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International Mediation, Identity Construction, and Normative Change

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Abstract

In this article, I argue the following: mediation can operate as an arena in which identities are reconstructed while the very occurrence of mediation can trigger and fuel processes of identity reconstruction. More precisely, the norms promoted through mediation can serve to reconstruct the identities of the conflict parties. I will make this claim by examining two contemporary instances of mediation in Syria and Yemen, cases which diverge in the third-party peacemaking approach taken. I investigate these cases by gathering and thematically analyzing an original qualitative dataset comprising 74 semi-structured interviews, 50 press conferences, and 110 official documents. My analysis challenges existing literature concerning the intertwinement of norms, identity, and mediation; contributes to our understanding of how identities in Syria and Yemen were transformed following the revolutions of 2011; and interrogates traditional understandings of the purpose and effects of mediation.

Keywords

mediation – identity – norms – Syria – Yemen – UN

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The rallies which engulfed Syria and Yemen in 2011 have been characterized as a revolution for dignity and rights.[2] However, Afrah Nassar, a Yemeni journalist, has also portrayed the demonstrations as having represented a chance to 'imagine a different Yemen' (Adada & Allahoum 2021). The opportunity to reshape the nations of Syria and Yemen through rebellion was frustrated and undermined, although insurrectionist undercurrents persist (Alrifai & Zelin 2021; Al Jazeera 2021). My contention is that this process of identity mutation seeped into the international mediation efforts launched to promote peace in Syria and Yemen once the revolutions gave way to violence. More precisely, mediators, potentially in partnership with the conflict parties, may re-sculpt conflict parties' identities in a bid to foster particular norms during third-party peace negotiations.

I begin by briefly navigating scholarship concerning the intertwinement of identity, conflict, and peace before defining the concepts of identity and norms. I then introduce the practice of mediation; assess existing arguments surrounding the relationship between identity, norms, and mediation; and chart and contrast the peace processes in Syria and Yemen between 2011 and 2014. After presenting the methods used to build my claims, I analyze the national aspirations of the Syrian and Yemeni people constructed through the mediation efforts. To conclude, I explore the broader implications of my analysis for our understanding of identity in Syria and Yemen and the very purpose and effects of mediation.

Identity, Conflict, and Peace

Identity and conflict have long been considered to be entangled. For many, identity incites and stokes division and violence. Huntington (1993: 22), of course, made the much-maligned argument that "the fundamental source of conflict" in the post-Cold War era "will be cultural": "the principal conflicts of global politics," he declared, "will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations." We could also consider Horowitz (1995: 7), who posited that "ethnic identity is strongly felt … and ethnicity is often accompanied by hostility toward outgroups"; Sadowski (1998: 22), who speculated that "sealing the peace in ethnic conflicts may prove harder"; and Mitzen (2006b: 342), who

2 This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/P000762/1. Transcripts of interviews conducted by the author are confidential and cannot be openly shared. Details on the press conferences and official documents consulted can be made available on request.

contended that a desire "to create cognitive and behavioral certainty," or to maintain a stable sense of self, can mean states "become attached to conflict" (for further examples, see Fierke 1996; Coakley 2012; Mälksoo 2015). It has also been suggested that conflict itself shapes identity in ways which entrench divisions, reducing the likelihood of peace (Todd 2018: 86; Chandra 2012). As Bar-Tal (2013: 3) phrases it, "leaders and their followers … form a socio-psychological repertoire composed of beliefs, attitudes, values, motivations, emotions, and patterns of behaviors that lead to conflicts and their escalation." Violence is further assumed to "shatter group belonging," rupturing identities and demanding their remaking (Bachleitner 2021b: 181; see also Hirschberger 2018; Alexander 2012). To summarize, oppositional identities, it is assumed, can provoke war; moreover, violence itself can damage and disrupt identities, and cement identities steeped in antagonism, thereby prolonging conflict.

These contentions have, however, been challenged. Gartzke and Gleditsch (2006: 55) find, on the contrary, that "ties of similarity rather than difference more often give rise to conflict." However, even if claims surrounding the relationship between identity and conflict are exaggerated, the sense endures that "explanations of the initiation, reproduction, and transformation of conflict are thin without reference to processes of identity consolidation and change" (Rumelili & Todd 2018: 3). Indeed, identity has been incorporated not only into literature concerning conflict but, also, regarding peace. Bar-Tal (2013: 323–24), for example, asserts that, to build peace, societies must gradually change "their fundamental views about the conflict, the goals, the rival, the relationship with the rival, their own group, their past"; in other words, they must change their identities (see also Berger 1996; Lederach 1997; Kelman 1997; Strömbom 2014; Khoury 2018). Furthermore, Rumelili & Strömbom (2021: 1361) observe that, "during the last few years, distinct literatures have developed in peace studies exploring how the concepts and processes of recognition, identity and ontological security intersect with peace processes." A crucial insight has been generated: specifically, that while identity change is a prerequisite for sustainable peace, transformations in self-understanding can, in turn, "trigger ontological insecurity" and thus undermine stability and harmony (Rumelili & Strömbom 2021: 1362). As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, conflict can solidify group identities, and ossify antagonistic relationships with others as communities' sense of self is defined in opposition to their enemies. As these antagonistic narratives are challenged and softened through conflict resolution, a group's identity is shaken, potentially inducing "a state of anxiety, panic, [and] uncertainty" (Rumelili & Strömbom 2021: 1364). This can lead to a 'backlash' against peace (Rumelili & Strömbom 2021: 1364; Rumelili 2015: 2–3). This has been ignored, so argues Rumelili (2015: 3), by peacebuilders who have assumed

"that members of conflict societies are in essence liberal subjects … who are willing to strip themselves of their particularistic identity narratives and identify with the other in the interest of peace."

These insights concern peacebuilding, although Bar-Tal (2013: 325) has contended that "the essence of peacemaking is psychological." However, the relationship between identity and a specific form of peacemaking, mediation, has faced neglect. I will demonstrate this later in the article. First, I will define the concepts of identity and norms, both of which are crucial to my overall argument that mediators may attempt to promote normative change within third-party peacemaking through reshaping the identities of the conflict parties.

Defining Identity and Norms

Identity

Much of the literature cited in the previous section depends upon a constructivist conception of identity, one in which identities "are continuously contested, imagined and reimagined, transformed and negotiated, both by their members and through their interactions with others" (Tully 1995: 11). As Abdelal et al. (2006: 700) state, "contestation" over the "content" of identities "is crucial to the meaning of social groups": identities "evolve," are "challenged" (Abdelal et al. 2006: 700), and "are not carved in stone" (Wendt 1999: 21, 36). Indeed, identities are the "basic character" of groups, denoting their "images of individuality and distinctiveness" (Jepperson et al. 1996: 33, 59), and they are shared: "social identities convey a sense of 'we-ness,'" of cohesion (Risse 2011: 25). Crucially, identities are constructed by group members; they are created as actors "make sense of who they are and what they want" (Risse 2011: 20), as meaning is given to the past and to the future (Berenskötter 2014: 264). Identities are thus "collectively shared social constructions" based upon "collective narratives of a common fate, a common history, and a common culture" (Risse 2011: 9, 25–6). They are not "presocially given," and do not objectively exist and lie "waiting to be discovered" (Risse 2011: 20). We therefore need to gain an awareness of the "self-understandings of group members" in order to gain an appreciation of a given identity (Risse 2011: 20). Moreover, as Flesken (2017: 54) argues, "examining identity change requires detailing which elements change and who or what impels these changes."

