



# INTERAGENCY CONFLICT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK (ICAF 2.0)

GUIDANCE NOTE

April 2014



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# **INTERAGENCY CONFLICT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK (ICAF 2.0) GUIDANCE NOTE – April 2014**

## **Introduction**

This guidance note provides an overview of the revised Interagency Conflict Analysis Framework (ICAF 2.0). The ICAF is a key U.S. government instrument for joint analysis of conflicts and instability. The ICAF was originally developed through an interagency process, and in 2012-2013 the U.S. State Department Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) updated the tool to enhance the utility, flexibility, quality and timeliness of the framework.

The purpose of the ICAF is to provide a rigorous shared analysis of a society's key conflict dynamics that will inform U.S. policy, plans and action. Although the State Department and the U.S. Government routinely engage in conflict analysis, the ICAF provides a framework to analyze conflict dynamics in a given geographic area, informed by conflict theory and research. That analysis should ideally be jointly held across relevant US agencies - but without sacrificing timeliness and incisiveness. Analysis is important as it underpins U.S. government efforts to adequately understand an environment, to confirm or reshape U.S. interests, and to optimize policy and action. The ability of the framework's application to achieve its purpose depends on how well it adheres to core principles elaborated below: Priority-focused, Locally-grounded, Joint, Agile, Accessible and Rigorous.

The ICAF 2.0 is generally consistent with other leading frameworks for conflict analysis, notably USAID's Conflict Analysis Framework (CAF 2.0), but is attuned to the needs of the State Department and coordinating the broader U.S. government. Many scholars and international practitioners point to the importance of integrated, locally-grounded and rigorous analysis as a foundation for effective strategies, plans and operations addressing conflicts and crises. The World Bank's World Development Report 2011 called for more in-depth assessments to achieve increased operational effectiveness. Donors are emphasizing conflict prevention and the need to stress political inclusion and capable and legitimate states as highlighted in the 2011 UK "Building Stability Overseas Strategy". The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) and the G7+<sup>1</sup> have recently embraced fragility assessment owned by national stakeholders. The ICAF recognizes the importance of locally-grounded analysis, conducted in partnership with others when possible, while acknowledging that the U.S. government often requires independent analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> The g7+ is an independent and autonomous forum of fragile and conflict-affected countries and regions that have united to form one collective voice on the global stage.

The present guidance explains the core principles and stages of implementation of the revised ICAF. In addition to this guidance note, CSO can offer supporting materials such as a summary pamphlet and the detailed *Research Design Manual for Conflict Analysis*. This guidance includes three phases: (a) Design; (b) Conducting the Analysis; and (c) Using the Analysis.

## *Conflict Theory and the Elements of the ICAF*

The ICAF rests on conflict<sup>2</sup> theory that says that neither socio-historical patterns (such as poverty or ethnic stratification) nor institutional practices (such as political exclusion or lack of service delivery) are sufficient to constitute or cause conflict. **Even the grievances consequently formed by social groups do not by themselves lead to violent conflict. Instead, conflict requires mobilization of social groups around their core grievances by key actors with the means and motivations to do so, usually timed to take advantage of a strategic opportunity.** Similarly, resources a society has for resiliency against conflict, such as a tradition of peaceful coexistence or protected social roles for women, require mobilization by key actors to be effective at preventing or mitigating conflict.

A **Conflict Dynamic** is the term for this combination of (a) *key actors* that leverage (b) *core grievances* or social/institutional *resiliencies* in conjunction with (c) *windows* of opportunity or *triggers* in order to either drive or mitigate conflict. A **negative** conflict dynamic is built around a grievance and creates or worsens conflict, while a **positive** conflict dynamic is built around a resiliency and prevents or mitigates conflict.<sup>3</sup> They are “dynamic” because they put actors into motion in time and space as they mobilize latent conflict into active conflict, or resist or reverse this change. Although windows and triggers will usually be present, sometimes conflict dynamics can occur without a specific trigger or window. The components that come together as current or likely future conflict dynamics are more clearly consequential than grievances, resiliencies, key actors or windows that do not contribute to a full conflict dynamic. The construction of conflict dynamics and each of the components are discussed in more detail in the section below on *Phase 2: Conduct the Analysis*.

### **Conflict Dynamic:**

The combination of (a) a *key actor* that leverages (b) a *core grievance* or social/institutional *resiliency* in conjunction with (c) a *window* of opportunity or *trigger* in order to either drive or mitigate conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> “Conflict” is defined in this paper as “**a perceived incompatibility of goals between two or more parties.**” The perception part is important, as changing perceptions might be a key part of conflict transformation. The type of conflict of interest has two further properties:

1. We are interested in *social* conflict, which bears some commonalities with individual conflict, but is different in being subject to the collective action problem, and thus the importance of *leadership*, as well as *group dynamics* which can be escalating or calming.
2. We are primarily interested in preventing and mitigating *violent* conflict, but violent conflict *prevention* requires addressing other kinds of conflict. Thus, we are interested in transforming *destructive* conflict to constructive conflict, where destructive conflict includes forms that are not yet violent, but rather oppressive, unjust or ineffective, and thus *likely to lead to violence*. Hate speech or extreme discrimination is a good example.

<sup>3</sup> In the original ICAF terminology, these were *conflict drivers* and *mitigating factors*, respectively. Largely due to diverse uses of the *conflict driver* term that do not meet this definition, these new terms were adopted, which are consistent with the CAF 2.0.

