

Entry

COVID-19 and Peace in Conflict-Affected Areas

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Definition: The relationship between COVID-19 and peace has been considered from a variety of perspectives. In addition, different empirical studies on the link between the pandemic and peace in conflict-affected areas exist. However, little work has been performed on examining these studies to highlight key findings on the theme of COVID-19 and peace in conflict-affected areas. A conflict-affected area is a country, or part of a country, where widespread violence or armed conflict was present when COVID-19 emerged in December 2019, or that was transitioning from recent armed conflict to peace by the time the disease arose. What do we know, so far, about how peace has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in conflict-affected areas? To address this question, this paper begins by recognizing the multidimensionality of peace and clarifying that the main aspects of peace in conflict-affected areas being considered in the article are relations between conflict parties, peace efforts, and peace processes. Afterwards, the paper discusses existing evidence regarding the impact of COVID-19 and state responses to it on these components of peace in conflict-affected areas. The conflict-affected areas considered include Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, the Philippines, Yemen, and other zones. The central finding of the article is that the existing studies on COVID-19 and peace in conflict-affected areas present mixed findings. On the one hand, the virus generated opportunities for cooperation between conflict parties in some cases, such as in the West Bank and Gaza Strip of Israel-Palestine. However, on the other hand, it created conditions that enabled conflict and impeded peace efforts and processes in many or most conflict-affected areas. The paper explains that two factors that determined how the disease affected peace in conflict-affected and non-conflict-affected areas are the pre-COVID-19 political and socio-economic conditions in an area, and how state and non-state actors responded to the pandemic. The article closes with a summary of the discussion and identification of its major limitations.



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1. Introduction

COVID-19 arose in late December 2019 in Wuhan, China. By early April 2020, close to 2 million cases and over 100 thousand deaths had been reported worldwide in more than 200 “countries, areas or territories” [1]. These numbers increased in subsequent months, while different governments and peoples adopted a variety of responses to the disease. The current paper draws on the existing literature about the disease and its impact to provide an overview of its relationship with peace in conflict-affected areas. A “conflict-affected area” is a country, or part of a country, where widespread violence or armed conflict was present when COVID-19 emerged in December 2019, or that was transitioning from recent armed conflict to peace by the time the disease arose [2–6]. This introductory section is followed by a segment where attention is given to the importance of clarifying what is meant by “peace” in the discussion on COVID-19 and peace. The clarification is useful mainly because peace is a multidimensional concept, which has been used in multiple ways in different contexts. After the section, the paper explains that to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on

peace, at least three stages of its influence should be considered. These are short-term, medium-term, and long-term stages and effects. After discussing these, the article draws on the existing academic literature on COVID-19 and peace to describe the different ways the virus and responses to it have affected peace in conflict-affected areas.

2. The Concept of Peace

“COVID-19 and Peace” is a broad topic under which one could place or discuss various themes. Peace-related issues whose link with COVID-19 have been discussed include peacekeeping, peacebuilding, the military, food security, civil society, democratic processes, governance, human rights, humanitarian actions, terrorism, international relations, the international system, political stability, state-society relations, socio-economic inequalities, gender-based violence, conflict, fragile states, the economy, refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), violent crime, discrimination, peace processes, security, cooperation, diplomacy, regional tension, politics, elections, justice, interpersonal and intergroup relations, and cybercrime. It is useful to clarify how the term peace is applied in the discussion. Peace is often used to refer to the absence of war or physical violence. Additionally, it has been understood as being of two major kinds, which are negative (absence of direct violence) and positive (absence of direct, structural, and cultural violence) [7–9]. However, peace research has shown the complexity and multidimensionality of the term. Peace has different meanings and applications in different contexts [10]. In addition to positive and negative peace, various other kinds of peace have been identified by researchers [8,10–14].

The two concepts of “relational peace” and “situational peace” [10] are useful in the study of the relationship between COVID-19 and peace. With the understanding that peace has situational and relational dimensions, the inquirer would be interested in how COVID-19 has affected relations between individuals and groups, and the situation or condition in a given area—for example, in terms of the absence of direct violence. Regarding human relations, the researcher may also be more specific about the kind being explored. For example, in a study [14] about the impact of COVID-19 on peace in Nigeria, the author gave major attention to relations between Christians and Muslims in the country and concluded that the pandemic had a positive effect on Christian-Muslim relations, given that it drew the different believers together in COVID-19 response. This is similar to the effect that the 2013/2015 Ebola Virus Epidemic in Upper West Africa had on the peoples of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, who are said to have “stood together” to fight a disease that was rightly perceived as “a common threat” [15]. Given the multidimensionality of peace, specificity about what is meant by “peace” is useful in the discussion on COVID-19 and peace. Due to space constraints, the current paper will focus mainly on the impact of COVID-19 on relations between conflict parties, peace efforts, and peace processes in conflict-affected areas. Before this is discussed in Section 4, it is useful to reflect briefly on the issue of “impact” in the following segment.