There are further aspects to the concept of identity which underpin the research undertaken here. Firstly, it is assumed that members of a political elite

play a vital role in constructing, reconstructing, and deconstructing identities (Lane 2011: 926). Furthermore, as noted above, identities are not only "contested, imagined and reimagined, transformed and negotiated" by their members but also "through their interaction *with others* [emphasis added]" (Tully 1995: 11; Jepperson et al. 1996: 59; Saideman 2002: 177). Thus, "the producer of an identity is not in control of what it means to others" (Hopf 1998: 175). The "content" of identities is shaped by external groups, by their shared interpretations of behavior: the "truth conditions for identity claims are communal rather than individual" (Wendt 1999: 176–8). As Wendt (1999: 176–8) describes at length, a state could be lauded as a "hegemon" or condemned as an "imperialist," depending upon fellow nations' collective understanding of interventionist action. A second example, which has proved an impediment to peace, would be the competing narratives composed and contested, by Palestinians, Israelis, and their neighbors, allies and detractors, regarding the founding of Israel, narratives which form essential elements of the two nations' identities (Khoury 2018: 380). This intersubjectivity is crucial, particularly in the context of third-party peacemaking of civil wars which, by definition, invites external parties into complex negotiations regarding states' pasts and futures. It means it is necessary to explore not only group members' views of their collective, but also the perceptions of their peers.

Moreover, interactions with others, and the very existence of a group within particular social structures, can mold identities: "the international and domestic societies in which states are embedded shape their identities in powerful ways" (Katzenstein 1996: 23). This is linked to the idea of "socialization," defined as "the process through which actors adopt the norms and rules of a given community" (Checkel 2017: 592; Wendt 1999: 170). As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 902) explain, "in the context of international politics, socialization involves diplomatic praise or censure," which is reinforced "by material sanctions and incentives." However, the concept of socialization brings with it the "analytic danger" of treating groups "as blank slates on which new values are inscribed" (Checkel 2017: 593–4). Therefore, it will also be assumed here that the concept of "strategic social construction" holds weight. This phrase encapsulates the process by which "extremely rational" actors "maximize their utilities" by influencing others' identities (Finnermore & Sikkink 1998: 910) or, alternatively, the possibility that groups will tactically reconfigure their identities in order to gain advantage (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001: 411; Laitin 1998: 20). Considering these latter two possibilities is not intended to disempower Syrian and Yemeni identity constructors but to add a further prism through which we can understand how identity developed within, and through, the initial stages of the Geneva Peace Process and the Yemeni transition years.

Norms

Abdelal et al. (2006: 696) claim that norms form an important element of identity and, indeed, many authors, almost imperceptibly, transition from discussing identity to invoking norms. For instance, norms are often defined as collective expectations concerning the behavior of actors occupying any given *identity* (Checkel 1998: 327–8; Jepperson et al. 1996: 54; Katzenstein 1996: 5). However, more fundamentally, norms are "intersubjective understandings" of "rights and obligations" (Björkdahl 2002: 14–5), which "constrain behavior" but, also, "*constitute* agents [emphasis added]" (Checkel 2001: 557). In addition to regulating groups (Finnermore & Sikkink 1998:891), norms can further "operate like rules that define the [very] identity of an actor" (Jepperson et al. 1996: 54), creating "new actors, interests, or categories of action" (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998: 891; Checkel 1998: 331). If we accept the aforementioned proposition that a fundamental strain of any identity is a shared sense of that which the group seeks, then the manner in which norms can constitute identities becomes clearer: norms "provide" communities with "understandings of interests" (Checkel 1999: 84), thus coming to define the bonds between groups (Klotz 1995; Herman 1996; Björkdahl 2002). It is therefore challenging to clearly delineate the two concepts of identity and norms.

More broadly, norms "provide people with a medium through which they may communicate" (Zehfuss 2002: 17) and, furthermore, actions are, at least partially, imbued with meaning through normative structures (Barnett 1998: 5). Emergent norms, and competitions between such rules and those already in existence, are also envisioned (Jepperson et al. 1996: 56), while Finnemore's idea of norm entrepreneurs, "committed individuals who happen to be in the right place at the right time to instill their beliefs in larger global social structures" (summarized by Checkel 1998: 332), is widely accepted. Within this line of thought, it is emphasized that norms are "actively built" by norm entrepreneurs who "call attention to issues or even 'create' issues by using language that names, interprets, and dramatizes them" (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998: 897). In the next section, we will see that, while identity has been relatively neglected by mediation scholars, the role of norms within mediation has received increasing attention in recent years.

Identity and Norms in Mediation Studies

Mediation entails the intervention of a third party in either an inter-state or a civil war. A mediator could be an individual, a group, a state, or an organization, while multiple mediators could cooperate either formally or unofficially

(Bercovitch et al. 1991: 8; Crocker et al. 2018: 81). Mediation does not involve physical force or the authority of law (Bercovitch et al. 1991: 8). Traditionally, mediation has been a murky practice comprising clandestine negotiations conducted in secluded settings, convening political leaders and representatives of armed groups (Hirblinger & Landau 2020b). However, mediation processes now often feature mechanisms to broaden their inclusion (Paffenholz 2014: 76–7), while more participatory and thus more transparent "National Dialogues" are also "increasingly popular" mediation tools (Stigant & Murray 2015). The first case under investigation here, the initial stages of the Geneva Peace Process, adopted a more conventional mediation format. The second case, however, featured a lengthy, comprehensive, and wide-ranging National Dialogue Conference (NDC), and this will be reflected on greater depth in the next section.

Ostensibly, the goal of mediation is to encourage a peace accord acceptable to the conflict parties, and to the mediator, an accord which the parties are purportedly unable to reach without external intervention (Zartman & Touval 2007: 437–8; Butler 2009: 120–1). Mediation is therefore depicted as pacific and altruistic. However, if mediation can reconstruct the identities of those at war, as I will suggest, we must also reconstruct our definitions of third-party peacemaking.

The influence of mediation upon constructed collective identity has been neglected within mediation studies (Clowry 2021); with notable exceptions (Aggestam 2015; Hirblinger & Landau 2020a), the inverse relationship has tended to be explored (see, for example: Bercovitch et al. 1991; Bercovitch & Houston 2000; Leng & Regan 2004; Greig 2005; Bercovitch & Gartner 2006; Frazier & Dixon 2009; Savun 2009; Mitchell et al. 2009; De Rouen et al. 2011; Beardsley 2011; Bercovitch & Elgström 2011; Bond & Ghosn 2015), and such studies, while highly valuable contributions to the field, do not incorporate many crucial elements within the concept of identity: its intersubjectivity, the possibility that multiple identities may be simultaneously held by a group, and the manner in which identities may be contested provoking shifts in shared selfhood amid mediation. The insights developed by authors cited in the second section of this article demand that mediation scholars pay greater attention to identity and its construction: the suggestions that identities may drive conflict, that shifts in identities may be required for peace, but that such reconstructions may, in turn, reignite violence, have obvious implications for mediators. However, as Duursma (2020: 295, 297) argues, "much of the literature on international mediation draws on a materialist perspective," ignoring "social structures" (see also, Hellmüller et al. 2020: 347; Kleiboer & t'Hart 1995: 314–5; Kaufman 2006: 201).