## ***Principles of CSO Conflict Analysis***

- a) **Priority-focused**: Answering key questions of policy-makers and prioritizing the most worrisome and promising dynamics, going beyond an undifferentiated presentation of data.
- b) **Locally-grounded**: Actively eliciting insider perspectives at multiple levels to capture the dynamics and causes of conflict on its own terms.
- c) **Joint**: Driven by an interagency and interdisciplinary perspective, with partners where appropriate, in analysis and recommendations.
- d) **Agile**: Completing the analysis, report, and briefings swiftly, and adjusting to ensure maximum effect in future iterations. Overcoming challenges of urgency, restrictive environments and limited resources through a judicious selection among varied methods and tools for data collection and analysis.
- e) **Accessible**: Relevant to decision-makers in policy, planning and action by presenting analysis and recommendations concisely and clearly.
- f) **Structured**: Analysis based on conflict theory: 1) integration of all conceptual components of the ICAF (key actors mobilizing grievances/resiliencies, including enabling conditions, identifying windows and triggers); and 2) positive as well as negative dynamics.

## **Phase 1: Design the Analysis**

The first phase of the analysis is its initial design, involving four steps organized around four basic questions.

### **Step 1: Why is the analysis being undertaken?**

What are the initial objectives, audience and scope (e.g. topical, geographical, temporal, demographic) of the analysis? What decisions will it inform, for whom, and in what timeframe? US interests and bureaucratic realities should be explicit. If there are multiple purposes/audiences, they should be prioritized and de-conflicted, and perhaps be addressed through different products and/or iterations.

The first step is to determine the existing policy context by examining documents and interviewing officers of key agencies/bureaus, as detailed in the *CSO Guide to Basic Analysis*, to determine not only what the policy is, but where there are important disagreements or gaps, the most important actors determining policy and their perspectives, and opportunities for contribution to policy elaboration or change. This analysis should inform the next step of consulting with key policy actors to jointly determine the objectives and scope of the analysis. While prioritizing a “center of gravity” policy actor, such as the Ambassador, a Special Representative or NSS, will speed this process, judiciously involving a broader set of actors, including from the interagency, in this initial design phase may improve the breadth of buy-in,

utility and influence of the analysis. The urgency of the analysis should be balanced with the degree of policy control held by each actor and the need for unified policy and joint action in making this determination.

The purpose of the analysis should drive its design. It is important to note, however, that the initial scope must not prevent the analysis from responding to unexpected or contradictory findings that argue for adjustment to the scope and the questions being asked. The local data and insider perspectives gathered and analyzed may well challenge existing outsider thinking about what should be priorities for the U.S. government.

## ***Step 2: What do we already know?***

Before collecting new data or producing original analysis, we should gather the existing knowledge relevant to the purpose and scope of the analysis. This should be captured in a *springboard analysis* which critically reviews this knowledge and sets the stage for new research by honing the research questions to the most important unknowns or hypotheses to be tested. This process may also identify existing sources of data and insight, reliable local or international research partners, and methodologies which have or have not worked well in this context. The thoroughness of this review will depend on the time and resources available, balancing the need to move forward with the efficiencies to be gained from the work already done by others.

- a) **Frame the case. What is the nature of the crisis or conflict?** What categories of conflict or violence are most appropriate: conflict mitigation, conflict prevention, mass atrocities prevention, transitional instability, anticipation of transitional instability, destabilizing violence, or other? Is a peace process, transition or armed conflict underway? What types of intervention have occurred, by whom, and with what results or lessons? Context or political sensitivities may require labeling the analysis something other than a “conflict analysis.”
- b) **Identify key sources of expertise on the conflict and the culture of the place,** and their points of convergence and divergence and omission. Seek credible sources from within the conflict society, not only international experts. What are the main institutions examining the conflict/crisis? Who are the top ten thought leaders? Who do they point to as nodes of influence? What are the competing ideas on the roots of the conflict and its solutions? In addition to consulting their works, consider interviewing them or holding an expert roundtable.
- c) **Evaluate the overall quality of relevant information and its certainty. Search for all existing conflict analyses/assessments<sup>4</sup>** (not every analysis/assessment of any kind) and write a **concise review** with a critical eye to each analysis’ strengths and weaknesses. Summarize points of agreement, disagreement and outstanding questions or gaps in analysis (especially gaps in addressing the ICAF components). Relative to other countries, how detailed is the international community’s knowledge? How biased is it, and how can this be balanced? What are the main gaps in sources and knowledge and

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<sup>4</sup> These are focused on the causes of and solutions to conflict, rather than focused on other issues such as development or human rights in conflict settings. They are ideally informed by a framework based in conflict theory.

how can they be filled? This “analysis of analyses” should generally appear in an annex and be referenced in the text.

- d) **Determine priority research questions** which fill in key gaps in knowledge, or challenge suspect received knowledge, relevant to meeting the analysis objectives. These might stem from hypotheses to be tested, or might be more inductive in nature. The ICAF framework should be used to help structure these questions. For example, rather than “What is driving violence by the tribes in the North?” ask something like “What key actors are mobilizing the northern tribes for conflict, with what motivations and means, around what grievances, and what upcoming windows might worsen this or provide opportunities for mitigation?” If some of this is already known, focus on the unknown components or nuances.

