



IPI MEETING BRIEF

Lost in Transition: UN Mediation in Libya, Syria, and Yemen

The Arab uprisings, and the wars they have descended into, have challenged the capacity of the UN system to resolve conflict. The traditional tools of mediation have been called into question as envoys have been asked to mediate political transitions rather than help implement peace after civil wars. Mediation efforts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen have also illustrated more fundamental limitations that the world organization is now confronting. As UN mediators continue to work in these conflicts, and as the prospects of new mediation efforts in similar political transitions arise, there is a need to rethink the main challenges mediators face and the new skills they require to confront them.

This was the central debate at the launch of IPI's report "[Lost in Transition: UN Mediation in Libya, Syria, and Yemen](#)" on Wednesday November 30, 2016, at the German Mission to the United Nations. This event brought together a group of diplomats and UN officials, many of them directly involved in these processes. The following main points emerged out of this discussion:

1. UN mediation has traditionally focused on reconciliation between parties after conflict, particularly civil wars. However, mediators during the Arab uprisings have engaged in political transitions. Though not totally unprecedented, this calls for a closer look at the way the UN should intervene to resolve conflict today.
2. In particular, facilitating a transition requires a reassessment of the tools traditionally used to mediate conflict. Impartiality stands out as one of the key principles of mediation that is impossible to maintain while trying to facilitate regime change.
3. The Security Council has at times provided essential support, but more often it has played a negative role, preventing mediators from performing their function. The role of providing "good offices" has been undermined by the permanent members, both as a group and at times unilaterally, making it difficult for mediators to distinguish themselves from the positions represented in the chamber. The role and impact of the great powers in certain conflicts need to be analyzed and factored into the mediation process.
4. The gap between theory and practice in mediation is inescapable. The implementation of inclusivity, a basic principle of mediation, is a case in point. Though the importance of inclusivity to resolving conflict is self-explanatory, it is extremely difficult for a mediator to be properly inclusive. For example, while the inclusion of civil society is often encouraged in negotiations to resolve conflict, the problem is choosing which representatives actually get to participate. The result is that the mediator is forced to be pragmatic and realistic as to what is achievable.