3. How Do We Understand the Impact of COVID-19 on Peace?

Many peace researchers would agree that its impact on global peace or on peace in any given area can be understood in terms of short-term, medium-term, and long-term effects [16–19]. The short-term impact is the effect it had in the period that commenced when the emergence of the disease was announced in December 2019 and ended in the weeks or months of 2021 following different countries’ adoption of various “urgent” strategies to curb the spread of the disease. This could be called “the emergency period” [16]. To understand the long-term impact of the disease on peace, one may consider what takes place in the period of recovery from the pandemic, which could be referred to as “the recovery period” [16]. An intermediate period could be examined for the medium-term effects of the disease. This is the time between the emergency and recovery period. It is not clear when the emergency period of the COVID-19 pandemic ended or when one should regard as the beginning of the recovery period. Different countries have had different experiences. Most of the existing studies on COVID-19 and different dimensions of peace,

some of which were consulted while writing this paper, are based on data collected in the years 2020 and 2021, which include the emergency period and months that could be regarded as the medium-term. The following section of the paper mainly discusses the effects of the pandemic and responses to the pandemic in this 2020-2021 timeframe, especially in 2020.

4. Survey of COVID-19 and Peace in Conflict-Affected Areas

Apart from adverse effects on peace, the outbreak of infectious diseases may produce positive peace-related outcomes in society. For example, it could reveal the weaknesses of a given peace strategy, which might then trigger the need or will to improve it, before or after the crisis has been controlled. In some conflict zones, infectious disease outbreaks create opportunities for cooperation between conflict parties, which could be grasped [14,16]. This cooperation caused by diseases is part of what is at times referred to as “disaster diplomacy” or “disaster-related cooperation”, which also includes cooperation resulting from the emergence of other kinds of crises, such as natural disasters [16,17,20,21]. Additionally, the outbreak of infectious diseases is said to create conditions that discourage war. For example, it causes economic challenges, which might reduce a state’s, or an actor’s, capability to start or sustain a war [14]. Most of the existing studies on COVID-19 suggest that its effects have been largely negative, but it seems the pandemic and state responses to it have had mixed effects on peace in conflict-affected areas [14]. While they seemed to reduce conflict or cause cooperation between conflict parties in some cases, they created conditions that enabled conflict in other areas.

The emergence of the disease and subsequent global efforts to curb its spread led to a reduction in the intensity of some conflicts in different zones [14,22]. For example, Ide [23] finds that in the first half of 2020, the pandemic led to a temporary decline in armed conflict events in some conflict-affected areas, including Afghanistan, Colombia, Thailand, and Yemen. He recognizes, however, that there might have been other factors not related to COVID-19 that contributed to the decline in conflict. For example, he notes that the February 2020 peace deal between the United States of America (USA) and the Taliban did influence the Afghanistan case. On the other hand, a report published by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) in 2021 shows that “most wars continued to rage” one year after the COVID-19 situation emerged [24]. Ide [23] observes that although Afghanistan, Colombia, Thailand, and Yemen experienced a temporary decline in armed conflict in early 2020 partly due to the pandemic, armed conflict events seem not to have decreased in the same period in some other areas, such as India, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, and the Philippines. In fact, according to Ide [23] and Polo [25], it appears that there was rather an increase in armed conflict events in some countries, such as Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, and the Philippines after March 2020, in part due to issues not related to COVID-19. Mehrl and Thurner [26] also found that armed conflicts increased in some parts of the Middle East during the shutdowns in early 2020, but they reduced in Europe, South Asia, and the Caucasus. The pandemic had mixed effects on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as shown in Lehrs’ [16] analysis of its influence on relations between some key parties in the conflict from March 2020 to September 2020. These parties include Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, Israel and the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem, and Israel and the Hamas government in the Gaza strip [16].