### **Step 3: How should the process be designed?**

A research plan should be designed to answer the priority research questions identified by the springboard analysis by gathering, processing and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. The ICAF conceptual framework can be filled using a variety of methods and tools, including field research methods, each of which has its pros and cons. The set of methods and tools chosen for a particular application of the framework should be tailored to the needs of the analysis, including the questions to be answered, the urgency and timing of decisions to be informed, the conflict context, and resources available - balancing considerations such as *speed*, *cost*, *reliability* and *bias*. Other key considerations are the degree of *access* to sources within the conflict environment and the complementary relationship between qualitative *in-depth* approaches and quantitative approaches enabling *breadth* of study for higher reliability. These considerations interact with the goal of being *elicitive* to truly understand local perspectives rather than imposing foreign conceptualizations, which is easier with more *interactive* and qualitative in-depth approaches. However, the security of researchers and/or the need to *do no harm* to respondents or the conflict system may argue for more *remote* or *passive* approaches, which often are also cheaper and faster. Alternatively, an *appreciative inquiry* approach to interactive methods can also minimize harm, and use of safe venues, data security measures and care in how data and analysis are communicated in public products can help prevent some forms of harm.

More detail on how to choose an appropriate set of methods and tools for a particular purpose and environment, including introductions to various methods and tools used by CSO and their pros and cons, can be found in CSO’s *Research Design Manual for Conflict Analysis*. **Methods and tools to consider include existing datasets, interviews (key informants, grassroots, diaspora), focus groups, surveys (in-person, phone, SMS, email), direct observation, expert roundtables, tabletop exercises, scenario analysis, media analysis (e.g. ICEWS, iSent), forecasting models (e.g. iCast), agent-based modeling (e.g. Senturion), social network analysis (SNA) and geographic information systems (GIS).**

Another component of the research plan is who will participate in data collection and/or analysis. One possibility is other U.S. government entities. In addition to broader acceptance of results, this can provide resources, contacts, data sources, or analytical capabilities – but often comes

with costs of speed and dilution of findings and recommendations to a least common denominator. Similar considerations apply with participation by other international actors or U.S.-based nongovernmental actors, along with sensitivities of sharing information. Participation by local partners can be similarly useful and adds their greater understanding of the culture and environment, contacts, and often greater access to people and places. It also has the benefit of building their capacity to continue quality conflict analysis after CSO departs. However, it can also introduce local biases, adds further information-sharing sensitivities, and significant capacity-building may be required. With all types of partners, gender balance of participation should be sought, to aid collecting and analyzing gender roles and perspectives, which often significantly vary in conflicts and may involve unanticipated insights.

Timing of the research is a critical component, including when results are needed and how soon research can begin. An iterative approach should be considered, to allow tailoring the focus and participation to different purposes or audiences with each iteration. In particular, a first iteration could have narrow focus and participation, and/or shallow data collection, to facilitate quick results, while later iterations could add new issues or areas, broader participants, more depth and/or more reliable data. Successive iterations can also update the analysis and show trends.

#### **Step 4: What products should be developed?**

A conflict analysis will typically produce a rigorous final document as described herein. Additional side products may be needed to guarantee the analysis achieves its objectives, including quality and utility for the planning process, policy and program development, and establishing a monitoring component. The package of products should be tailored to the intended audiences and purposes and the types of data and analysis used. Products should strive for concise and easily digested simplification of complexity using graphics (charts, graphs, maps, box inserts) as well as text, and employing annexes or online resources to provide further depth to a streamlined main presentation. Products might include: summary and detailed reports on conflict dynamics, related PowerPoint presentations, focused analysis of elements of conflict dynamics such as key actor mapping, network maps, regionally or topically focused deeper analysis, mapping and gapping of interventions versus conflict dynamics, trend and scenario analysis based on projecting conflict dynamics, etc. Planning of an analysis must include commitment of appropriate resources and time for the creation of the chosen products.

### **Phase 2: Conduct the Analysis**

The central findings of the analysis should be a handful of prioritized conflict dynamics which explain the most worrisome or promising current trends or foreseeable developments. Identifying key conflict dynamics is the crux of the ICAF, as these conjunctions (rather than unconnected components) are the basis for effective policy, planning and action.

To construct conflict dynamics, we need to first analyze their components: key actors, grievances, resiliencies and windows/triggers. The process presented below gives an initial order for considering the component concepts, but these should be interactive, not a simple linear progression. Starting with key actors is meant to focus the next step on the most relevant grievances and resiliencies, but additional key actors may come to mind when thinking about

grievances or resiliencies. Similarly, thinking about windows and triggers may generate new ideas about the previous components. Iterations of this interactive thinking are encouraged, and are the basis for forming conflict dynamics.