It must be acknowledged, though, that the study of norms occupies a burgeoning place within the field of mediation studies. To summarize, it has increasingly been recognized that mediators, "in interaction with the negotiating parties and other stakeholders, are constantly involved in the application, creation and adaptation of different norms on various levels" (Kastner 2020: 365). Scholars now suggest that mediation is, "unequivocally," a foreign policy tool "that can be used to diffuse norms" (Vuković 2021: 48) and, moreover, that "mediators' mandates have progressively extended from their core task of ending violence … to upholding specific norms associated with durable peace agreements, such as human rights, gender equality, and inclusivity" (Hellmüller et al. 2020: 345). Here, I will explore the variety of arguments developed concerning the symbiosis between mediation and norms, together with the one occasion on which this relationship has then been linked to identity construction.

Hellmüller et al. (2015: 5) categorize those norms they perceive to be at work within mediation, distinguishing between "content-related and process-related norms; between settled and unsettled norms; and between definitional and non-definitional norms." By content-related norms, the authors denote that which might "be negotiated during a mediation process, and … will eventually figure in the final peace agreement," whereas, by process-related norms, the authors are referring to "how a mediation process is planned and conducted." Settled norms are those which are likely to be "internalized" and difficult to contravene, whereas unsettled norms "can be overridden without justification" (Hellmüller et al. 2015: 6). Lastly, definitional norms pertain to the very nature of mediation (Hellmüller et al. 2015: 6–7). The overall notion is that any norm identified as operating within a third-party peace process will fit into each of these binaries. However, it also worth noting that Hellmüller et al. (2017: 9) specifically comment that mediators "are increasingly faced with normative demands reflecting the *liberal norms* of their mandate-givers [emphasis added]."

How might norms be pursued within mediation? An early study by Mandell and Tomlin (1991: 51) explores how a mediator can instigate normative change in order to influence conflict resolution, illustrating the claims made with examples from Henry Kissinger's mediation activities between Egypt and Israel (1973–6). The authors contend that Kissinger was able to foster three norms to which both Israel and Egypt began to adhere, achieved through the pursuit of four strategies. Firstly, they suggest Kissinger "generated new learning by altering the preference structures of the parties," achieving this through "pressing, compensation and integration strategies." Secondly, Mandell and Tomlin claim Kissinger "fostered repetitive behavior by encouraging the parties to invest in

a process of incremental peace-building." Thirdly, the former US Secretary of State "consistently rewarded new learning by compensating the parties with substantial financial and military aid." Finally, Kissinger "facilitated congruence," according to the authors, by "compelling the parties to make public their new intentions to the international community at large" (Mandell & Tomlin 1991: 53–4).

Vuković (2020: 449) has also posited that norms can "be diffused" through mediation, illustrating his claims by exploring the mediation efforts of the European Union (EU) in Montenegro (2002–6). Vuković explores a further practice through which a norm may be diffused within mediation, which he terms "reframing." Within this process, a normative solution to a given conflict is grounded within an existing normative system: the appropriateness of a resolution is explained to the conflict parties by the mediator, and presented as aligning with the normative inclinations of the disputants (Vuković 2020: 457). In a departure from Mandell and Tomlin, Vuković argues that "mediators do not resort to material resources that create artificial payoff structures, but only resort to discursive techniques" (Vuković 2020: 457). Nevertheless, mediators may deploy "soft power in the form of relations, legitimacy and emulation, in order to strengthen the justification for normative claims" (Vuković 2020: 457).

Why might norms be encouraged? The overall argument of Mandell and Tomlin is that, during a mediation attempt, conflict parties may be compelled to adopt new norms. These new norms can come to define the relationship between the conflict parties, thus facilitating the reaching of a solution. Vuković, however, focuses both on the relationship between the disputants together with the negotiated outcome of the mediation attempt, arguing that norms can be diffused by mediators in order to reduce tensions, regulate relations between conflict parties, and persuade conflict parties to pursue particular outcomes.

Turning to unintentional effects, Kastner (2020: 379) has suggested that "pushing a normative agenda too explicitly can affect" the "legitimacy" of mediators "and as a result, they might be sidelined by the negotiating parties." Offering support, Hellmüller et al. (2015:12) claim that the peacemakers interviewed for their study "described being constantly lobbied during peace processes" to include various normative provisions. However, those interviewed by Hellmüller et al. criticized this practice, arguing that such demands both neglect the need to work collaboratively with the conflict parties and, moreover, overestimate the "power of the mediator."

A final intervention within this subfield of inquiry considers how norm promotion within mediation may have *an effect upon the identities of the conflict parties*. Kostić (2013: 27) has characterized the US peacemaking intervention

in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), from 1994, as "a vivid example of the projection of American norms of civic nation-building in the Balkans." He holds that "at an early stage the American mediators attempted through discursive practices and framings to *construct the recipient subject of their policies* [emphasis added]" (Kostić 2013: 27) and provides examples of the norms promoted and the way in which they were encouraged. For instance, he discusses how much of the new BiH constitution "was written by American legal experts projecting their own constitutional and political norms" (Kostić 2013: 28). Indeed, Kostić (2013: 22) cites a US diplomat, who argued that the mediation efforts sought to entrench a "framework of society that followed liberal norms of democracy, free market economy and human rights"; the US thus pursued, through the promotion of norms within the mediation process, the building of a new "Bosnian nation," and to construct it in such a way as to mimic the "norms of civic inclusiveness and rights" deemed central to the "American political identity" (Kostić 2013: 23).

The previous section noted the interlacing of identity and norms: while norms can be defined as behavioral rules, it has also been theorized that norms form integral strands of shared identities. They can come to constitute what a group is: adherence to the actions dictated by norms and the values they imply can define what it means to be a member of a community. Moreover, if norms are framed and understood in this way, we can assume, norms are more difficult to contravene. To do so might, as suggested in the second section, provoke disquiet and unsteadiness, or ontological insecurity. By suggesting that the promotion of norms during the peace process in BiH also served to reshape the nation, Kostić thus considers the longer-term implications of the promotion of norms in mediation, beyond how this promotion may affect the relationship between the conflict parties, the legitimacy of the mediator, and the prospects for peace. He considers how the sense of self of those at war may be transformed by the promotion of norms and, moreover, frames this in an insidious way: the impact is profound, and the "true intentions" of the mediators, in the reading of Kostić (2013: 37), was to create a political community "based on its own image" to further project "its own power."

Succinctly, Kostić not only appreciates that mediation may function as a vehicle through which norms are promoted but, moreover, that this practice, in turn, may serve to shape the identities of those "receiving" third-party peacemaking interventions. The following hypothesis is therefore provoked: *Mediators can use mediation to instigate normative change on the part of the conflict parties and this, in turn, can shape the identities of the conflict parties.* To respond, I will assess a "content-related" norm, that of democracy, which appears to have been sought during the mediation efforts under investigation.

While the central aim of the article is to assess this hypothesis, I will also return to the broader insights generated by mediation scholars regarding the interplay between norms and mediation in the conclusion. I will suggest that many are confirmed by the data analyzed here.

Mediation in Syria and Yemen, 2011–2014

In order to assess the hypothesis generated in the previous section, this article will examine two instances of mediation: stages I and II of the Geneva Peace Process, convened to promote peace in Syria, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative and NDC, held to resolve the Yemeni crisis.