In the West Bank, Israel and the Palestinian Authority cooperated at the initial stage when they understood that joint efforts were required to control the virus. In a period when the leaderships of the two parties did not have much communication, the pandemic led to a phone call between the Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin, and the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, on 18 March 2020, some days after the first case of the virus was declared in Israel on 27 February 2020 [16]. In addition, Israel delivered COVID-19 testing materials to the Palestinian Authority, medical personnel from both parties took part in joint training sessions, discussions between finance ministers of both parties regarding the economic dimensions of the pandemic took place, and financial aid was provided for the Palestinians

by Israel [16]. However, Lehrs [16] observes that the interest in cooperation declined as the emergency period passed. The initial cooperation was limited, and it did not prevent violent incidents from occurring in the West Bank. In fact, by the end of May 2020, the situation had changed “from one of cooperation to one of conflict”, partly because of some political changes in Israel and because of a perception in Israel that the virus was largely under control [16]. Although the second wave of the infection in Israel, which began in late June, seemed to re-focus the Israeli leadership and public interest on the virus, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank persisted. The first wave of the virus triggered cooperation between the parties, but the second wave did not [16].

Contradictory effects were also recorded in East Jerusalem. The spread of the virus from March 2020 caused tension between Israeli authorities and the Palestinians, but the situation also led to cooperation between Israeli actors and the Palestinians in the region, and among the Palestinians, who set up committees to provide COVID-19-related assistance to residents of the area [16]. In the Gaza strip, the crisis led to cooperation between the Hamas government, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, for example, in terms of the coordination of humanitarian efforts [16]. However, the virus later became an issue of conflict between the parties. For example, Hamas demanded ventilators from Israel and even threatened to “take them by force from Israel” if they were not provided, and Israel seemed to require Hamas’ release of the bodies of Israeli soldiers in exchange for COVID-19 assistance [16]. By August 2020, the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians had escalated despite the initial cooperation, to the point that at least two rockets were launched from Gaza into Israel in August, leading to Israeli military responses [16]. In general, it seems the pandemic has not caused any lasting positive change in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Lehrs [16] explains, it neither produced “a new peacemaking process” nor “a dramatic improvement in relations” between the conflict parties. What is clear, however, is that although pre-disaster conditions in the region shaped the COVID-19 experiences in these three parts of Israel-Palestine, the pandemic promoted cooperation and equally created conditions that enabled conflict.

On 23 March 2020, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, called for a global humanitarian ceasefire in conflict zones to enable COVID-19 efforts. In response to this, the Saudi-backed coalition in Yemen announced on 8 April 2020 that it would cease all military operations in the country from 9 April 2020 to support coronavirus response, even though no cases had been reported in Yemen. Although many hoped that the declaration would create opportunities for cooperation between the conflict parties, it did not stop the escalation of violence days after the declaration, as Houthi forces are said to have taken advantage of the COVID-19 situation to recruit members and advance their operations [19]. As Montevocchio [19] puts it, this led to the arrest of the “progress towards peace” in Yemen. The UN appeal for a ceasefire initially generated “often unilateral ceasefire agreements” [27] in some conflict zones, including Yemen, Colombia, Cameroon, and the Philippines [19,27,28]. However, the declarations hardly received general acceptance and support from the conflict parties in the areas and therefore, rarely had major lasting effects on hostilities [19,27,28].

As of 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, at least six United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions were active in Africa [29]. These include the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UN-ISFA), The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and the African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) [29]. In these conflict-affected areas, the pandemic led to cooperation between the UN peacekeepers and the governments of the countries in the coordination of COVID-19 efforts [29]. However, it is not clear whether there has been any lasting positive effect that this cooperation or the pandemic had on the armed conflicts in these African countries. Instead, it is reported that the restrictive

measures imposed by the states to mitigate the spread of the virus hampered peace efforts in the countries [29]. For example, Peter [30] and Montevecchio [19] have observed that the pandemic and restrictive measures put in place to control it hindered the implementation of the Revitalized peace Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which the parties in the South Sudanese conflict signed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 12 September 2018. In some other conflict zones outside Africa, the pandemic mainly worsened the conflict situation and impeded, rather than aided, peace processes. For instance, in Myanmar, the COVID-19 situation is believed to have deepened the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis that was existing before the first case of the infection in the country was reported on 23 March 2020 [31]. In addition, peace processes in Colombia, the Philippines and Ukraine were slowed down [32], and different studies have shown how UN and non-UN peace work in Africa and other regions were hampered [14,33–38]. The pandemic and the restrictive measures taken by governments also created conditions that led to an increase in local violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, and South Sudan, among other countries within and outside Africa [28].

Global and regional cooperation emerged in response to the pandemic, as in the case of the member states of the South African Development Community (SADC) [39]. Yet, the pandemic raised tensions between countries as in the case of China and the USA. It created security gaps, which terror groups and other violent non-state actors took advantage of. For example, in July 2020, the UN warned that ISIS was exploiting the COVID-19 situation to relaunch operations in Iraq and Syria—in a period when the control of the disease’s spread was a priority of most or all governments [40]. In some parts of northern Nigeria where armed bandits attacked communities before the COVID-19 period, communal attacks are said to have increased during the lockdown [14]. Terror groups in the northeast region of the country, including Boko Haram, also took advantage of the disease outbreak to intensify their operations and recruit more members [41].