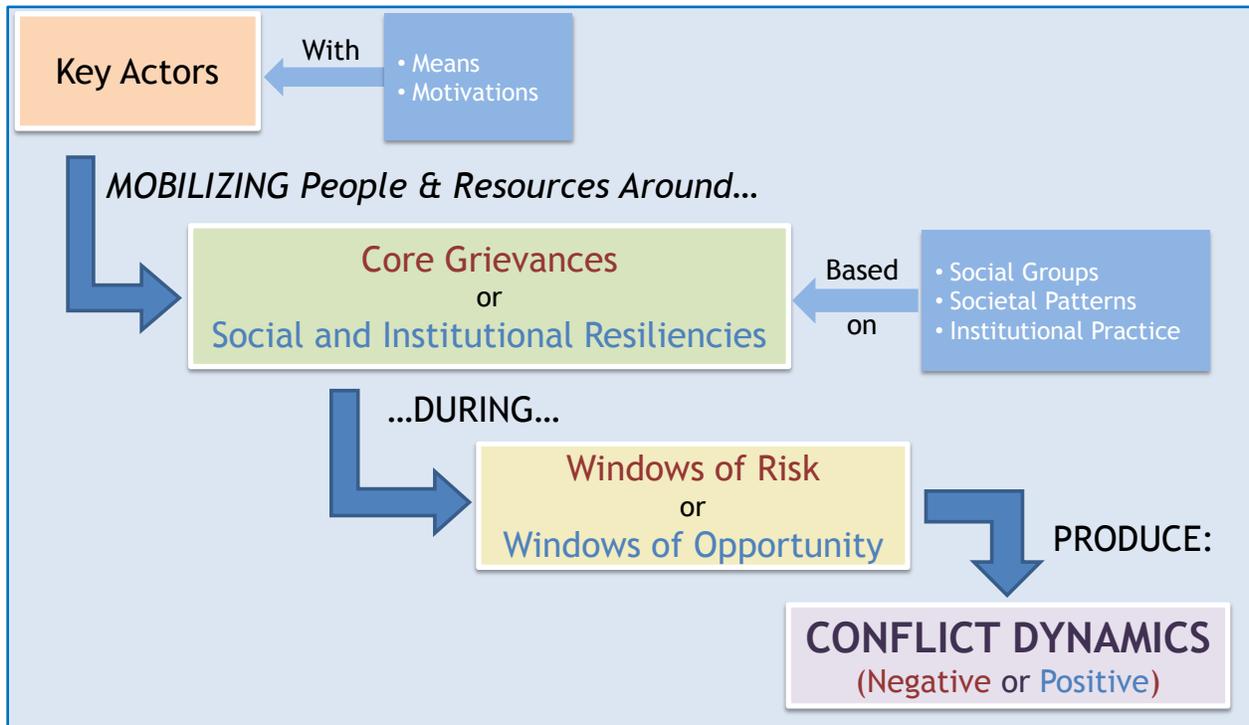


Figure 1: The Construction of Conflict Dynamics

### Step 1: Identify Key Actors (mobilizers and mitigators of violent conflict)

**Key Actors** are influential people, organizations, or groups with the means (e.g. arms, political following, leadership position, resources, moral authority, charisma, narratives) and motivations to mobilize people and resources towards or away from conflict. The ability to mobilize social groups around core grievances or resiliencies, or to affect conflict by strongly altering underlying conditions is what establishes an actor as key. Sometimes important key actors operate *indirectly* by affecting or supporting other key actors, or have critical effects through *inaction* (for instance, by failing to prevent gender and sexually-based violence (GSBV) or violence against civilians). Key actors can act negatively as inciters or spoilers, or positively as peacemakers and peacebuilders. Often, a key actor is capable of both negative and positive roles, and an important aspect of conflict transformation is to move them towards constructive ways of managing conflict. It is important to examine the actual and potential roles of both men and women as key actors, both positive and negative.

**Key Actor:**  
 An influential individual, organization, or group with the means and motivations to mobilize people and resources towards or away from conflict.

Key actors' strategies are built on their motives and whatever means they possess, as well as their underlying conceptualizations about conflict and conflict management. Understanding each

actor's *motivations* and underlying conceptualizations enables use of political, economic, military and diplomatic levers to alter incentive structures, educate, and persuade in order to reduce destructive behavior and encourage constructive behavior. Note that they may possess motives that differ from the grievances or resiliencies they publicly use to mobilize others, and these ulterior motives may be hidden. Knowledge of the *means* of influence and resources available to an actor allows interventions to remove, suppress or dissuade use of destructive means and promote, strengthen and broaden use of constructive means. Note that a key aspect of the means available to a key actor is the vulnerabilities of opponents or groups being targeted, which is particularly relevant for mass atrocities and for GSBV. Conceptions that followers have about other groups or the other gender can also be enabling factors for key actors to mobilize these kinds of violence, and key actors may manipulate the salient conceptions with the narratives they use.

**Conflict theory recognizes that conflict mobilizers and mitigators, and those they mobilize, are not solely motivated by grievances over injustice or ideals, but by interests, including economic profit and opportunity.** Political and military leaders mobilize groups toward violent conflict with promises of loot, plunder, or control over economic enterprises. Conflict analysis requires understanding not just key actors' economic motives and means, but how those interact with political, military and social motives, and how these in turn are used to mobilize violence or build peace. All these motives can be strongly shaped by contextual factors such as the availability of lucrative natural resources like oil or diamonds and weak rule of law or security structures.

Key actors are should also always be analyzed in relation to the constituencies or the social groups they may mobilize, and the strength and salience of related grievances and resiliencies. Rather than list actors in an undifferentiated fashion, the most pertinent should receive more analysis. Special attention should be paid to key actors likely to become more important in upcoming windows, including new key actors whose emergence can be anticipated.

