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Analysis:

Constructing the Legitimacy of Mediators

IN SHORT

The legitimacy of mediators is not a fixed attribute; it is actively constructed in specific relationships. In working with conflict parties, legitimacy is critical for mediators to secure access, build trust, and support effective peace processes. Yet the landscape of peace mediation is changing and with it the notion of what constitutes a legitimate mediator. Traditional Western and multilateral actors are playing a less prominent role in many peace processes, while states such as Qatar, Türkiye and China are expanding their mediation efforts. At the same time, private mediation organizations face growing questions about how they add value in an increasingly crowded field. The sources of legitimacy available to most private mediation organizations supporting peace processes differ from those available to state and intergovernmental lead mediators. While the legitimacy of lead mediators in high-level peace processes is often rooted in political endorsement, private mediation organizations derive legitimacy primarily from expertise, impartiality, independence, flexibility, long-term engagement, and trusted relationships.

This paper examines how mediators construct legitimacy and the different claims they make to justify their role in conflict resolution. It identifies six sources of legitimacy — institutional position, principled commitments, expertise, relational capital, resources, and individual attributes — and explores how these are emphasized by both private mediation organizations and also by powerful state mediators. Drawing on an analysis of the public narratives of private mediation organizations and examples from active state mediators, the paper highlights contrasting approaches to building trust, securing access to conflict parties, and demonstrating relevance in contemporary peace processes.

Understanding how legitimacy is constructed makes visible the distinction between legitimacy grounded in political authority and power relationships, and legitimacy grounded in social relationships and professional credibility. It can also help mediators identify areas of comparative advantage and adapt to a changing mediation environment. Although growing geopolitical competition has made the mediation field more crowded and contested, the core sources of legitimacy available to private mediation organizations have remained relatively consistent. Private and state mediators can combine their distinct strengths to support more sustainable peace processes.

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Why do conflict parties choose to engage with one mediator over another? For mediators and third parties, their legitimacy is critical for securing access and building trust. Legitimacy is the subjective belief in the rightfulness of some actor's engagement, and it results in deference to that actor.[1] Coercion and material incentives matter, but sustainable peace depends on durable changes.

Those changes are more likely when conflict parties accept the role of mediators and are willing to defer to them in some way. For example, according to Duursma, many African leaders and conflict parties in Africa share norms around sovereignty, anti-colonialism, and nonalignment. Sharing these principled commitments might enhance the legitimacy and subsequently the effectiveness of African mediators in the continent.[2]

Conflict parties differ in why they might defer to a particular mediator. For example, state actors might prefer mediators with institutional authority to manage an interstate dispute, while separatist groups seeking a role at the negotiating table might particularly value expertise in conflict analysis and process design. In addition to these different reasons for deference, the supply of mediators is shifting. According to recent data on the role of third parties in peace agreements, Western countries are signatories to fewer agreements and countries like Kenya, Qatar and Türkiye are becoming more engaged in peace processes.[3]

This paper explores legitimation: how different kinds of mediators construct legitimacy through claims about their expertise, relationships, resources, and values.[4] Comparing private mediators with states increasingly engaged in mediation offers practical insights into a changing peacemaking landscape.

The Different Bases of Legitimacy

There are at least six types of legitimation claims that mediators make to the conflict parties and other stakeholders.[5] Mediators might refer to their institutional position, their proven knowledge, their resources, their relational capital, their principles, or their individual attributes.

- **Institutional positions** can strengthen or weaken legitimacy. The diplomats and special envoys of state and multilateral actors bring delegated authority, where some group of states or powerful leaders have given them the task of peace mediation. On the other hand, institutional office holders may be constrained by rules and bureaucracy. Private mediators' independence and unofficial status can feed perceptions that they are more flexible, discrete, and innovative, but typically it comes with no official endorsement.
- **Principled commitments** to impartiality, inclusion, consent, and transparency may help conflict parties believe that the mediator will construct and lead a process that is fair to them and others. These process-based principles may be particularly important when the outcomes are uncertain. For these principles to enhance legitimacy, they need to be important to the conflict party.
- **Proven knowledge** about some aspect of conflict response is central to mediator legitimacy. This expertise can include knowledge about general conflict dynamics, a deep understanding of a specific context, process design skills, and/or knowledge of international law. Such claims must be supported by verifiable credentials, demonstrated local knowledge, or a track record of effectiveness.
- **Relational capital** is another reason mediators might be seen as legitimate. Strong networks help with communication and commitment at global and local levels. Global networks can help mediators leverage power and resources. Locally, insider mediators may enjoy higher legitimacy due to higher trust, greater familiarity, and a sense that they have a shared stake in the outcome.
- **Resources** can enhance or complicate the perception that the mediator's involvement is legitimate. Financial, political, economic and coercive resources can provide leverage or incentivize agreement. However, powerful actors risk being perceived as overly intrusive, so mediators with fewer resources may appear less threatening and thus more acceptable to some conflicting parties.
- Finally, **individual attributes** — including professional background, religious identity, geographical location, or national origin — can foster trust. These are characteristics of the mediator that may appeal to conflict parties, and mediators can choose whether to foreground these characteristics in their legitimation efforts.