Stages I and II of the Geneva Peace Process

In Syria, the period under investigation began with a failed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution which would have called for a "Syrian-led political process" (UNSC, S/2012/77, 2012a); however, Russia and China wielded their vetoes which provoked the launch of the Friends of Syria (FoS). A coalition of Arab and Western states, this group met in February 2012 and recognized the Syrian National Council (SNC) as "a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful change" (Euractiv 2012; Mohammed & Lowe 2012). The SNC emerged in 2011, and encompassed recent and long-term exiles opposed to President Bashar al-Asad's government together with representatives of activist bodies inside Syria (Phillips 2016: 106–7). February 2012 also saw Kofi Annan appointed Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League on the Syria crisis; one month later, he unveiled his six-point plan for peace. Backed by the UNSC, this scheme advocated once more for a political process headed by Syrians (UNSC, S/PRST/2012/6, 2012b) and, in June, Annan gathered together the Secretaries-General of the UN and the Arab League, together with various foreign ministers, to form an "Action Group for Syria." The group released a communiqué which called for a "Syrian-led transition" and the "establishment of a transitional governing body which … should be formed on the basis of mutual consent." No Syrian representatives attended the one-day meeting which became known as "Geneva I" (GI) (UNSC, A/66/865-S/2012/522, 2012e; Phillips 2016: 101).

It took until January 2014 for a "political process" including Syrian delegates to be convened. In the preceding months, Annan resigned (Black 2012), the SNC disintegrated, and a broader Syrian opposition organization, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), received endorsement from the FoS (Phillips 2016: 114–6). Lakhdar Brahimi assumed

the helm at the UN and the Arab League while the FoS and a reduced consort, the "London 11," continued to offer "political and practical support" to SOC (UK Government 2013). Invitations to attend the opening of Geneva II (GII) in Montreux, Switzerland, were delivered to 44 states and organizations (Charbonneau & Hafezi 2014). Two short rounds of talks between a Syrian opposition delegation and a Syrian government delegation, mediated by Brahimi, followed in Geneva but achieved little. Brahimi abruptly ended the mediation efforts on the 15 February 2014. In remarks to the press, he noted that the Syrian government delegation had refused to discuss the notion of a transitional governing body (TGB) in parallel with their favored topic of "terrorism" (UN Live 2014c), appearing to blame the failure of the talks on the intransigence of al-Asad's representatives.

The GCC Initiative and the NDC

The Yemeni mediation effort began when the GCC intervened in March 2011 to broker a proposal. This text recommended President Ali Abdullah Saleh's abdication, protected by an immunity deal, and the formation of a temporary "unity government" followed by elections (Lackner 2017: 38). However, opposition leaders and Saleh prevaricated, and the protests swelled further (Hill 2017: 210, 212). In April 2011, the UN appointed Jamal Benomar Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Yemen; he developed an Implementation Mechanism for the GCC Initiative in collaboration with Yemeni political leaders, and persuaded Saleh to sign the GCC deal in November 2011 (Hill 2017: 240–1). Three months later, in a referendum with only one option, the Yemeni people acquiesced to former Vice-President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi adopting the role of caretaker President (Hill 2017: 241).

Preparations for the NDC, the next step envisaged in the Implementation Mechanism, began in June 2012 (OSESGY, n.d.). The Technical Preparatory Committee, a group of Yemenis appointed by Hadi (Burke 2013: 16; Papagianni 2014: 6), eventually decided, following advice from Benomar (Murray 2013: 6; Zyck 2014: 7), that 565 delegates drawn from across Yemeni society would attend (Schmitz 2014: 6; Paffenholz & Ross, 2016: 203–4). Seats were awarded to a wide range of political parties, Hadi personally appointed 62 delegates, and 40 seats each were allocated to "independent" representatives of Yemeni youth, women, and civil society. Moreover, the political factions invited were mandated to ensure their nominations comprised those of southern origin (50%), women (30%) and youth (20%) (Saif Hassan 2014: 53; Paffenholz & Ross 2016: 203–4). When the delegates arrived in the capital, they were tasked with negotiating "the future" of Yemen (Paffenholz & Ross 2016: 203). They

were organized into nine Working Groups, each of which grappled with a different theme and generated a series of recommendations (OSESGY, n.d.). In addition to Benomar, the international community also offered support through the Friends of Yemen (FoY) together with a narrower collective of diplomats, the "Group of 10" (G10), the self-proclaimed "sponsors and guardians of the GCC Initiative" who met weekly, playing a role in persuading various Yemeni factions to attend and commit to the NDC (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2013: 2–3; Burke 2013: 13–4; Schmitz 2014: 17).

The Dialogue launched on 18 March 2013. International officials sought permission to attend the negotiations, offered "capacity building" and lectures from "experts," and conducted clandestine negotiations outside the conference (OSESGY, n.d.; Burke 2013: 16). Nevertheless, Benomar and his team have been described as having played "a relatively modest role in the conference" (Zyck 2014: 8); the Working Groups were facilitated by Yemenis and, when conflicts occurred, the Consultative Committee, a body comprised of Yemenis, would swoop in, escalating the thorniest challenges to Hadi. While a number of the Working Groups progressed without difficulty, other teams faced profound disputes: the six-month deadline for concluding the Dialogue was missed following deadlocks in "The Southern Question" and "Statebuilding" Working Groups (Gaston 2014: 1). As August gave way to September, Hadi charged an exclusive sub-committee, known as the "8+8 Committee," with finding a solution to the "southern issue" (Gaston 2014: 3–4; Thiel 2015). The group proposed the federalization of Yemen (Subcommittee of the Southern Working Group 2013). During the committee's discussions, "Benomar was reportedly tasked to take a leading role in mediating between" the participants (Zyck 2014: 9) but no consensus was reached on the precise form which federalism would take (Gaston 2014: 4). Nonetheless, in January 2014, the conference produced its Final Report, detailing 1,800 ambitious recommendations for reform; the intention had been that each of these recommendations would be voted upon but, on the day of the vote, Ahmed Sharif al-Din was assassinated and his fellow Huthi delegates withdrew (Gaston 2014: 5; Paffenholz & Ross,2016: 205). Hadi waved through the submissions of the Working Groups, announcing that a further body would be formed to further deliberate the federalization of Yemen. Within a few weeks, without broad consultation, this 22-member "Region-Defining Committee" proposed that the state would be divided into six regions (Thiel 2014; Thiel 2015; Gaston 2014: 4–5). All but the Huthi representative on the committee agreed. Nevertheless, other factions, too, expressed reservations regarding the proposed federalization, or rejected it (Thiel 2015; Bayoumy 2014; Paffenholz & Ross 2016: 205; Gaston 2014: 4). Just one year

following the conference, the Huthis marched into Sanaa, captured the presidential palace, forced Hadi into exile, and began marching south.

Contrasting the Two Cases of Mediation

Both mediation efforts were launched, and ostensibly spearheaded, by the UN with support offered by members of the international community and non-governmental organizations. Both took place within the same period and sought to resolve civil conflicts which had erupted in the same region of the world, and which were provoked by the same transnational demonstrations. Both peace processes also failed to secure lasting peace. Indeed, the two cases under investigation here merely mark the beginning of lengthy and ongoing peace negotiations.

Despite these similarities, the two mediation efforts took markedly different shapes: the Geneva Peace Process adopted a more traditional form of mediation, finally convening two opposing Syrian delegations for clandestine talks, overseen by the UN Envoy, in January 2014. In Yemen, the peace process began with secretive negotiations, including an exclusive group of political leaders and international actors, and culminating in the GCC Initiative and Implementation Mechanism. Later, however, it expanded into a participatory, comprehensive, and months-long National Dialogue. International actors remained present, particularly "behind-the-scenes," but it was Yemenis who designed, managed, and facilitated the NDC. It was Yemenis who authored and approved its outcomes. The two mediation attempts were selected for investigation due to these differences; their diversity will enrich the conclusions reached, illuminating whether, and if so how, divergent approaches to mediation may interact with processes of identity construction.