## **Step 2: Identify Core Grievances and Social / Institutional Resiliencies**

Core grievances and social/institutional resiliencies represent the perceived or real features of a society that can be leveraged by key actors to foster or mitigate violent conflict. These result from the interaction of social groups' perceptions with socioeconomic patterns and institutional practices. The analysis should focus on the grievances and resiliencies that key actors are currently using or likely to use to mobilize conflict or peace, rather than an exhaustive exploration.

**Core Grievances** are social groups' perceptions that their physical security, livelihood, identity or other key interests are threatened by other groups or social institutions. Three important components of a grievance are **which groups feel the grievance, who or what they blame for it, and any underlying social patterns or institutional practices in which it is rooted** (which may differ from or complicate the perceived cause). Grievances are commonly about discrimination, past violence,

### **Core Grievance:**

A social group's perception that its physical security, livelihood, identity or other key interests are threatened by other groups or social institutions.

resource competition or cultural clashes between ethnic or religious identity groups, but can also be between citizens more generally and key actors such as government, militias or businesses, or between groups defined by interests rather than identity, as discussed below. Grievances may exist in a latent state for a long time, particularly in oppressive environments or among disempowered groups, without generating attempts to correct them. An important barrier to collective action is people focusing on their own suffering or a broader set of problems instead of realizing that they share a particular grievance with many others, and that it is feasible to flex the strength in their numbers (which appears more feasible if they share an identity and connections, and an accessible target). It is thus important to track how grievances *change in intensity or saliency*, especially if some groups are disproportionately affected by a change, as this provides a key actor greater opportunity to mobilize conflict. An inflamed grievance may cause groups to coalesce and organize around an identity, including new identities formed from common grievances, potentially meaning the emergence of new power dynamics. The *narrative* with which grievances are communicated is a vital indicator, especially if it develops dehumanizing tones towards those blamed, which is a warning sign for mass atrocities.

***Social and Institutional Resiliencies*** are socio-economic patterns and institutional practices that serve or may serve to diminish conflict among groups or to lessen the likelihood that conflicts will become violent. They may help reduce or limit grievances, prevent or retard escalation, solve problems constructively, correct misinformation and/or connect people in positive relationships across conflict lines. These patterns and practices may include relations among identity groups, networks, information flows, values, other cultural properties and the performance of state or informal institutions. By their nature, resiliencies tend to bridge social groups (such as inter-group commerce), but they can sometimes be specific to a particular group (for instance, the pro-peace scripture of a particular religious community.) They may be gender-specific, as with the bridging position of Somali women due to inter-clan marriage traditions. Resiliencies may be latent, unrecognized, widely acknowledged, or exaggerated, and range from historical phenomena that could be reinvigorated to present strengths to newly developing innovations. Like grievances, their intensity and salience can vary over time, affecting opportunities for key actors to mobilize people and resources around them. **Resiliencies are critical to uncover because peacebuilding will be more efficient, effective and sustainable if it builds on indigenous strengths and culturally resonates than if it blindly imports foreign concepts for conflict prevention and mitigation.** This is not to say that foreign concepts are inherently unhelpful, but the first choice should be to work with and expand local resiliencies, and imported concepts should be chosen to fill gaps in local resiliencies or tailored to work with them, rather than ignoring or competing with them. Yet transnational resiliencies (e.g., diaspora) also should be explored critically.

***Social/Institutional Resiliency:***

A socio-economic pattern or institutional practice that serves or may serve to diminish conflict among groups or to lessen the likelihood that conflicts will become violent.

Because grievances or resiliencies can be specific to social groups and rooted in social and historical patterns or institutional practices, it can be useful to dig deeper into these underlying concepts to help understand how grievances might be alleviated or resiliencies expanded:

**a) *Social Groups***

Social groups are those organized around identity (religion, race, ethnicity, language, region, gender, age) or interests (e.g., socio-economic class, values). The latter in particular may exist as “potential groups”: similarities among people that have yet to crystallize as conscious connections but can be activated by changes in the environment or key actor mobilization. The analysis should focus on the most significant social groups, in terms not only of grievances and resiliencies, but also size, organization, resources, allies, geographic placement or other properties that may give them an important role in conflict as antagonists, targets or peacebuilders. For instance, an ethnic minority whose co-ethnics control a powerful neighboring state might be of more concern than a similarly sized minority without such an ally.

**b) *Social and Historical Patterns***

First, social and historical patterns include broad contextual or structural features. What historical narratives and underlying conceptualizations dominate ethnic or group relations – especially regarding past conflicts? Does demography or geography play a role in social conflict – including diasporas, migrants and internally displaced persons? How do gender conceptualizations and norms affect conflict and the (often changing) roles men and women play in pursuing conflict or building peace? How are men and women affected by conflict (including economics, status, war trauma and GSBV)? What about communications technology, traditional and social media, and the internet? How are political, economic and military power apportioned among social groups? What groups control which natural or other resources (land, industry, raw materials, exports)? Political power and economic opportunities are interrelated in ways that underpin grievances and resiliencies. Inequality of resources, opportunity or status, be it in the political, economic, cultural or social realm, is particularly important. Conceptualizations, traditions and values concerning authority relations with both state and non-state authorities are key. How inclusive is the culture and social structure? What is the *culture of conflict* – for example: is compromise valued or shameful; is rational bargaining over issues in the present or concern with long-term relationships dominant; is the tendency toward zero-sum thinking or creative alternatives? Is there a history of frequent violence against civilians or incidents of mass atrocities?