The Legitimacy of Private Mediators

While private mediation groups are not homogeneous, there are some clear patterns in how they describe themselves in their public communication. Collectively, these statements offer insight into how the private mediation field understands its role in the current international landscape. We reviewed the annual reports, strategic plans, and websites of thirty-five dialogue and mediation groups.[6] These unofficial peacemaking groups are largely Western, were founded in the 1990s and 2000s, and are members of the UN Mediation Support Network or other umbrella organizations.[7] We searched for the frequency with which four types of legitimation claims appeared, and categorized these claims as having high emphasis, low emphasis, or absent. The table below summarizes the frequency with which each type of legitimation claim appeared in our sample.

Expertise and humility are both heavily emphasized by these private groups. In a crowded mediation field of multilateral agencies and active states, these are two essential ways for private mediators to differentiate themselves. Almost all private mediation groups emphasize their expertise and knowledge that can be of service to others. For example, strengthening mediation capacity is one of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's three strategic goals (2024–27). To do this, "HD mediation teams will provide conflict parties and trusted third parties with creative ideas, technical and thematic expertise, and tailored proposals on how to design peace negotiations and agreements."

There is a risk that outsider experts could be seen as imposing solutions, however, so many organizations equally emphasize empowerment, accompaniment, and local support as ways to foreground the importance of humility. For example, Search for Common Ground describes its strategy as "locally rooted, globally connected" and reports that its largest impact is in expanding individual and collective agency. These claims to expertise and humility are important for private mediators whose relational capital at the global and local levels allows them to serve as brokers. In some conflicts, this commitment to service and the non-coercive nature of private mediators may make them more attractive in comparison to state actors with clear strategic interests and the means to use leverage.

A claim to independence is a way to highlight the flexibility and relative openness of these private groups. Most organizations briefly mention their private, unofficial, or independent status with little elaboration of what that means for their work. For example, the strategic plan of the Berghof Foundation begins by briefly describing the organization as an "independent, non-governmental and non-profit organization," but a principled commitment to independence does not receive further attention. The issue of independence is a delicate one for dialogue and mediation NGOs, as their funding depends heavily on official donors and their relational capital comes in part from their connections to states and multilaterals.

Impartiality, or the idea of treating the parties with equal concern, has long been thought of as a mediation "fundamental" (Whitfield 2024).[8] For example, CMI writes that "[o]ur impartiality ensures that we act without a political agenda, for the benefit of peace, and without biases towards any party or interest." Attention to needs alone and engaging as a facilitator rather than stakeholder is a classic outsider conception of conflict resolution. Yet there is diversity among private mediators in how they foreground impartiality claims in their public narratives. Inter Mediate places high emphasis on impartiality. It is the first principle listed in their approach, where the organization "does not seek to advance any parties' agenda or any particular political ideology." By contrast, Conciliation Resources does not use the words impartiality or neutrality in their strategic plan or self-description, but highlights that their work involves "connecting, convening and facilitating."

The different orientations towards impartiality also reflect how organizations understand their own role and added value in conflict resolution. Some organizations place greater emphasis on supporting local actors and communities, viewing solidarity with affected populations as essential for addressing the structural drivers of conflict and fostering more just outcomes. Others argue that maintaining impartiality and access to all conflict parties is critical for facilitating dialogue and engaging relevant actors in peace processes. These differing approaches suggest that understandings of impartiality are often shaped by where organizations locate their comparative advantage and focus within the broader peacebuilding ecosystem.

	Independence (institutional)	Impartiality (principled)	Expertise (knowledge)	Humility (principled, relational)
No mention	5	1	0	0
Low emphasis	23	22	4	3
High emphasis	7	13	31	32

The Legitimacy of State Mediators

Global peace mediation is undergoing a significant transformation. The role of multilateral organizations is evolving, influential middle powers like Qatar and Türkiye enjoy more prominent roles, and new bodies are emerging, including the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed) and the Board of Peace. These mediators also legitimate their approaches to gain access to conflict parties. The legitimacy of a state mediator in high-level peace processes is usually derived from endorsement by influential international, regional, and national power brokers. Effective leverage depends on recognition and support from actors with political authority and military power. Such backing generates a form of legitimacy that is inherently political in nature. This differs from the legitimacy available to private mediation organizations. Still, as private mediators consider how to distinguish themselves in a changing peace mediation field, there are emergent patterns of legitimation claims among these state actors.

