



Isak Svensson

International Mediation Bias and Peacemaking: Taking Sides in Civil War

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Given that limited attention has been given to the roles and effectiveness of biased mediators in civil wars, Professor Isak Svensson's latest book represents a powerful attempt to deepen understanding of this topic through solid theoretical and empirical observation. As a student of international mediation, I was attracted to *International Mediation Bias and Peacemaking: Taking Siders in Civil War* for two reasons. Firstly, I was interested to learn why it is important to understand the roles and functions of biased mediators in armed conflicts and peace processes. Secondly, I wanted to gain a comparative understanding of whether biased or unbiased mediators are more effective and useful in conflict mediation processes. This book is genuinely enlightening regarding both of these concerns.

Svensson sets out to challenge the conventional wisdom that civil war mediators should be neutral if they are to be effective in their roles. In particular, this book challenges three apparently established facts about international mediation. Firstly, it challenges the established concepts and definitions of mediation success. Svensson argues that previous conceptualisations of mediation success are characterised by three major problems: a lack of clarity around what could, or should, be achieved by mediators which leads to "unmet expectations"; a lack of clarity around how sustainable peace can be achieved; and a tendency to overlook the quality of outcomes. Against this backdrop, the author develops an alternative proposal that would involve mediation success being measured by whether or not a "peace institution" emerges from the content of a peace agreement. Biased mediators, as Svensson illustrates throughout this book, are highly effective in creating peace institutions.

Svensson questions the effectiveness of unbiased mediators and argues that, too often, the primary motivation of an unbiased mediator is to end the war rather than to produce a high-quality peace agreement. He suggests that unbiased mediators are often at their most useful when they address the side issues that affect a mediation process rather than its main concerns. He also argues that unbiased mediators bring few resources to the mediation process.

Finally, this book provides solid justifications for why biased mediators are more effective than unbiased ones. Svensson sets out to prove that "biased mediators are more effective peacemakers since they have leverage over the parties, can deliver their side, possess private information and overcome rebel-sided and government-sided commitment problems" (p. 4).

The book makes a positive case that biased mediators are more effective than their unbiased counterparts, and its core argument is that biased mediators are highly effective in creating "peace institutions" as part of peace agreements. Svensson uses the term "peace institution" to refer to the creation of security guarantees as well as mechanisms for power-sharing and justice. Biased mediators are shown to contribute to the sustainability of peace institutions even though they have no significant role in their effective implementation; they are also credited with making the content of a peace agreement reasonably fair and advantageous for both parties. Svensson goes on to argue that, even if biased mediators favour one party over another, their attempts are often focused on producing sustainable outcomes for a peace process. He suggests that a coalition of government-biased and rebel-biased mediators can function effectively in the mediation process and help to produce better outcomes for all parties involved.

This book offers a solid combination of theory and empirical observation. The first three chapters set out the theoretical basis for Svensson's discussion, and each of the subsequent



seven chapters is based on empirical evidence and highlights a specific theme related to institutional arrangements for peace. These chapters demonstrate why biased mediators are effective in achieving a particular outcome in peace negotiations through mediation; the first is focused on a quantitative study while the rest are presented as case studies of either single or multiple cases. Svensson is therefore able to explore his arguments regarding the effectiveness of biased mediators in relation to empirical evidence in both qualitative and quantitative forms.

This book provides a micro-analysis of the role of biased mediators, usefully distinguishing between government-biased and rebel-biased, as well as source-biased and content-biased, mediators. Svensson describes their usefulness and effectiveness in various conflict settings and pays particular attention to their roles in crafting the content of peace agreements.

Although the core objective of this book is to demonstrate the effectiveness of biased mediators in helping parties to craft a high-quality peace agreement, it also draws attention both to the roles that unbiased mediators play in resolving internal armed conflicts around the world and to their limitations in conflict resolution processes. Svensson stresses that unbiased mediators have an important role to play in conflict mediation processes and acknowledges the contributions they can make. He also shows that, in some exceptional cases, unbiased mediators have been effective in producing high-quality peace agreements which provide peace institutions. Svensson uses as an example Martti Ahtisaari's role in mediating the conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh movement (GAM). Svensson makes recommendations to unbiased mediators regarding their limits and effectiveness in the peace process by establishing a four-part model for peacemaking that involves unbiased mediators (See p. 107). His model requires them to (a) act as biased mediators do, (b) transform external supporters into biased mediators, (c) coordinate and collaborate with biased mediators, and (d) provide a framework to accommodate differently biased mediators.

This book provides an overview of criticisms against the usefulness of biased mediators in mediation processes. Svensson explains why these criticisms are not valid using multiple methods and approaches, and the book is methodologically very sound. In general, he uses four different approaches to explain his thoughts and arguments on the issue related to biased mediation. Firstly, he provides a concrete theoretical explanation of the topic and a review of the existing mediation literature, as well as his own prior research on biased mediation. Secondly, he provides a quantitative analysis of peace agreements using the Terms of Peace Agreements Data (TOPAD) from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Thirdly, Svensson provides in-depth analysis of case studies in order to assess specific aspects of biased mediation. Finally, he adopts a comparative study method to demonstrate how biased mediators outperform unbiased mediators.

Overall, this book makes a novel contribution to the field of mediation research. Svensson concludes that, whether they are biased or unbiased, mediators all have their own limitations as they work to resolve and find durable solutions to conflicts. He concludes that while unbiased mediators are good at ending violent conflicts but often produce low-quality peace agreements, biased mediators are often significantly better at creating effective peace institutions as part of the content of the peace agreements they help to broker.

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