Second, social patterns also refer to acute features of the current state of affairs. How have political, economic and social relations changed recently? Have populations been displaced, social life disrupted, political power or wealth/income patterns overturned? Is there a peace process or a trend toward greater organized violence? Is there a regime transition, and if so with what characteristics, narratives and obstacles?

**c) *Institutional Practices***

Institutional practices include those of political regimes, line ministries and other state organizations such as formal legal systems, as well as political parties, religious institutions, unions, businesses, universities, media and civil society organizations. They

also include informal mechanisms of conflict resolution and representation, traditional forms of authority and law, criminal or other networks, and informal norms of ethnic relations or economic exchange. How weak or strong are various state and non-state capacities? Are they autocratic or democratic? How well are human rights respected? How strong are norms protecting civilians? What roles are women allowed in decision-making, and what mediation or “safe” political roles do they play? How legitimate are state leaders or informal authorities with the significant social groups? How do formal institutions of economic and political power relate to informal channels? How strongly do leaders control armed groups? What are the transnational or subnational dimensions of institutions strength and legitimacy? How open are institutions to international influence? How equally do the institutions serve the significant social groups? Are different groups served by different institutions? Is there conflict or cooperation between institutions? Both positive and negative practices should be examined.

### **Step 3: Identify Potential Windows of Opportunity and Triggers**

**Windows of Opportunity** are changes in the strategic situation providing incentives or capacities for key actors to mobilize people or resources for or against conflict. Key actors may seize on these moments to pursue their motivations to build peace or act as a spoiler. These moments are context-specific, but can include elections or referendums, party primaries, constitutional assemblies, natural disasters, national or religious holidays, the visit of influential outsiders such as the pope or a UN human rights delegation, an international donor conference, or anniversaries of significant events. Windows may affect social groups differently, including by age and gender.

**Window of Opportunity:**  
A change in the strategic situation providing incentives or capacities for key actors to mobilize people or resources for or against conflict.

**Triggers** are more discrete, highly salient events that focus the window’s potential to rapidly convert a non-violent conflict into a violent one or vice versa. A window of opportunity could pass with no changes at all, but if a trigger occurs during the window, it may catalyze peace by strengthening resiliencies or incite conflict by inflaming grievances. If a window is like a pressure cooker on a hot stove, a trigger is like loosening the lid. Triggers might spark or squelch violent conflict by dramatically changing the balance of political or economic power or piquing the attention of social groups around grievances or peacebuilding opportunities. A trigger could be an assassination attempt during an election campaign, a government responding to natural disaster in one region before another, a sharp economic shock, or an influential figure proposing elements of a peace agreement during a ceasefire.

**Trigger:**  
A discrete, highly salient event that focuses a window’s potential to rapidly convert a non-violent conflict into a violent one or vice versa.

### **Step 4: Identify and Prioritize Conflict Dynamics**

The ICAF should ultimately identify and prioritize conflict dynamics. As stated earlier, conflict dynamics combine the above conceptual elements: (a) key actors that leverage (b) core

grievances or social/institutional resiliencies in conjunction with (c) windows of opportunity or triggers. They may be *positive* (conflict preventing/mitigating) or *negative* (conflict instigating/escalating). They may be *current* or likely *future* dynamics. Thought should be given to whether upcoming windows are likely to significantly change existing dynamics or create new ones. They might do this by making grievances or resiliencies stronger or more salient, affecting the motivations, means or strategies of key actors, or promoting the emergence of new key actors, grievances or resiliencies.

Conflict dynamics should not be formulated as direct recommendations of actions to take, but instead present an insightful and compelling narrative that understands the conflict on its own terms, though holding some obvious implications for action. **Key conflict dynamics should set the stage for determining recommendations for policies, plans and actions** which may challenge existing approaches – and thus, their formulation should be insulated from the reverse causality of being driven by institutional biases set by existing approaches. This requires that they be very specific (proper nouns are a good sign) and strive for revealing new insights – they must not be so vague that they could apply to a wide range of situations, actors and call for business as usual.

Conflict dynamics should be prioritized in terms of their *current or anticipated impact* on the conflict. When looking into the future, this involves a combination of the *likelihood* of the dynamic occurring/continuing and the strength of the anticipated impact. This produces a prioritized list of what should be addressed. **This list should be further winnowed according to what dynamics are most feasibly malleable by direct or indirect action of the U.S. government.** It is critically important at this stage to think creatively, beyond the inertia of *existing* U.S. policy, plans and activities, to what these feasibly *could* be. Determining appropriate U.S. government priorities also requires attention to the *comparative advantages* other international or national actors may have for taking preventive or mitigating action, their likelihood of taking such action, and the influence the U.S. government may bring to bear on them to do so. Depending on the audience for the analysis, the resulting list of priorities may be tagged for external partners as well as U.S government actors.

The main report should focus on the three to five highest priority dynamics. Identifying these priority conflict dynamics requires careful reflection and sound judgment. Listing twenty conflict dynamics is of little utility; however, a handful of next-priority conflict dynamics may be retained in an appendix for a more comprehensive understanding and as a foundation for continued monitoring. **Discussion of the priority conflict dynamics should consider probable shifts in the environment that may negatively or positively affect relevant grievances, resiliencies, actors or windows.** Key among such shifts is how dynamics may change in

**Negative Conflict Dynamic Example:**

Leaders of the Liberation party, anticipating a loss in upcoming elections, are reportedly planning to discredit the election by having their youth wing incite violent riots over rumored omissions of ethnic minority names from voter rolls.