Those different approaches to constructing and justifying organizational legitimacy are visible in Foreign Ministry white papers, press releases, founding documents, and speeches. This category of powerful, active state mediators is diverse and growing, so the examples below are illustrative rather than a systematic comparison among a fixed group.

The resources of state actors may invite deference out of a pragmatic consideration that powerful mediators are most likely to change conflict dynamics. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio argued in August 2025 that "we happen to be in the role of the only country in the world with the only leader in the world who can actually bring Putin to a table to even discuss these things." In addition, the institutional positions of diplomats and special envoys can imbue peace processes with political recognition and a sense of seriousness, which may be attractive to conflict parties.

Compared to private mediation groups, state mediators put little emphasis on their expertise. A potential exception is China. In launching IOMed, China sought to create an intergovernmental institution that would serve as an alternative dispute settlement institution that combines expertise in civil law and common law in its Hong Kong headquarters. That expertise is still aspirational, however, so IOMed, China, and emergent mediators may face questions about their capacity to move parties through conflict resolution processes.

The relational capital held by state mediators may also be different from that of private organizations. China's extensive economic ties and its position of neutrality in regional conflicts support its efforts to maintain "friendly and balanced relations" with all countries.[9] In 2022, Türkiye's legitimacy as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine drew on what President Erdoğan described as a foreign policy of 'balance' built on strong economic ties with both parties.[10] These states may serve as brokers to enhance communication across diverse actors. It is not clear that those wide relational networks are accompanied by deep trust.

Broad engagement with stakeholders can enhance mediator legitimacy by signaling inclusiveness and a deep understanding of conflict dynamics. Thus, from a legitimacy perspective, perhaps the biggest challenge to some of the private mediators from these state actors is their greater willingness to directly engage with many different types of groups engaged in conflict. Over the past two decades, sanctions against a variety of violent groups have limited the ability of Western states and some multilaterals to engage in wide-ranging dialogue. This meant that private actors were often the only way for some conflict parties to reach powerful states. The new approach to wide engagement, particularly evident in the mediation efforts of Gulf states, threatens to cut out the NGO brokers. Alternately, however, wide engagement with elites by state mediators could complement bottom-up inclusion work of many mediation NGOs.

Legitimacy Challenges in Shifting Global Landscape

The field of global peace mediation has moved to the center of geopolitics and is getting even more crowded. This does not change the need for peace mediators to build their legitimacy, but the growing supply of conflict mediators may not improve mediation outcomes. On one hand, a bigger pool of mediators could allow local actors to find partners that they believe will best accompany them through conflict response processes. Given that some forms of legitimacy depend on shared values, close cultural ties, or deep relationships, conflict parties now have more choices and may find mediators with whom they feel a closer affinity. Yet there is a potential downside to this, as greater legitimacy in the eyes of one conflict party does not automatically equate with greater effectiveness. More options can allow conflict parties to engage in forum shopping, selecting third-party mediators who will not push them on difficult questions around the root causes of conflict.

For NGOs who have staked their legitimacy on their ability to reach civil society actors and engage with sanctioned groups to build more inclusive peace agreements, there is real concern about whether they can add legitimacy to peace processes in a changing mediation landscape. The discussion above focused on how mediators construct their legitimacy vis-à-vis the conflict stakeholders, but the participation of NGOs in peacemaking also depends on their perceived legitimacy with other powerful mediators. The post-Cold War liberal peacebuilding model offered expansive space for civil society actors, evident in the UN's Mediation Support Network that connected to many non-governmental organizations. The UN's engagement in peacemaking has weakened. In recent years, geopolitical divisions among Security Council members have frequently hampered the Council's ability to respond to major conflicts and crises, raising concerns about its effectiveness in crisis management and conflict resolution. In the meantime powerful state mediators are leading peace processes outside the UN framework, but often with an intention to connecting it back to the UN framework and the UN Security Council at some point, notably for legitimacy.

Yet all is not lost for the private mediation organizations that emphasize the role of civil society and highlight the need for inclusive, comprehensive peace processes. There is, for instance, real complementarity between the non-Western mediators with access to many state parties and private mediation groups able to engage deeply with subnational groups and regional actors.