Methods

I generated my own primary data to evaluate the hypothesis developed. First, I conducted 74 semi-structured interviews with 73 interlocutors between March 2019 and March 2020. The interviewees were either participants in, or close observers of, the two cases of mediation on which I am focusing; they include Syrian and Yemeni politicians and members of civil society who were involved in the peace efforts, and the international mediators in both case studies. Within this latter group are UN officials, diplomats, representatives of foreign states, and staff members of both international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The interviews explored the interlocutors' memories of and perspectives on the peace process in which they were involved.

The size and "representativity" of my sample were affected by the sensitive and confidential nature of the topic; the limited time available for fieldwork (12 months); the manner in which my participants were geographically dispersed with many displaced by war; the ongoing conflicts within Syria and Yemen; the political systems of many of the states involved in the mediation efforts; and the elite nature of my interviewees. Crucial states and groups involved in the mediation efforts could not be consulted, including the al-Asad regime, the Huthi movement, Russia, and the GCC. Notwithstanding these limitations, it nevertheless should be noted that my goal was to build a rich dataset but not to comprehensively represent all groups which participated in the mediation attempt. Instead, I sought "rich rigor," "sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex … data and time in the field," and "credibility," to be gained through "thick description, concrete detail … crystallization [and] multivocality" (Tracy 2010: 840). This was achieved through the high number of detailed interviews conducted with a variety of participants.

To protect my interlocutors, I have provided each interviewee with one of twelve abbreviations and each interviewee has also been given a unique number. Therefore, in the section which follows, with the exception of those participants who permitted their words to be quoted but requested to remain entirely anonymous (and who are cited as Anonymous (1), Anonymous (2), etc.), quotations and thoughts will be attributed to one of the following abbreviations:

TABLE 1 Interviewee abbreviations

Interviewee type	**Abbreviation**
Member of the Syrian Opposition and Delegate at Geneva II	SO, DaGII
Member of the Syrian Opposition	SO
Mediator in the Syrian Case Study involved in the Track I Process	M, S, TI
Mediator in the Syrian Case Study involved in a Track II initiative	M, S, TII
International Observer of the Syrian Case Study	O, I (S)
Syrian Observer of the Syrian Case Study	O, S
Delegate at the NDC	NDC, D
Member of the NDC Secretariat	NDC, Se
Mediator in the Yemeni Case Study involved in the Track I Process	M, Y, TI
Mediator in the Yemeni Case Study involved in the Track II Process	M, Y, TII
International Observer of the Yemeni Case Study	O, I (Y)
Yemeni Observer of the Yemeni Case Study	O, Y

Of the 74 conversations held, 40 (54%) were conducted remotely, while the remaining 34 interviews (46%) took place in person. I made short trips to Geneva, London, Oxford, Washington DC, Istanbul, and Amman, to meet interviewees.

In addition to these interviews, I also transcribed 50 press conferences delivered at the UN during, and relating to, the two cases of mediation.[3] I introduced this second data source due to the inherently partial nature of the interview data gathered, due to the limitations of my sample, and in a bid to achieve "crystallization" (Ellingson 2008; Richardson 2000b). The interviews provided memories of the participants' actions and thoughts during the period under study. The press conferences, however, constitute data generated at the time of the mediation efforts; nevertheless, the purpose of examining this data was not to "verify" the accounts provided in the interviews but to deepen my understanding of the case studies. Furthermore, by consulting the press conferences, I gained an appreciation of the experiences and opinions of individuals I was unable to interview.

Finally, I gathered together 110 official documents concerning the two cases of mediation. These include SNC and SOC press releases, FoS and London 11 press releases, GCC Initiative documents, NDC documents, FoY press releases, and UN documents (resolutions, draft resolutions, peace plans and agreements, and press releases).[4] The purpose of consulting these documents was to further widen the sample of voices consulted.

Following the data collection, I conducted a thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke 2006: 79). I began by immersing myself within the primary data. I then generated an initial set of codes (Saldaña 2014: 4), and organized these into broader categories and then themes, the latter of which capture "something important about the data in relation to the research question" and represent "some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset" (Braun & Clarke 2006: 82). One of these themes will be analyzed in this article and its constituent categories and codes are presented in Table 2.

3 All press conferences have been downloaded and transcribed, and these transcripts are available from the author on request. A list of press conferences can also be provided. In the section which follows, all press conferences are cited using the formula UN Live, [date]. The lettering system employed (for example, 2011a, 2011b), relates to their sequence within the selection cited in this article, and not to their sequence in the overall dataset.

4 All official documents have been downloaded and are available from the author on request. A list of official documents can also be provided. In the section which follows, all official documents are cited using the formula [Organization/State], [date]. The lettering system employed (for example, 2011a, 2011b), relates to their sequence within the selection cited in this article, and not to their sequence in the overall dataset.

TABLE 2 Theme, categories and codes

Theme	Category	Code
Democracy and Reform	Liberal democratic governance	Democratic institutions, Elections, Representation, Accountability, Long-lasting support for democracy, Justice, Law, Citizenship
	Liberal values	Human rights, Freedom, Dignity, Civil state
	Openness	Voice, Transparency, Consultation, Pluralism, Diversity, Difference
	Transformation	Transition, Change, Reform, Novelty, Peace

I limited my own biases by prioritizing the generation of data-driven codes which, where possible, use the precise words of my primary sources (Rivas 2012: 372). I also devoted considerable time to immersion within the data in a bid to enhance my "sensitivity to its meanings" and to ensure that I remained cognizant of the data as a whole (Rivas 2012: 368).

Promoting the Norm of Democracy in Mediation through Identity Construction

What Do the Syrian People Seek?

I have posited that members of a group are brought together as they consider "what they want," and as those external to the group influence and offer their perspective on this matter. Within my dataset, a clear, national interest is voiced repeatedly by both the Syrian opposition and those actors involved in mediating the conflict: it is claimed that democracy is the universally held aspiration of Syrians and, relatedly, it is also often claimed that the fall of the al-Asad government is desired by the nation. Beginning with the international officials represented within the dataset, I must first note that, within none of my interviews with international mediators, were the ambitions and desires of the Syrian people as a whole stated. In press conferences delivered by international actors, however, both tentative and more direct statements are made in this vein. For instance, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon claims that "the legitimate demands of the Syrian people" are "the same demands that people across the Arab world have been making for more than a year now" (UN Live 2012), thus implying the Syrians seek democracy and the ousting

of their government. Annan is both direct, describing the "aspirations of the Syrian people" to be "democratic" (ibid), and more guarded in his claims:

> we must move quickly forward on the political process to meet the aspirations of the Syrian people. We must commence a comprehensive political dialogue between the Syrian government and the whole spectrum of the Syrian opposition. This must enable a Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, plural political system in which citizens are equal regardless of their affiliations or ethnicities, or beliefs (ibid).

In this representative passage, Annan moves from expressing his desire to deliver the hopes of Syrians to claiming that there needs to be a transition to democracy in the country, thus implying the two are one and the same. John Kerry, then US Secretary of State, also felt confident in describing at length the "hopes" of the "Syrian people" "for the future of their country"; once more, he mentions the need for the freedom to protest and resist, and states that "the resolution to this crisis cannot be about one man's insistence or one family's insistence about clinging to power" (UN Live 2014a); the removal of al-Asad is therefore once more claimed to be longed for by all Syrians. In 2013, Brahimi, makes a more understated claim, and also displays uncertainty, even as he voices it, that he might have the power to speak on behalf of the Syrian people as a whole:

> my feeling is that the Syrians – I think there is, there is near unanimity and, no, not unanimity, but certainly a large, large consensus among Syrians – whether they are in, actively engaged against the government or not – they all want to give up this presidential system and have a parliamentary system (UN Live 2013).

