

Chapter 1: Preventing conflict

The best way of reducing conflict is to preventing it from starting. This chapter looks at efforts to identify the root causes of conflict, and current institutional attempts to prevent conflict.

Root causes

To those of us fortunate to be distant spectators of violent political conflict it all seems very simple. War between country A and country B is inevitable, we think, because they both want the same piece of land. Or the inhabitants of country A believe in X while the inhabitants of country B believe in Y. Or within country C the ruling party are of ethnic group D and rich, while the masses are of ethnic group E and poor. Once conflict is actually happening, it is not difficult for outsiders to give plausible reasons for its occurrence, or even its inevitability.

Poverty, ignorance, despair, and differences of wealth, ethnicity, religion,ⁱ class, culture or ideology: all these are thought to be some of the ‘root causes’ of war and violence. So are inequalities in access to resources, scarcity and economic decline, insecurity, the violation of human rights, exclusion or persecution of sectoral groups, and state failures including declining institutional and political legitimacy and capacity. Other key foundations for conflict could be historical legacies, regional threats, the availability of weapons, economic shocks, and the extension or withdrawal of external support.ⁱⁱ Large numbers of unemployed males may also catalyse conflict.

Inward factors are also cited; such as individual pathologies, like a history of being abused at home, that predisposes someone to take up violence in later life.^{iii iv} Often blamed too are the media, and the frequency with which our children are exposed to images of violence - especially when violence is presented as an acceptable and effective way of solving problems.

No doubt all these factors can and do play a part in fomenting and fanning the flames of conflict. But even aside from the impossibility of eliminating every potential cause of conflict, there is no *inevitability* that these causes will lead to war. Selective memory has strengthened these linkages in the collective mind, but for each of these ‘root causes’ there are examples that disprove any simple cause-and-effect relationship. There are dozens of countries in which people of different ethnicity and religion live happily side-by-side. There are also thousands of decent, peaceable and fulfilled adults who as children were horribly abused. One researcher into child abuse concluded that it does increase the risk of later criminality - but not always. The ‘intergenerational transmission of violence is not inevitable,’ she wrote.^v There are many instances of land disputes that have ended. Take, for example, the border between Scotland and England, once the setting of a 300-year-old series of bloody conflicts, now as peaceful as any border in the world. The Swiss have a high rate of gun ownership *and* an enviable absence of internal political conflict, as well as a low rate of gun crime. Japan is still a relatively peaceful society, but one in which lurid depictions of violence

are avidly produced, promulgated and consumed, and have been for many years. Although tribalism is often a factor behind civil war, it is not always the main one. A study focusing on the rise of al-Baqquer Brigade in Syria found that the emergence of tribal militias was principally a grassroots phenomenon stemming from competition over local resources.^{vi}

It would seem likely, then, that political violence cannot be *inextricably* linked to one, or even several, root causes. What could be a root cause of conflict in one region can be irrelevant in another. Elimination of supposed root causes, such as poverty, could alleviate tension in one particular conflict, but it could conceivably by, say, allowing more to be spent on weapons, inflame conflict in another. Availability of small arms in most societies probably does inflame conflict, but the low Swiss murder rate, for example, is underpinned by strict gun control laws. There is no formula connecting any alleged root cause with conflict in ways that can be meaningful in the sense that removing it will always and inevitably lessen the chance of conflict.

As well, the factors that generate conflict may differ from those that make it feasible. In general, the existence of some form of grievance, whether economic, political, or social in nature; whether well founded or not, appears to be the most persuasive motivation for conflict. Of these, economic motivations appear most significant in initiating, prolonging, and transforming conflict. Valuable natural resources can inflame conflict when grievances already exist, as they offer a ready means of financing rebellion. But they can also become a source of grievance in themselves, if state institutions responsible for their management instead engage in corruption.^{vii} The United Nations estimates that, in the last 60 years, at least 40 per cent of all intrastate conflicts have a link to natural resources, and that this link doubles the risk of a conflict relapse in the first five years.^{viii} The exploitation of natural resources, and climate- and ecological-related stresses, are becoming significant causes of violent conflict.^{ix}

