

CONFLICT AND PEACE SCENARIOS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

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What impact will the global outbreak of the coronavirus have on conflicts around the world? Whether it is seeking ceasefires for humanitarian assistance or offering to soften international sanctions in exchange for political steps, the pandemic is opening new and unexpected scenarios of war and peace. In Afghanistan, Libya or Venezuela, conflicts are already being shaken up and, somehow, transformed.

Four days after the tsunami in December 2004, separatist armed rebels in Aceh, Indonesia declared a ceasefire to allow an international humanitarian relief operation. The coordination that emerged between the Indonesian government and the rebels proved critical in paving the way for the peace deal signed in August 2005. Not only did the tsunami open a space for dialogue but it also transformed the actors. As Irwandi Yusuf, a former commander of the rebels, later reflected, after the tsunami tragedy “both sides became more understanding”.

The global outbreak of the coronavirus is already having considerable impact on conflicts around the world today. The uncertainty about the future that engulfs us all is also felt by the politicians or commanders embroiled in these conflicts. What perhaps they are less aware of, is that, as occurred with the tsunami, the scope of the tragedy may also alter their core interests, objectives and even world views, thus opening new, unexpected scenarios of war and peace.

Perhaps the only certainty in any foreseeable scenario is that the Corona pandemic will put addressing the impending global economic crisis at the forefront of most countries agendas, particularly in the more exposed global south. With resolving conflicts becoming less central to both local and international actors, the main question that will define these new scenarios is whether actors will seize new opportunities for de-escalation emerging from the pandemic or whether decision makers on the ground will try to take advantage of the situation to reach their goals.

In Afghanistan, COVID-19 emerged in the context of a disputed presidential election and a US-Taliban deal that includes the withdrawal of most

US troops. On 23 March, with the pandemic having already strongly hit Europe and the US, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that due to the disputed election, the US was withdrawing \$1 billion of aid and that it would proceed with its troop withdrawal as per its agreement with the Taliban.

The US's decision should however be mostly understood as a political move in an election year amid a looming global economic crisis. The effects of a large-scale Corona crisis in Afghanistan, which borders Iran, the third most affected country by the pandemic, are as easy as they are terrifying to imagine.

The question now is how Afghan political actors will view this new scenario. The Taliban may see the US's disengagement as a window of opportunity to impose a political or even military victory. On the other hand, driven by a Corona crisis that will also affect them, Taliban commanders could allow extensive humanitarian access to areas they control and finally seek to enforce a ceasefire throughout the country. In this context, it is not impossible to imagine that strengthened pro peace sectors in the government and the Taliban could even reach an intra-Afghan peace deal.

In Libya, international actors desperate for any progress on peace talks, have started calling on warring sides to reach a "Corona ceasefire". After claiming that COVID-19 had not yet reached Libya, the government finally reported the first case of infection on 25 March. With many Libyans regularly traveling to Europe the numbers are most likely a lot higher.

But it is a recent series of arrivals that have awoken much controversy in Libya regarding Covid 19: Syrian mercenaries. Battle hardened Syrian fighters were first sent by Turkey to Libya to support the internationally recognised government to hold off the military offensive on Tripoli led by Khalifa Haftar, with the support of UAE and Egypt. More recently, the government in Tripoli has warned that Syrian fighters, and even members of Lebanon's Hizbullah and the Iranian revolutionary guard sent to support Haftar, are putting Libyans at risk of Corona contagion.

In this increasingly overt proxy war context, a scenario that is likely to play out in other conflicts affected by the pandemic, appears to be emerging. Both the government and Haftar, perhaps pressured by their external backers, are paying lip service to international calls for a Corona ceasefire. This could eventually result in limited humanitarian access but it is very difficult to imagine external actors deciding to stop backing their local proxies in Libya. If anything, they may use this time to prepare the next offensive.

In Venezuela, the threat of COVID-19 deepening one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world has led to something that seemed impossible weeks ago: Nicolás Maduro asking for an emergency loan from the IMF, which he not long ago called a model of "savage capitalism". While Venezuela currently has under one hundred confirmed cases, Maduro has understood the potential scale of the coronavirus impact and has, perhaps, sensed an opportunity.

While the IMF quickly rejected the request, on 26 March Maduro called on the opposition to join a national dialogue on responding to the pandemic.

Governors and mayors from opposing sides have already started openly working together locally. And last week Colombia, one of the US's strongest allies in the quest to oust Maduro from power, began indirectly coordinating with the Venezuelan government on Corona response through the Pan American Health organisation.

Could COVID-19 provide the perfect cover for the relevant actors in Venezuela to 'save face' and back track on their maximalist positions? Maduro could now use the Corona crisis to release political prisoners, normalise the situation in the parliament and seek better relations with international actors willing to help tackle the crisis. On the other side, the opposition could agree to cooperate on the health crisis response and convince the US to soften its economic sanctions on Venezuela. Such steps would make a broader political agreement feasible again.

What scenario finally emerges in these and any other conflict around the world will probably end up surprising us. Much like our ordinary lives, these conflicts are already being shaken up and, somehow, transformed. It is now the responsibility of politicians, mediators, civil society leaders etc. to together use the transformative effect of the Corona crisis, in any way possible, in the interests of peace. Whether it is seeking ceasefires for humanitarian assistance or offering to soften international sanctions in exchange for political steps, we must understand that what was impossible before the pandemic may be possible today.