



Our Project

After the Cold War, the academic field of Conflict Management – which focuses on preventing and mitigating violent civil conflict – has flourished and revealed important insights. Regrettably, much of this wisdom has yet to be incorporated into foreign policy. Diplomatic and development efforts often miss opportunities to peacefully manage foreign conflicts, or even worse may exacerbate them. Our project aims to help bridge that gap.

We started by interviewing dozens of U.S. officials at USAID, the State Department, the Defense Department, and federal contractors about how their work is guided by two factors: (1) U.S. government guidance documents on conflict, and (2) their past education and training about conflict. The findings in our report, “Insights from Practitioners,” reveal that most U.S. officials who work on international diplomacy, development, and security lack practical training on strategies to prevent and mitigate civil wars. Government guidance documents in this area, such as conflict assessment frameworks, focus mainly on describing the contentious politics of countries, rather than formulating policy responses to minimize violence.

Recognizing these problems, the U.S. government’s “Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability” in 2020 pledged to “expand training and tools for U.S. diplomats engaging in fragile countries and regions.” It also declared that, “State, USAID, and DoD will incorporate lessons into agency training curricula ... [and] develop a robust evidence base to ... determine the effectiveness of policies and interventions across contexts, conditions, and stakeholders groups.” In light of the potential consequences of civil wars – including regional insecurity, refugee flows, violent extremism, weapons proliferation, economic decline, humanitarian suffering, and deployment of U.S. forces – such an investment in prevention could yield large returns.

To assist government officials who have limited time for classroom study, our project includes seven issue briefs on the following topics: Civil War Roots, Prevention, Constitutional Design, Peace Processes, Peacebuilding, Backfire Risks, and Case Studies. We also have compiled a 350-page curriculum, comprising 40 edited readings divided into the same seven topics, for in-depth study. By learning how potential remedies interact with causes of violence, readers can better formulate strategies to minimize civil wars and maximize achievement of U.S. foreign policy goals.