It is not always clear in which way is the direction of causation. In some cases, resource competition can exacerbate civil war. In others, civil war can exacerbate competition over resources. Neither is it always clear which particular ‘root causes’ are operating even once a conflict has started. Explanations for the civil war in Lebanon from 1975-90 centred on ethnic or ideological causes of the conflict. But since the end of the conflict, economic developments, and rampant corruption in particular, seem to imply that economic opportunities were probably more important. The civil war resulted in the entry of new actors and an unprecedented rise in the level of social and political power, financial accumulation, and exercise of violence surrounding pre-existing, illegal drug-related activities. For local militias, drugs not only provided a means by which to pay wages, procure arms, and materiel, but also a source of capital accumulation among their leaders and middlemen. This trade resulted in trans-communal, regional cooperation between producers and militias, who negotiated the division of labour and took a share of the profits. These groups, therefore, had a collective interest in prolonging the war. The authorities have since done little to dismantle the drug networks and their factories. As a result, there has been long-term integration of these networks into the international drug market. Satisfaction of ‘greed’ in the name of

‘creed’ would have been impossible if not for cooperation across allegedly ‘intractable’ communal boundaries.^x

These findings echo the pioneering work of Lewis Fry Richardson, who gathered data on all the wars from 1820 to 1949. Rather than ranking wars by historical importance, or by relevance to later events, he picked the most objective measure he could find: the number killed; and focussed on those conflicts that killed more than 3000, for which the data were reasonably complete. There were 108 such conflicts during the 130-year period of study described in his seminal *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*.^{xi} World Wars 1 and 2 together accounted for some 36 million deaths, or about 60 percent of all the deaths of his study period. (This total excludes those caused by famine and disease associated with war.^{xii}) While compiling his list of wars, Richardson noted the various items that historians mentioned as possible irritants or pacifying influences, and then looked for correlations between these factors and belligerence. The results were almost uniformly disappointing: there were tendencies or correlations, but no unambiguous causal relationships. States tended to become involved in wars in proportion to the number of states with which they have common frontiers, though in proportion to their possible contacts for war-making, sea powers seem to have been less belligerent than land powers. Richardson’s own suppositions about the importance of arms races were not confirmed; he found evidence of a preparatory arms race in only 13 out of 315 cases. Richardson was a proponent of Esperanto, but found that similarity and difference of language appeared to have little influence on the occurrence of wars, contrary to the belief of some advocates of universal languages. Economic indicators were equally unhelpful: economic causes seem to have featured directly in fewer than 29 per cent of the wars since between 1820 and 1949. The statistics neither confirm nor refute the ideas that war is mainly a struggle between the rich and the poor, or that commerce between nations creates bonds that prevent war.^{xiii}

So it is not always obvious, even after a long conflict has ended, what its ‘root causes’ were, and perhaps the very notion of a ‘root cause’ needs questioning. It implies that factors such as ‘poverty’ or ‘ethnicity’ can be removed from their social context, and somehow dealt with, and that then a desired result will follow. But human societies are complex. Poverty can feed grievance, but grievance can be a result of poverty. No single formula, no single set of parameters will always lead to conflict, nor guarantee freedom from conflict. Indeed, even the notion of ‘causation’ in this context is questionable. Perhaps we should leave the last word to Tolstoy:

The deeper we delve in search of these causes the more of them we discover, and each single cause or series of causes appears to us equally valid in itself, and equally false by its insignificance compared to the magnitude of the event.^{xiv}

Conflict prevention: vortices of bureaucracy

If the intellectual underpinning of a root causes approach is shaky, so too is the institutional structure that exists to prevent conflict.

In recent years there has been more emphasis on preventing conflict, but the government and international bodies concerned with conflict are still mainly geared towards dealing with it once it has become violent, rather than preventing it arising in the first place. Too often the international community becomes involved in such conflict-prevention activities as mediation and peacekeeping only when the protagonists are facing each other or have actually begun armed conflict. There is also some institutional reluctance to become involved. Many development professionals, for example, see the more immediate causes of national conflicts as 'getting into politics': something that should be left to military agencies; or as interference in a country's internal affairs.