**Positive Conflict Dynamic Example:**

The country's main interfaith coalition is moving (as it did successfully during 2009 attacks) to organize widely respected religious leaders to use a new radio program to urge followers to abstain from violent reactions to any religious-based attacks.

response to interventions, especially what spoilers might emerge and take action if peace progresses.

### **Phase 3: Recommendations and Use of the Analysis**

Ensuring impact of the analysis is as important as its design and preparation. Once the analysis is completed, the analysis team should revisit the original assumptions about the optimal products. Are these products still the best way to ensure that the analysis enters into policy, planning and/or actions?

Recommendations should follow the analysis and lead into next step planning processes. However, moving beyond the conflict dynamics to recommendations requires additional analytic steps, as described below.

#### **Step 1: Analyze fit of policies, strategies & activities to key conflict dynamics**

This step requires first understanding the national government's policies, strategies and current and planned activities for stabilization or peacebuilding relevant to the key dynamics, and also those of notable local nongovernmental actors including civil society organizations, the private sector, philanthropists, the media and political parties. The relevant policies, strategies and current and planned activities of the U.S. government should be identified, as well as the main multilateral institutions and bilateral actors, and major nongovernmental international actors, including diaspora groups. (Analyzing this range of activities is a significant undertaking in itself, and most of this analysis should be placed in an annex.) The analysis should assess how well these approaches match the prioritized conflict dynamics and associated opportunities or needs, and their collective chances of success in addressing each dynamic. Identified gaps should be the basis for recommendations.

#### **Step 2: Recommend measures that better address key conflict dynamics**

The analysis should make a handful of recommendations that address, even partially, the key conflict dynamics. Recommendations should usually be addressed to the US government, with as much specificity as appropriate. Recommendations may also be directed at non-USG actors where these have comparative advantage in addressing key conflict dynamics, if the U.S government can influence or support these actors, or if the analysis audience includes such actors. Recommended interventions should be informed by a “do no harm” analysis that anticipates potential perverse consequences of interventions. Recommended activities should support, expand and connect local resiliencies and positive local key actors where possible and avoid competing with or disempowering these.

Recommendations can address any of the components of a conflict dynamic, according to where the most leverage can be applied by the actors involved and the time required. The fastest way to adjust future dynamics may be to change the nature or timing of upcoming windows – for instance, by providing international monitors for an election, or delaying it. Transforming the means or motivations of key actors from destructive to constructive approaches to conflict may



be the most effective approach, especially for current dynamics. Supporting the development of new positive key actors or suppressing negative key actors are also possibilities. Alternatively, action may focus on changing perceptions about grievances, raising the salience of resiliencies, providing immediate relief of grievances, promoting rapid expansion of resiliencies or addressing the underlying social and institutional causes of grievances. Some of these grassroots or structural development activities may take more time and effort to affect conflict dynamics, but can still be appropriate where there is less traction with key actors or as an adjunct to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of other approaches.

***Step 3: Apply recommendations to policy change, strategic planning processes, and/ or design of programs or activities.***

Multiple options exist for how to use the analysis to generate action. Depending on the purpose of the analysis, it may be used to inform a policy discussion or design a specific diplomatic, programmatic or military intervention.

Findings of the analysis may challenge U.S. policy and result in recommendations to adjust policy. To influence policy, release of analysis should be timed to receive attention, and accompanied by follow-up with key decision-makers to address concerns and build support. Recommendations should be formulated and advocated in an accessible manner that appeals to the interests and perspectives of key players to the degree feasible without undue damage to the integrity of the recommendations. Countervailing interests and perspectives should be anticipated or detected and addressed where possible, including those of non-U.S. Government actors whose support is needed in-country and internationally. If a change in policy is made, working with those who should implement the policy to aid them in understanding and applying the analysis is often helpful.

Ideally, the findings of an analysis will feed into planning steps that build on the analysis, either at the strategic or tactical/programming level. The planning process chosen should reflect the country-specific context and the bureaucratic openings. Strategic planning tools include tabletop exercises, civil-military planning, scenario or contingency planning, and crisis or transitional response planning. Additional analysis may also be warranted, for more detail within a country or at the supranational level. It may be required at a highly localized level for programmatic design. Normally the analysis team should be involved in the planning process, and attention to the needs of the planning process should be given explicit attention during the analysis itself. The analysis should guide development of an overall theory of change and theories of change specific to each intervention activity.

In addition to the planning effort, the analysis process will be the first opportunity to consider establishing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system to support the planning process. Iterative analysis of the conflict environment can be used to help judge the impact of interventions, with the initial analysis as a baseline. Each conflict dynamic may be measured and the analysis can help identify what to measure on a rolling basis, and methods of doing so.

*Drafted by Charles T. Call, Bruce Hemmer and Paul Turner  
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## Annex: Examples of Key Conflict Dynamics

Conflict Dynamics should contain: 1) a key actor with motives and means identified; 2) a grievance or resiliency and the social groups to which it applies; and 3) a window, if apparent. Conflict Dynamics that are not fully formed are missing key information that may enable more effective or efficient interventions. Furthermore, conflict dynamics should be specific to the context in order to add insight beyond familiar problems and solutions, and should display clearly strong current or future significance to the conflict trajectory. Below are examples of conflict dynamics that are deficient in a component, specificity or significance, followed by improved versions and explanations of how the improvements could aid intervention design.