Brahimi here stumbles over his words, and corrects himself, before presenting the desires of Syrians to be an ousting of al-Asad as President and the introduction of a parliamentary system (presumably a democratically elected parliament). Nevertheless, Brahimi grows in confidence in his ability to express the interests of the Syrian people during this period; as the chief mediator brought the first round of Geneva II to a close, he claimed that "both sides understand that the Syrian people are longing for a genuinely democratic Syria, where governance is transparent and accountable and based on human rights and the rule of law" (UN Live 2014b).

The hopes of the Syrian people tend not to be expressed directly within the UN resolutions crafted during this period of mediation. However, the Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria, which was convened by Annan, describes in detail the alleged desires of "the people of the Syrian Arab Republic." These are claimed to be a "genuinely democratic and pluralistic" state, a "multiparty democracy" in which there exists compliance with "international standards on human rights" and "equal opportunities and chances" are offered for all (UNSC, A/66/865-S/2012/522, 2012e). Moreover, the statements released and speeches made following gatherings of the FoS are forthright in their ability to present and promote the ambitions of Syrians as a national collective. As the Chair of the FoS meeting in February 2012 succinctly phrased it in his conclusions, "the aspirations of the Syrian people [are] for dignity, freedom, peace, reform, democracy, prosperity and stability" (UK Government 2012a). Later in 2012, it is mentioned that the Friends are determined to "facilitate a Syrian-led political transition leading to a civil, democratic, pluralistic, independent and free state … one which determines its own future based on the collective will of its people" (UK Government 2012b). If this transition is "Syrian-led," and if it will lead to the outcomes listed, this phrasing implies that the described state is that which the Syrians desire. This foregone conclusion is repeated by William Hague, the British Foreign Minister in April 2012 (UK Government 2012c), but, beyond 2012, we no longer see declarations of the desires of the Syrians in FoS statements.

Turning now to members of the Syrian opposition, and their conception of the collective aims of the Syrian people, as one of my interviewees phrased it: "*each Syrian* [was] working towards the same goal. A fight to choose their President and their Prime Minister [emphasis added]" (SO (4)). Another linked "Syrians," broadly defined, with this goal, arguing that "Syria is about the Syrians – it is about, how can we move the country from this thuggish mafia to rule of a state – parliamentary, presidential" (SO (1)). A further interlocutor stated that "Syrians, we have lost everything just to see democracy, freedom" (SO, DaGII (4)). Such claims are repeated far more frequently, and in stronger terms, within the press conferences, official statements, and speeches of the SNC and SOC. For instance, in a speech delivered by then-President of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, at an FoS conference in Tunis in 2012, this narrative is constructed emphatically. At one point, he argues the following:

> What the Syrian people seek – *all the Syrian people* – is a government that knows the true meaning of accountability and responsibility. What the Syrian people seek is a government bound by the rule of law and under

> which all citizens of all segments of society are free and equal in their rights and national obligations. The Syrian people, *all the Syrian people*, want an end to the rule of a mafia family and the establishment of a forward-looking, democratic, civil state in this new era … A system of government under which all Syrians have equal opportunities … [emphasis added] (SNC 2012).

This repetition of the phrase, "the Syrian people," qualified twice with the aside, "all the Syrian people," is marked, and we can observe once more that it is claimed that this national collective seeks a liberal democratic system, a system which cannot include al-Asad. In the official statements released by SOC, which feature reproductions of speeches delivered at FoS conferences and at Geneva by Ahmad al-Jarba, President of the Coalition between the years 2013 and 2014, the alleged ambitions of the Syrian people as a whole are also frequently conveyed. These hopes are often prefaced with the word "legitimate" (SOC 2013a; SOC 2013e; SOC 2013f; SOC 2013h), as though they should not be questioned, and the aims are similar to those stated above: "democracy" is continually mentioned (SOC 2013a; SOC 2013c; SOC 2013e; SOC 2013h; SOC 2014), together with "freedom" (SOC 2013b; SOC 2013d; SOC 2013e; SOC 2013g; SOC 2013h; SOC 2014), "justice" (SOC 2013e) and "universal rights" (SOC 2013d). This is also framed as a means of escaping "decades of oppression and exclusion" (ibid); in other words, it is claimed that the Syrian people seek to escape the grip of their repressive government.

To summarize, my interpretation is that, within the dataset, the longings of Syrians, presented as unified, are articulated within the context of, and within reflections on, the initial years of the Geneva Peace Process as being for democracy and, in the rhetoric of certain actors, for the overthrow of al-Asad. This is propagated by both the Syrian opposition together with a number of the international actors involved in the peace process.

The Norm of Democracy and the UN

Democracy does not feature within the UN Charter (Rushton 2008: 100–1). Nevertheless, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, proclaims in Article 21 that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of [her or] his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives," that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government," and that "this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures" (Rushton 2008: 101; UN 1948). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,

adopted by the General Assembly in 1966, includes similar stipulations in Article 25 (Rushton 2008: 101; UN 1966). Moreover, the "Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Democracy," penned in 2009, states that "democratic principles are woven throughout the normative fabric of the United Nations" (UN 2009: 2); indeed, in this document it is claimed that the 2005 World Summit saw 170 heads of state and government renew their "commitment to support democracy by strengthening countries' capacities to implement the principles and practices of democracy" (UN 2009: 2). While the Guidance Note recognizes that "there is no one model of democracy," the document nevertheless asserts that "the UN framework should seek to address both immediate threats to democratic governance as well as the underlying or structural causes of such interruptions" (UN 2009: 2–3). In 2005, the UN launched its Democracy Fund (UNDEF), a body which "funds, helps design, manages, mentors, and generates projects … that contribute to strengthening democracy" (UNDEF 2015: 1). Lastly, as the UN has recognized, while the sixteenth Sustainable Development Goal, part of a set of aims set by the UN General Assembly in 2015, does not use the term "democracy," many of its targets "are geared towards protecting democratic institutions" (UN 2020). Democracy, then, is a norm sought after by the UN, the lead, although not the sole, mediator in the two cases under consideration.

Nevertheless, in the Guidance Note of 2009, the following is also argued:

> Local norms and practices must be taken into consideration and weaved into emerging democratic institutions and processes to the extent possible … UN assistance should also be explicitly requested by local actors and never imposed. The major responsibility for democratic transitions and consolidation lies with forces within the national society and no amount of external assistance will create democracy (UN 2009: 3–4).

Moreover, UNDEF has argued the following of its work and strategy: "our work also aims to advance transparency and accountability, promote the rule of law, and encourage responsible and inclusive government – *while always supporting local ownership and domestic engagement* [emphasis added]" (UNDEF 2015: 2). Furthermore, UNDEF states that their "strategy is to support local civil society and community leaders in addressing locally identified needs and priorities" (UNDEF 2015: 2). Within these quotations, we can perceive an apparent emphasis upon the consent of those on the receiving end of democracy promotion and a rhetorical commitment, at least, to empowering either "national" or "local" actors to lead and define democratization processes. Thus, while democracy can be thought of as a norm pursued by the UN, the organization

simultaneously states that democracy should only be encouraged in conjunction with, and with the consent of, the "local" and "national" stakeholders of the communities in which the norm of democracy is being encouraged.