5. What Determined COVID-19’s Impact on Peace?

Although this paper does not do a comprehensive assessment of the different variables that have determined the effect of the pandemic on peace in conflict-affected and non-conflict-affected areas, it will highlight the important role played by two broad factors. These are the pre-COVID-19 political and socio-economic conditions in an area, and how state and non-state actors responded to the pandemic. These factors are discussed below.

5.1. Pre-Existing Conditions

One factor that helped to determine how the pandemic affected peace in different countries is the political and socio-economic situation in the areas before the emergence of COVID-19. This, in turn, helped to shape how different governments responded to the disease. In other words, pre-COVID-19 country-specific conditions and government response were influential determinants of the impact of the pandemic on peace [14,15,42–46]. Different societies experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways. Truly, there were experiences which could be found in more than one area. For example, in some countries where the state ordered a shutdown to curtail the disease’s spread, economic difficulties were experienced by large numbers of people. Furthermore, similar religious interpretations and conspiracy theories regarding the disease existed in various societies. In addition, there were fears about COVID-19 vaccination in the West and other countries in the Global South. These similarities notwithstanding, every country where COVID-19 cases were reported had its own unique pre-COVID-19 political and socio-economic conditions, which helped to shape how it responded to the disease, and the impact the disease and the responses had on the society. For example, before the emergence of the disease, some states had a relatively high degree of economic capability and stability, which in turn enabled their governments to ease the economic problems that a COVID-19 shutdown might cause. Other countries where this economic feature was lacking were

unable to sustain a system that alleviated the problems resulting from the shutdown. It appears that social unrest was more likely to emerge in areas where COVID-19 restrictive measures were ordered with little or no implementation of economic support policies [43].

In addition, some states had major security problems before the emergence of the disease. COVID-19 seemed to compound the previously existing poor security situation in some of these areas. Armed conflict weakens medical institutions in the area where the conflict takes place, thereby impairing the societies' ability to properly manage an infectious disease outbreak. On the other hand, the spread of an infectious disease might also produce conditions that enable or motivate violence. Hence, the relationship between infectious diseases and conflict is "symbiotic" [22]. The absence of armed conflict and the presence of other peaceful conditions in a society are part of what affects its ability to "anticipate, detect, and coordinate response and recovery" from a disease outbreak situation such as that of COVID-19 [47]. Additionally, it is believed that by worsening conditions that contribute to conflict in conflict-affected areas, COVID-19 might have delayed the realization of peace in the societies. For example, through reduced economic activity and job losses, it increased youth unemployment and youth poverty, which in turn might have aided armed groups' recruitment of new members amid the pandemic [25]. For these reasons, peace actors have been largely concerned about the situation in conflict-affected zones in the COVID-19 period.

Existing studies on COVID-19 and peace in conflict-affected areas show that mostly short-lived cooperation between conflict parties has emerged from the pandemic. This article suggests that one way to understand this limited impact of COVID diplomacy is to think about the complex nature of peace and conflict and the pre-COVID-19 conflict situations in conflict-affected areas. As Ide [23] rightly observes, "armed conflicts are complex, dynamic and multi-faceted phenomena". Similarly, peace in any given conflict-affected or non-conflict-affected area is generally shaped by multiple factors, including political, economic, ethnoreligious, and other kinds of variables, depending on the context [14,48–50]. The prevention of armed conflicts and the causation of sustainable peace in conflict-affected areas require more than the health diplomacy that the need to control COVID-19 generates [14]. It seems that the status of different intrastate conflicts before the emergence of COVID-19 helped to determine the extent to which the conflict parties were committed to advancing any peace talks during the COVID-19 period.

For COVID diplomacy to generate continued cooperation or peace talks between conflict parties, it appears that one necessary condition is that the parties should be willing to extend cooperation beyond the immediate COVID-19 context or be committed to doing so. Such acceptance or commitment might be partially or fully based on a conflict party's understanding that the continued communication or cooperation would or could lead to the partial or total resolution of its central concerns, for which it is involved in the conflict. If the state of the conflict before the emergence of COVID-19 and COVID diplomacy was that of significant distance from resolution, it would be unsurprising if no further peace talks emerge from COVID-19 response. However, that is not to say that there are not other factors apart from pre-COVID-19 conditions which could affect conflict parties' commitment to post-COVID-19 peace talks. This paper recognizes the potency of COVID-19 efforts to facilitate communication and cooperation between conflict parties. In addition, COVID-19 has obstructed peace work that was going on before its emergence and worsened conditions that drive conflict in different areas. Therefore, the point in the current section is not that there is a straightforward link between pre-COVID-19 conflict situation, COVID-19-related cooperation, and post-COVID-19 communication and cooperation between conflict parties in conflict-affected areas. Instead, the point is that pre-existing conflict situations in conflict-affected areas might have helped to determine conflict parties' willingness to promote post-COVID-19 communication, cooperation or peace talks in conflict zones.

