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## **Framing a War or Framing Failure? How the 'Civil War' Narrative Shaped UN Mediation in Syria**

The book *UN Mediators in Syria* provides a meticulous examination of the mediators' strategies, beginning with Kofi Annan's Six-Point Plan, moving to Lakhdar Brahimi's confrontational approach, and concluding with Staffan de Mistura's focus on localized initiatives. Through these case studies, the author underscores the interplay between the mediators' agency and the constraints imposed by international and regional actors. The book situates these figures within the broader framework of international mediation in protracted conflicts, making it a vital resource for scholars and practitioners alike.

The book begins with a strong conceptual foundation, presenting the United Nations' central role as a mediator in complex intrastate conflicts such as the Syrian case. The author argues that while the UN enjoys a unique position due to its perceived impartiality and international stature, its effectiveness in resolving conflicts remains highly contested. This introduces the core research question: to what extent do the individual perceptions and decision-making approaches of UN mediators influence the outcomes of peace processes? To answer this question, the book's introduction outlines a clear methodological ambition, combining first-level analysis with process tracing to address gaps in the existing literature. This approach allows the

author to move beyond “impersonal forces” and explore the nuanced role of individual decision-makers in shaping mediation outcomes. Such a perspective is a welcome departure from dominant frameworks that often reduce mediators to mere institutional actors.

The second chapter delves into Kofi Annan’s tenure as the UN mediator for Syria, offering a first-level analysis of his mediation efforts from February to August 2012. This chapter stands out for its detailed exploration of Annan’s strategies and challenges during a pivotal phase of the Syrian conflict. Through a timeline of key events, the author situates Annan’s mediation within the broader geopolitical landscape, highlighting the interplay between global power dynamics and local resistance to international intervention.

The discussion begins with the undefined context of the violence in Syria at the time of Annan’s appointment. As the author astutely observes, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) did not classify the Syrian crisis as a “civil war” until July 2012—shortly before Annan’s resignation. Until then, the lack of consensus among international actors on how to characterize the violence left mediators grappling with unclear mandates and competing narratives (42-44). The pressing question for readers: Should the conflict be approached as an internal armed conflict, an internationalized proxy war, or a crisis of governance requiring humanitarian intervention? The decision to frame it as a civil war, the author argues, narrowed the scope of mediation strategies and foreclosed opportunities for more innovative or inclusive approaches.

This framing had far-reaching implications for Annan's role. The term "civil war" placed the Assad regime and the opposition as equal belligerents in a domestic struggle, sidelining considerations of international accountability and external influence. It also enabled the Assad regime to exploit the narrative of sovereignty, positioning itself as a legitimate government combating internal unrest rather than a regime responsible for widespread atrocities. This framing, the author argues, inadvertently undermined the recognition of Assad's atrocities and fueled perceptions of moral equivalence between the regime and opposition forces. Such a characterization echoes the sentiments of many Syrians who reject the term "civil war" as it diminishes the scale and intentionality of Assad's violence. According to Nassar, this framing limited Annan's ability to leverage international pressure or invoke mechanisms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. The reluctance to frame the violence within the parameters of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework, or as an internationalized conflict involving state-sponsored proxy wars, created a narrow lens through which mediators like Kofi Annan operated.

The originality of this argument lies in its challenge to conventional narratives. By emphasizing the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the Syrian crisis, the book forces readers to rethink the foundational assumptions that underpin international mediation. Rather than viewing the failure as a consequence of diplomatic inertia or geopolitical rivalry alone, the author compels us to consider how the terminology itself dictated the strategic options available to mediators and the international community at large.

In Chapter 3, *The Quiet Negotiator*, Brahimi is presented as a mediator attempting to balance pressures from global powers, the intransigence of the Assad regime, and the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition. The chapter critically examines whether Brahimi's strategies adequately addressed the structural challenges posed by the external control of opposition factions. For instance, the author questions how a mediator can effectively unify an opposition that is not only ideologically fractured but also heavily influenced by external dependencies. Additionally, the chapter delves into the structural limitations imposed by the Geneva II framework, which Brahimi was tasked with navigating. The framework's binary representation of the conflict—government versus opposition—oversimplified the complexities of the Syrian war, neglecting the intricate local and regional dynamics that could not be encapsulated within such a rigid structure. This critique highlights the difficulties of mediating a conflict where both internal and external forces resist straightforward categorization, complicating efforts to achieve meaningful dialogue and resolution.

