribes or specific armed actors involved, and functioning either as mediators, facilitators or witnesses. As local actors however, their true alignment continues to appear amorphous. The title can convey a sense of religious or tribal identity or community representation, however often they cannot be disentangled from the complex web of armed actors.

Nonetheless, this diverse participation of hyper-local actors does not necessarily suggest an absence of the state. In the case of intercommunal conflicts, the latter may play a key role in the mediation phase that brings all potential signing parties around the same table. Conversely, the signing of

countless local agreements between armed groups in Syria has come to enshrine the quasi-absence of the state in local conflict management across different parts of the country. This diversity of actors suggests that not only does localisation of peacemaking raise challenges for peace process designs that anticipates the state to be one of the parties, but that those wishing to support local peace processes may need to look beyond 'the usual suspects' for finding mediators and brokers with the requisite local legitimacy to engage with the process.

Observation 2: The role of religious rules, rituals, and prayer in local peacemaking

In both the MENA and sub-Saharan regions, the religious credentials of some armed groups are mirrored in the texts of local peace agreements. These religious references can include the inclusion of religious rules, including the Islamic Shariah law, to settle specific cases or provide implementation mechanisms for elements of the agreement, as in an agreement between the al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army, in 2014 in Idlib. Other religious references in local peace agreements include sealing the agreement through shared Christian worship, such as the 1999 Waat Lou Nuer Covenant in South Sudan and swearing an oath on the Koran by members of a local community as part of the 2019 Procès verbal de gestion de conflit in CAR.

Religious actors, rituals, and prayers do feature in national and internationalised peace processes, such as the Papal benediction in 1998 as part of the Ecuador-Peru border dispute peace process. However, the inclusion of religious rules, rituals and prayer appears to be more prevalent and central in local peace agreements than national ones, and in some instances the inclusion of religious references may account for the importance of religious identity as an additional layer within nested conflicts.

Observation 3: The variety of purposes and functions of local agreements

Local agreements serve a variety of purposes. While some local peace agreements may be regarded as crucial steps for the broader peace process, others pursue more limited and immediate goals, such as allowing humanitarian access or solving daily disputes over natural resources. Interestingly, some agreements challenge our notion of agreements functioning as peaceful tools for conflict management. In Syria and Yemen for instance, a number of local peace agreements were used as tactical tools to manage the conduct of warfare in order to improve outcomes for certain groups within the broader peace settlement, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham response to an initiative to end the conflict with Harar al-Shamin July 2017, or the 2014 agreement between the Tihami Movement and Ansar Allah. In other instances, agreements that provided for a cessation of hostilities in one locale, displaced warfare to another area, or reiterated commitments of signing parties to their struggle against a third actor. In fact, the majority of local agreements signed in Syria are assertions of the commitment of the non-state armed groups to sustain their struggle against central rule.

Yet in other contexts, local peace agreements may have positive knock-on effects. Local agreements can help contain violence in some instances, inspire peacemaking in neighbouring areas by demonstrating their effectiveness, or even improve conditions for brokering peace at the national level. For instance, the 'people-to-people' processes facilitated by the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) in South Sudan led to the signing of a series of local peace agreements, including the Wunlit Dinka Nuer Covenant and Resolutions in 1999. While this series of agreements was not technically linked to a national process between the government in Khartoum and South Sudanese opposition forces, the 'people-to-people' process contributed to the creation of

a peace movement in southern Sudan and fostered 'Southern unity.'

Conclusions

In this post, and throughout our work with local peace agreements more broadly, we have argued that we cannot understand the increasing fragmentation of conflict management and peacemaking without turning our collective attention to peace processes beyond national arenas of peacemaking, and analysing the involvement of armed groups in local peace processes. Through our own efforts to research this, by compiling PA-X Local and through Joint Analysis Workshops with actors involved in local peace processes, we suggest that local peace processes are a global practice across diverse conflict settings, and the documents resulting from this practice are just one initial avenue for shedding light on the opportunities and challenges that local peace processes pose.

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