Cooperation could thus yield more sustainable peacebuilding. State mediators such as China and Qatar may still benefit from partnering with private mediators as they develop mediation expertise and seek access to local actors. States might also work with small private groups to push back against the perception that coercive power and national interests will drive their mediation efforts. For private mediators, frank and open discussion with state mediators and new mediation platforms about areas of common interest will allow them to make the case that their expertise and humility are key assets in reducing violence and advancing sustainable peace processes.

1) Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Contestation in Global Governance," The Review of International Organizations 14/4 (2019): 717–29.

2) Allard Duursma, 'African Solutions to African Challenges: The Role of Legitimacy in Mediating Civil Wars in Africa', International Organization, 74/2 (2020), pp. 295–330, doi:10.1017/S0020818320000015.

3) Sanja Badanjak, Third Parties in Peace Agreements: First Look at New Data and Key Trends (Edinburgh: PeaceRep, University of Edinburgh, 2023), DOI: 10.7488/era/5190

4) Unlike states and intergovernmental organizations, private mediation organizations do not typically serve as lead mediators in high-level peace processes. Rather, they contribute to peace mediation through facilitation, dialogue support, process design, capacity building, and relationship-building among conflict stakeholders.

5) Deborah D. Avant, Martha Finnemore and Susan K. Sell (eds.), Who Governs the Globe? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6) In alphabetical order: ACCORD, Berghof, Carter Center, CCSP, CINEP, HD, Clingendael, CMI, Conciliation Resources, Concordis, Conflict Dynamics International, DAG, European Institute of Peace, Forward Thinking, Inclusive Peace, IFIT, Inter Mediate, International Alert, International Crisis Group, Interpeace, Life and Peace Institute, NOREF, Ottawa Dialogue, Peace Direct, Promediation, Puntland Development and Research Center, Saferworld, Sant' Egidio, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Search for Common Ground, Serapaz, Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network, Swisspeace, US Institute of Peace, and WANEP.

7) Identifying a distinct private mediation field is challenging, as some groups are quasi-governmental while others are more research- and less action-oriented. The sample here includes members of the MSN or those featured in a 2024 PRIO study of private peace facilitation organizations. It also includes several additional members of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office or the Alliance for Peacebuilding. The 2024 PRIO study is Antoni Sastre Bel and Øystein H. Rolandsen, The EU and Peace Facilitation Organizations: Peace Multipliers or Cats to Be Herded?, PRIO Policy Brief No. 20 (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2024).

8) Whitfield, Teresa, ed. Still Time to Talk: Adaptation and Innovation in Peace Mediation. Accord 30. London: Conciliation Resources, 2024.

9) Shinji Yamaguchi, 'China's Role in Conflict Mediation in the Middle East: Normalization of Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the 2023 Israel-Hamas War', Asia-Pacific Review, 30, no. 3 (2023), pp. 99–114, doi:10.1080/13439006.2023.2295705.

10) Buğra Süsler and Chris Alden, 'Brokering Peace: Emerging Middle Powers, Agency and Mediation', Global Policy, 17 (Supplement) (2026), pp. S33–S44, doi:10.1111/1758-5899.70100.

CONCLUSIONS /

- Mediator legitimacy is not an inherent attribute but a social relationship. Different conflict parties may view the same mediator as legitimate for different reasons. Effective mediation requires careful attention to how legitimacy is perceived and constructed in specific contexts.

- Private mediation organizations supporting peace processes ground their legitimacy often in expertise, flexibility, and humility, allowing them to engage with local actors, support inclusive processes, and complement the efforts of more powerful state and multilateral mediators.

- State mediators, often leading high-level negotiations such as Qatar, Türkiye, and China derive legitimacy from different sources, including institutional authority and endorsement by influential international, regional, and national power brokers, material resources, and wide relationships. As their role expands, they will face increasing expectations to demonstrate their expertise and build trust across diverse stakeholders.

- Private mediation actors see that legitimacy is strengthened when conflict parties view mediation processes as inclusive, fair, and relevant to their concerns. To build more sustainable peace agreements, mediators should engage a broad range of stakeholders and ensure that peace processes are responsive to local needs, grievances, and perspectives.

- The diversification of the mediation field creates new opportunities for conflict parties to engage with mediators whose approaches, values, and relationships they find credible. On the other hand, a larger pool of mediators may encourage forum shopping and increase competition among third parties and potentially undermine legitimacy.

- Building cooperative relationships within an increasingly diverse mediation landscape is important. Mediation organizations could further explore how different sources of legitimacy interact, where they are mutually reinforcing, and where tensions may emerge.

- The future of peacemaking is likely to depend on greater complementarity among mediators. Partnerships that combine the authority and resources of state actors with the expertise, flexibility, and local engagement of private mediators may be better positioned to support sustainable peace processes.

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