In the previous sub-section, I claimed that in the context of, and within reflections on, the Geneva Peace Process, the Syrian people as a national collective were depicted as seeking a democratic state. I showed that this was emphasized both by members of the opposition and those international actors involved in mediating the war. This fresh envisioning of the nation within the mediation attempt could represent an instance of norm promotion and, therefore, an indication that mediators might use third-party peace negotiations to promote a given norm by characterizing it as a strand of the national identity of the state undergoing mediation. In turn, this supports my fundamental contention that mediation shapes identity. This tactic of promoting norms through identity construction, by characterizing the norm as an intrinsic element of Syria's national identity, may have been adopted due to the purported emphasis of the UN upon encouraging locally and nationally owned versions of democracy: by arguing that democracy constituted the collectively held will of the Syrian people, the UN may have been seeking to remove itself as a norm promoter, appearing to be merely repeating the wishes fundamentally associated with the national identity of Syria. This argument represents a departure from the literature surveyed earlier; in this scholarship, by promoting norms, mediators can shape the identities of conflict parties. My argument, instead, is that mediators can seek to reshape the identities of the conflict parties in order to encourage the absorption of particular norms.

That the Syrian opposition espoused a similar narrative concerning the intrinsic association between democracy and the Syrian people could suggest that the attempts by the mediators to promote the norm of democracy through identity construction were successful; indeed, the initial stages of the Geneva Peace Process may have formed the backdrop to an instance of socialization or, perhaps, strategic social construction. By probing the assertions of the Syrian opposition and the international community that the Syrians as a whole desire a democratic state, the intention is not to deny the long history of democratic resistance within Syria, and in particular the sacrifices made by the 2011 protesters, nor to deny the belief in democracy held by the Syrian opposition. Nevertheless, it is worth questioning why it was this aim, to the exclusion of others, which received overwhelming focus, and which was presented as an essential element of the Syrian national identity. There does seem to be evidence that, in the initial stages of the Geneva Peace Process, the UN and other members of the international community implicitly, and apparently

successfully, encouraged the norm of democracy by depicting it as a nationally shared aspiration, a strand within the Syrian identity. There seems to be evidence, therefore, that the mediation efforts shaped a facet of the Syrian national identity. However, the picture in relation to the Yemeni case study is more complex.

What Do the Yemeni People Seek?

As we have seen, within the data gathered concerning the Geneva Peace Process, the nationally held aspirations of Syria are firmly proclaimed. However, within the data gathered concerning the GCC Initiative and the NDC, there are far fewer considerations of the aims shared by the Yemeni people. Within the data gathered representing the international mediators and members of the international community, a Yemeni desire for democracy is mentioned, although not by representatives of the UN. More frequent are the ideas of "transition," "change," and "peace": in other words, under-specified reform. Indeed, none of the international officials, during our conversations, explored their perspectives on the national ideals of the Yemeni people and this theme is only mentioned once within the press conferences transcribed: in October 2011, Benomar argued that the Yemeni national collective desired "a quick transition" (UN Live 2011). However, this topic does receive consideration within the UN resolutions analyzed. Within these documents, the wishes of all Yemenis are implied to be "an inclusive and Yemeni-led political process of transition" (UNSC, S/RES/2014, 2011); "a peaceful, inclusive, orderly and Yemeni-led political transition process" together with "peaceful change and meaningful political, economic and social reform, as set forth in the GCC Initiative and Implementation Mechanism and in Resolution 2014 (2011)" (UNSC, S/RES/2051, 2012d); and, once more, "peaceful change" (UNSC, S/RES/2140, 2014a).

Furthermore, the international voices captured within the transcripts of UNSC meetings often consider the wishes of the Yemeni people, and oscillate between calls for reform and more precise demands for democracy. For instance, in 2012, Benomar made the claim that the steps made by Hadi "to advance the transition" have "received the overwhelming support and goodwill of the Yemenis" (UNSC, S/PV.6776, 2012c); indeed, later in the year, the envoy argued that "the transition enjoys the overwhelming endorsement and support of the population" (UNSC, S/PV.6878, 2012f). Offering further support, within the same meeting, the UK representative to the UNSC claimed that international efforts to sanction those "intent on disrupting peaceful transition" will be implemented, arguing that "the Yemeni people demand no less" (ibid), and this sentiment was repeated by many others in this meeting. Within

these meetings, the GCC Initiative and the NDC are also argued to be desired by Yemenis. For instance, the representative of Morocco claimed that the GCC Initiative is a "plan on which Yemenis have agreed" and constitutes "the determination of its people" (ibid).

In a similar vein, in the summer of 2012, Benomar argued that the NDC was demonstrative of "the Yemeni people's commitment to choosing dialogue over violence and consensus over division," that the people of Yemen were demanding punishment for saboteurs of the transition, and that they were "counting on the Security Council to continue speaking in one voice in support of the transition" (UNSC, S/PV.6976, 2013). Following the conclusion of the NDC, in February 2014, this message was communicated once more: the representative of France noted that "a democratic transition" can be considered to respond "to the aspirations of the Yemeni people" (UNSC, S/PV.7119, 2014b). This seemingly deeply held desire of Yemenis for change is also reiterated within UK government statements concerning the FoY. For example, within a speech delivered by William Hague, then-British Foreign Secretary, at an FoY Ministerial in September 2012, held at the United Nations, he argued the following:

> The Yemeni people have made clear that they want to see change and we have seen progress on reform by the Yemeni government, but there still remains much more to be done if there is to be permanent, lasting change and fulfilment of people's basic rights to freedom and democracy (UK Government 2012d).

Finally, within the text of the GCC Initiative, it is also pledged "that the Agreement shall fulfill the aspirations of the Yemeni people for change and reform" (GCC 2011a) while, in the Implementation Mechanism for this Initiative, which was drafted with considerable input from Benomar, it is acknowledged that "our people, including youth, have legitimate aspirations for change" and that "the situation requires that all political leaders should fulfill their responsibilities towards the people by immediately engaging in a clear process for transition to good democratic governance in Yemen" (GCC 2011b). Thus, those external actors implicated in the mediation process in Yemen do appear to envision the collective aims of the Yemeni people, although they seem to do so less frequently than those mediators involved in the Syrian case. Moreover, whereas in Syria, the international community communicated very clearly that the Syrian people desired democracy, which I argued was an attempt to promote the norm of democracy, in Yemen, there appears to have been a far more tentative attempt to do this.

To what extent do the Yemeni voices represented within the dataset align with the vision of the nation, and of its aspirations, provided by the international mediators? Within the interviews conducted, the aims of Yemenis were not frequently mentioned. One interlocutor did imply that the Yemeni people sought "reform" and "progress" (Anonymous (6)). Furthermore, referring only to Yemeni youth as opposed to the broader population, one participant described similar goals, claiming that the youth had "something in common – [they] all wanted, had an aspiration, to live something different – to change – for a time when their voices are heard" (NDC, D (2)). Moreover, an additional interlocutor, a former Yemeni politician who did not participate in the NDC, spoke broadly of a national desire for "ideals" and "of having a less corrupt government" (O, Y (1)). An ambition for democracy constituting an aspiration shared by all Yemenis is emphasized to a greater extent within the NDC Final Report. Consider, for instance, the following declaration, included within the Concluding Statements:

> Today, the Conference is a great testament to the capabilities of the Yemeni people in bringing about a peaceful political transition basing it on a proven legacy in the practice of democracy … This would be the transition founded on a deep faith in comprehensive national partnership for building the new Yemen; a Yemen that is built upon the foundations of good governance, the peaceful transfer of power, consolidation of the role of the State and its institutions to foster the needs, interests, and aspirations of the Yemeni people, while ensuring that these institutions are accountable to the people (NDC 2014: 225).