5.2. Responses to the Pandemic

To explain how the responses of state and non-state actors to the spread of the virus affected peace, this section pays attention to governments' local COVID-19 efforts and the instrumentalization of the COVID-19 situation by armed groups. As the virus spread across the globe in early 2020, different governments felt the urgent need to curb its spread. Two kinds of responses to the virus produced by this sense of urgency are the introduction of restrictive measures, and cooperation between state and non-state actors in the coordination of COVID-19 efforts. For example, cooperation between different governmental and non-governmental actors in conflict-affected areas emerged in Israel-Palestine and Nigeria [14,16]. A strategy that was widely adopted to curtail the spread of the virus is the use of shutdowns, which many governments in the Global North and Global South introduced in early 2020. Although shutdowns were common, they played out in different societies in different ways. For example, some governments provided financial support for residents during the shutdown, but others provided little or no support. This influenced the behavior of the masses and levels of social unrest during the shutdown [43]. For example, in some areas in Africa where the financial intervention of the state was poor or non-existent, shutdowns led to criminal activity. In parts of Nigeria, residents were less likely to follow the government's shutdown directives, and some people resorted to robbery to get the resources they needed to survive in a period when there was minimal economic activity [14].

Shutdowns generally had a link with protest events. At the beginning of the implementation of shutdowns in many countries in early 2020, there was a significant reduction in demonstrations globally. Understandably, this was because restrictions on people's movement meant that people spent more time away from the public space. However, protest events reemerged later as the shutdown continued [44,51]. It has been reported that there were more demonstrations in 2020 than there were before the emergence of COVID-19 in 2019 [24]. Hence, the relationship between the pandemic or shutdown policies and demonstrations has been understood as being "U-shaped" [44]. Some of the protests condemned government responses to the pandemic, but there were protests related to other pre-COVID-19 matters [24]. It is estimated that about 33,247 of the protests that occurred in 2020 were "directly related to COVID-19" [22].

In early 2020, the need to control the spread of the virus drew the attention of governments in conflict-affected and non-conflict-affected zones. In areas where governments were fighting armed groups before the emergence of the virus, such as Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, and Syria, the governments' attention to COVID-19 and the adverse impact of the pandemic on state economic and military strength created opportunities for armed groups to extend their political and territorial control [14,23,25,52]. In addition, as governments were preoccupied with managing the COVID-19 situation among their local populations, international and UN-led peace efforts declined, and this contributed to the escalation of violence in some areas, such as Libya in early 2020 [23,25,42]. Even though it seems there was a temporary decline in armed conflict events in Afghanistan in early 2020 [23], the Taliban seized the pandemic as an opportunity to intensify their attacks against the Afghan government in that period [25].

6. Conclusions

- The relationship between COVID-19 and peace has been explored from a variety of perspectives. Different studies on the link between COVID-19 and peace in conflict-affected areas exist, but little work has been done on assessing them to understand their key points.
- This article has discussed the major research findings on the impact of COVID-19 and state responses to it on some aspects of peace in conflict-affected areas, including relations between conflict parties, peace efforts and peace processes. The conflict-affected areas considered include Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, the Philippines, Yemen, and other zones.

- The central finding of the paper is that the existing studies on COVID-19 and peace in conflict-affected areas present mixed findings. On the one hand, the virus generated opportunities for cooperation between conflict parties in some cases, such as in the West Bank and Gaza Strip of Israel-Palestine. However, on the other hand, it created conditions that enabled conflict and impeded peace efforts and processes in many or most conflict-affected areas.
- Given that peace in conflict-affected areas is broader than the issues that have been the primary foci of this paper, a more comprehensive review of existing evidence is required to get a wider understanding of the impact of the virus on peace in the areas.
- In addition, since the global COVID-19 situation is still evolving, its full impact on peace in conflict-affected areas will be understood when its long-term effects are examined in future.
- This paper will be useful in future analyses. It has considered existing evidence on how COVID-19 affected relations between conflict parties, peace efforts, and peace processes in conflict-affected areas.

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