### *Specifying Key Actor*

Deficient: Tarek mobs are killing or displacing thousands of Hanya throughout the Tarek Province, triggered by social media reports of the murder of ten Tareks by a Hanya. This is aggravating anger towards this ethnic group that Tareks already regarded as foreign and competitors for resources.

Improved: **Tarek extremists in the TCM party are seeking to increase their power by uniting Tareks against an exaggerated threat. They are mobilizing** Tarek mobs to kill or displace thousands of Hanya Muslims throughout Tarek Province by **using** social media **to spread** reports of the murder of ten Tareks by a Hanya, aggravating anger towards this ethnic group that Tareks already regarded as foreign and competitors for resources.

How the Improvement Helps: Naming “extremists in the TCM party” as key actors allows a more targeted intervention than one addressing “Tarek mobs.” Identifying their motivation of “seeking to increase their power” suggests different interventions than might be applied to the perception of threat at the grassroots. Knowing they are the ones employing the social media as a means to mobilize may facilitate efforts to disrupt their online influence or hold them accountable.

### *Specifying Resiliency*

Deficient: The well-connected Minarians in Europe (MIE) diaspora group is using its economic and political influence with European governments to press the Government of Minaria to stop supporting the MMF militia because it is committing atrocities against Arakans.

Improved: The well-connected Minarians in Europe (MIE) diaspora group is using its economic and political influence with European governments to press the government of Minaria to stop supporting the MMF militia because it is committing atrocities against Arakans. **MIE points to historic Minarian support for humanitarian protections, having been victims of genocide in 1820, and the hypocrisy of the current situation.**

**The diaspora is aware of the MMF atrocities from international media, which does not reach most Minarians in-country due to the controlled media.**

How the Improvement Helps: There are two resiliencies here. Understanding how to shape an anti-atrocity message in a manner resonant with Minarian culture could helpfully shape diplomacy and public diplomacy in Minaria. Realizing that the diaspora's connection to international media makes it more informed about MMF atrocities suggests that efforts to better connect people in Minaria with the same information, perhaps by facilitating contact with diaspora, could spread anti-MMF activism within Minaria.

### *Specifying Grievance*

Deficient: Leaders of the Liberation Party, anticipating a loss in upcoming elections, are seeking to depress turnout and discredit the election by having their youth wing incite violent riots.

Improved: Leaders of the Liberation Party, anticipating a loss in upcoming elections, are seeking to depress turnout and discredit the election by having their youth wing incite violent riots **around rumors that many ethnic minority names are omitted from voter registration rolls being distributed to polling stations.**

How the Improvement Helps: Identifying the grievance being used to mobilize violence allows targeted action to counter such rumors through efforts such as rapid independent spot checks, or action to defuse reactions by emphasizing that provisional ballots are available for anyone not on the rolls, which will be counted if an internationally observed investigation determines those voters should have been on the rolls.

### *Being Specific*

Deficient: Widespread poverty aggravated by the global economic downturn, combined with pervasive corruption at all political levels that prevents rule of law, fuels participation in criminal gangs which violently contest for territory.

Improved: Widespread poverty fuels participation in **the Queta and KR-6** criminal gangs **in drug-trafficking corridors in the eastern provinces, where the effects of the economic downturn have been greatest. The gangs use drug profits to prevent rule of law in this region via longstanding** corrupt relationships **with top leaders of the EPJN and FRP parties, respectively, and lower politicians, bureaucrats, police and judges appointed through their patronage.** Gang leaders are consequently free to operate, and violently contest for territory **at the margins of control by the two parties.**

How the Improvement Helps: The original formulation is relevant to half the globe and provides little insight. The country-specific detail enables focus on particular actors in strategic locations instead of broadly applying off-the-shelf interventions to a general problem. Knowing more about why certain locations are more problematic aids program

design. For example, a location might be targeted that is not currently violent, but can be predicted to be in danger because it is not only economically depressed and in the East, but also is likely to change from EPJN to FRP hands in the upcoming election. Knowing that the corrupt relationships are driven by top leaders of the parties suggests intervention at that level is essential, rather than a completely localized approach.

### *Showing Significance*

Deficient: In the southern areas where there is little government control or service delivery, armed bandits are now attacking convoys that refuse to make payments required to pass.

Improved: In the **predominantly Christian** southern areas where there is little government control or service delivery, **Christian separatist leader Adan Lezika's units have pressured** armed bandits to attack convoys that refuse to make payments required to pass, **inhibiting a vital trade route and eliciting threats of army reprisals by the Muslim-dominant government.**

How the Improvement Helps: Under the original formulation, the dynamic seems part of longstanding low-level violence that is not much to worry about and can even be seen as a locally-driven stand-in for absent government taxation and services. The added information helps show that this is becoming a strategic threat of interreligious escalating armed conflict.



Publicly available conflict analyses using the ICAF are available at  
[www.state.gov/j/cso](http://www.state.gov/j/cso)

For more information, contact:  
[ICAF@state.gov](mailto:ICAF@state.gov) or [CSOPublic@state.gov](mailto:CSOPublic@state.gov)