Lastly, the representative of Yemen to the UNSC remarked in December 2012:

> It is also noteworthy that the President wants to foster the necessary environment for the National Dialogue … so that everyone can contribute with transparency to obtaining tangible and positive results in the form of domestic peace, multilateral democracy, the protection of human rights and good governance – *all of which is in response to the aspirations of Yemenis* [emphasis added] (UNSC, S/PV.6878, 2012f).

To summarize, whereas, during the Geneva Peace Process, members of the international community appeared to plainly and forcefully reconstruct the Syrian national identity in order to promote democracy, such a direct effort does not seem to have taken place in relation to the Yemeni transition and

peace process. If this is an instance of socialization, or strategic social construction, it is far less apparent, within the dataset, than was the case with Syria.

Why did members of the international community neglect to promote, as strongly and through identity reconstruction, the norm of democracy in relation to Yemen? Could this be attributed to the very different mediation approach adopted in Yemen? Earlier, I highlighted the divergent mediation styles adopted in the two cases. In Yemen, while the peace process began, as in Syria, with exclusive, high-level talks, this instance of mediation then dramatically broadened into a National Dialogue. As noted earlier, and as Planta et al. (2015:4) have argued, "National Dialogues are increasingly seen *per definitionem* as the most participatory and inclusive tool for conflict transformation" (see also Stigant & Murray 2015; Berghof Foundation 2017: 20, 29, 82, 86; Paffenholz et al. 2017: 9). Moreover, Paffenholz et al. (2017: 9) have suggested that the "large-scale inclusion" of National Dialogues can, in turn, help to "generate ownership" of the outcomes of the mediation effort, thus enhancing the sustainability of any accord produced (Stigant & Murray 2015). Within the context of peacemaking, the term "inclusion" is deeply contested but it has, nevertheless, recently gained a great deal of prominence (De Waal 2017: 165; Turner 2020). Having declared inclusion to be a crucial element of effective mediation, the UN, in its *Guidance for Effective Mediation*, defines the concept as follows: "inclusion refers to the extent and manner in which the views and needs of conflict parties and other stakeholders are represented and integrated into the process and outcome of a mediation effort" (UN 2012: 11). In the same document, the UN also proclaims "national ownership" to be fundamental to third-party peacemaking, asserting that it "implies that conflict parties and the broader society commit to the mediation process" and that "solutions cannot be imposed" (UN 2012: 14–5).

The attempt made by the UN to embody these values of inclusion and national ownership through the convening of a National Dialogue in Yemen, even if executed imperfectly,[5] may explain the more tentative efforts made to reimagine the Yemeni identity through the peace process. Inclusion and national ownership imply the empowerment of the conflict parties, and a diminishing of the authority of external actors. There is a possibility, therefore, that the mediation strategy selected shaped the extent to which the mediators felt comfortable in promoting, through identity reconstruction, the norm of democracy.

5 It must be briefly noted that the extent to which national ownership and inclusion were achieved in the Yemeni mediation effort faced deep contestation within the dataset.

Conclusion

I have argued that mediators may attempt to reconstruct conflict parties' identities in a bid to foster particular norms, subtly encouraging norms by presenting them as being integral to the nation or nations at war. However, I argued that the data related to the Yemeni case showed that such attempts may not always proceed smoothly. More fundamentally, my analysis suggests that mediation can shape the identities of the conflict parties.

In the fourth section, I explored existing arguments surrounding the interplay between mediation and norms. As I demonstrated there, scholars have suggested that mediators are constantly involved in the application, and potentially the diffusion, of norms, and that mediators are now frequently mandated to uphold norms and, specifically, liberal norms. Furthermore, these norms can be pursued precisely because it is the belief of mediators that their absorption will encourage peace, although the advancement of norms in third-party peace processes, it has been suggested, may negatively affect the perceived legitimacy of the mediator. The evidence analyzed here confirms many of these insights: in both cases, we can see attempts to promote the liberal norm of democracy within the peace process and this is, on occasion, linked to peace. The achievement of democracy is framed as a path to escape conflict, and democracies are painted as inherently harmonious. I have also demonstrated that a more tentative attempt at norm promotion was made in Yemen, and speculated that this may have been due to the supposedly more egalitarian and empowering approach to mediation taken. The mediators may have been concerned that their legitimacy would be undermined if, during an apparently inclusive and nationally owned form of mediation, the mediators had forcefully declared that which it meant to be Yemeni in order to project a particular norm.

There are also wider implications to the arguments I have made. The notion that there exists a unified Syrian and Yemeni people with shared aspirations – claims made by the members of the Syrian opposition, by Yemeni voices and by the international peacemakers represented within my dataset – would seem to contest the fractured images which dominate scholarship on group identities in Syria and Yemen post-2011 (Rifai 2018; Phillips 2015; Bartolomei 2018; Pinto 2017; Hinnebusch 2019; Philbrick Yadav 2017; Day 2012). Nevertheless, there is also the possibility that their refrains represent attempts to mask a concern at the splintering of Syria and Yemen post-2011, and are an attempt, therefore, to rhetorically hold the states together. Furthermore, the construction of democracy and reform as central aspirations of the Syrian and Yemeni national identities align with the nascent arguments within area studies scholarship which contend that 2011 and its aftermath provoked a reimagining of identities in

Syria and Yemen which foregrounded civic values (Ismail 2011; Phillips 2015; Bartolomei 2018; Leenders 2013; Chevée 2021; Bachleitner 2021a; Bachleitner 2021b; Bonnefoy & Poirier 2013; Philbrick Yadav 2017). Crucially, this construction, this foregrounding of democracy as binding together all Syrians and all Yemenis, represents a departure from the identifications observed by academics in Syria and Yemen prior to 2011. Scholars often argue, on the contrary, that national ties held little meaning within either Syria or Yemen, disregarding nationalist imagery propagated by the governments of the two states as calculating façades. Indeed, it is most commonly suggested that Syrian and Yemeni citizens, before the rupture of 2011, chiefly felt allegiance to sub- and supra-state identities (Hinnebusch 2012; Beshara 2011; Saouli 2018; Salamandra 2013; Hinnebusch 2001; Salamandra 2004; Philbrick Yadav 2017; Jones 2011; Day 2012). The mediation efforts thus appear to have intervened in an ongoing process of identity mutation in both states.

Finally, that mediation can be used to re-sculpt the identities of the conflict parties in order to promote particular norms challenges our very conception of mediation. In the fourth section, I contended that mediation is depicted as a benevolent practice with humanitarian intent, as a process intended to generate peace. However, it has been suggested that inflicting fresh identities upon societies at war forms an essential strategy of "liberal" peacebuilders and, moreover, that this aim is often shrouded beneath a veneer of compassion (Kostić 2007: 16; Kostić 2013: 24). Identities "generate and shape interests" (Jepperson et al. 1996: 60; see also, Lynch 2002: 28), conditioning the policies which governments can pursue, and the policies perceived as legitimate by those they govern (Telhami & Barnett 2002: 7; see also, Saideman 2002: 199). To hold an identity is to have "expectations about self" (Wendt 1992: 397) which, in turn, shape our opinions of and behavior towards others. Identities are integral to individuals, groups, societies, nations, and transnational communities, defining who we are and that which we seek. If the identities of the conflict parties can be recast within mediation to artfully promote the norms favored by the mediators, as I suggest, we must recognize the social power of mediation, and better integrate the concept of collective identity within our analytical frameworks.

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