While the narrative frequently centers on the perceived failures or limitations of the mediators, the broader complexities of Geneva II demand deeper contextual analysis. The fragmentation between the Syrian opposition's political and military wings, for instance, played a critical role in undermining negotiations. However, the author does not sufficiently address how structural dependencies—such as the logistical and financial ties of military groups to Turkey—further eroded the opposition's cohesion. These external influences significantly constrained Brahimi's ability to exert leverage over the opposition, limiting the effectiveness of his mediation efforts.

The book invites readers to critically compare the approaches of the UN mediators. Unlike his predecessors, De Mistura's role as a mediator is outlined in chapter 4 *The Televised Humanitarian*, where Nassar explores how De Mistura's tenure as a mediator began in a highly militarized and fragmented conflict environment, compounded by the rise of ISIS, direct military interventions by Russia and Turkey, and the narrowing of U.S. engagement in Syria. While Annan and Brahimi emphasized broader political frameworks like the Six-Point Plan or Geneva Communiqué, de Mistura appeared to shift his strategy toward localized and incremental efforts, such as the Aleppo Freeze, as a means of achieving humanitarian relief and de-escalation. De Mistura's candid acknowledgment of the "impossibility" of his mission underscores the growing limitations of the UN's mediation capacity in Syria, particularly as the conflict transformed into a complex proxy war involving numerous state and non-state actors.

While the book's strengths are numerous, there are areas that could benefit from further development. The critique of the mediators' strategies occasionally risks underestimating the structural constraints they faced. For instance, while Annan's Six-Point Plan is critiqued for its lack of enforceability, the book could delve deeper into how UNSC divisions limited his ability to secure stronger commitments. Additionally, while the focus on individual agency is a welcome departure from institutional critiques, the book might have explored the interplay between the two more comprehensively. How did the mediators' personal attributes interact with the structural realities of the UN's mediation framework? This question is particularly pertinent in the case of de Mistura, whose localized strategies often clashed with the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Syrian conflict.

The book's argument that mediators' framing decisions can fundamentally shape mediation outcomes is a powerful reminder of the importance of conceptual clarity in conflict resolution. By examining the roles of Annan, Brahimi, and de Mistura through the lens of framing, agency, and strategy, the book offers valuable insights into the challenges of international mediation in protracted conflicts.

The analysis also has broader implications for the field of conflict resolution. A notable conclusion is the advocacy for greater professionalization of the UN's mediation apparatus.

The author's call for greater professionalization of the UN's mediation apparatus—through training, accountability mechanisms, and more inclusive representation—provides a roadmap for improving future mediation efforts. The emphasis on evaluating mediators not just by their outcomes but by their strategies and contextual understanding is particularly timely. The concluding remarks also stress the need for better alignment between localized initiatives and broader political goals, a lesson drawn from the varied approaches of the three mediators. The book ultimately challenges traditional views of mediation as being solely institutional, urging a more nuanced understanding that accounts for the interplay of mediator agency, structural dynamics, and the specificities of the conflict.

These conclusions resonate with current debates on the effectiveness of international mediation and provide actionable recommendations for improving future conflict resolution efforts. By reflecting on both the successes and limitations of UN mediation in Syria, the book offers a valuable roadmap for refining peacemaking strategies in other protracted conflicts.

As such, *UN Mediators in Syria* is a significant contribution to the fields of international mediation and Middle East studies. Its combination of methodological rigor, original arguments, and practical recommendations makes it essential reading for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. By challenging readers to rethink the role of mediators and the impact of framing on conflict resolution, the book sets a new standard for analyzing mediation in complex conflicts.