The United Nations (UN) been criticised for institutional weakness and inflexibility in this area. There is no single UN agency responsible for conflict prevention. As Amanda Chicago Lewis wrote:

Over the past eight decades, the United Nations has expanded to encompass an alphabet soup of humanitarian agencies and subsidiary organs with colossal, overlapping ambitions, supported by layers and layers of middle managers. There are endless commissions and centers and conferences and committees, departments and offices and institutes and forums tangled up in abstruse rules and regulations There is a Counter-Terrorism Committee and an Office of Counter-Terrorism; a Department of Peace Operations and a Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. The organization has become so unwieldy that even its most well-meaning workers describe being caught in a culture of toxic inefficiency, hamstrung by problems of accountability, organization, and funding. "The U.N. is a vortex of bureaucracy," Anadil Hossain, a former senior adviser at the U.N. Refugee Agency, told me. "Something needs to change. It's embarrassing."^{xv}

Perhaps the single official whose mandate is solely conflict prevention is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's High Commissioner on National Minorities, and his charge allows him to act only in pre-crisis situations; if they heat up, he must disengage. Another example: the UN High Commissioner for Refugees can only alleviate refugees' plight, not address the forces that caused it. More fundamental criticisms concern the structure of the UN Security Council, set up 80 years ago. And the Security Council, though technically empowered to act on threats to international peace and security that arise within member countries, has mainly concerned itself with inter-state conflicts. Yet there is a growing trend in the number of intrastate conflicts: according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the vast majority of the 61 active conflicts that involved at least one state in 2024 (the highest number recorded since statistics began in 1946) are intrastate conflicts—armed conflicts occurring within a single country, often between government forces and non-state groups or between multiple non-state groups.^{xvi}

Many overseas aid programmes have, as an implicit objective, conflict prevention. But few donors exert the leverage that they could. Actually, development assistance can contribute to conflict. A systematic review of 36 cases of aid given by the US, the World Bank and non-governmental organisations found that aid increased violence in 14 cases, had no effect in

eight, reduced violence in seven, and had mixed effects in five. No type of aid was immune: every type, depending on context, could increase violence.^{xvii}

Incentives and resources

There are no mechanisms in place to monitor, in an over-arching, coherent way, the distribution of conflict-reduction resources to make sure that they are achieving the best possible return for their outlay; nor are there incentives to set up such monitoring systems. The widespread presence of violent political conflict, the human cost of conflict, the potential for further conflict, and the obvious inadequacies of existing peace-making bodies; all suggest that it is worth investigating new approaches, even in the absence of definitive proof that anything new will work.

There are many government and non-governmental bodies that have as their aim the prevention or reduction of conflict. None of these organisations, nor the people that work for them, either permanently or on short-term contracts, are paid according to results. They have only indirect incentives to seek out and develop those ways of minimising conflict that are most cost-effective. They might even be subconsciously discouraged from achieving their stated goals: if too successful, their funding might be curtailed. There is no question that the people who work for these organisations are competent and well meaning and hard working. But, however well-intentioned, neither these bodies nor their agents are rewarded in ways that correlate with its success in maintaining peace or achieving peaceful resolution of political conflict. They behave rationally given the incentives they face, but these incentives do not consistently reward the achievement of desired outcomes.

Lack of pecuniary incentives has two other dimensions. First, the funding of these bodies bears no relationship with their success or otherwise in reducing conflict. This means that the net resources at each organisation's command including the number of professional and support personnel, and non-labour resources, are unrelated to their efficiency or effectiveness in reducing conflict. Second, while there are well-intentioned and highly motivated people who work for these organisations without expecting (or wanting) high financial compensation, there are also others who would be more able and willing to work for these organisations, even on short-term contracts, if there were more funds available either for their own compensation, or for expanding the range of personnel and other resources at their disposal, which would make it easier for them to do their job effectively.

Given the current conflicts in the world and the potential for more, this book will assume current funding levels for peace making are inadequate. This may be because of a sense of fatalism: a sense that conflict is inevitable, so why bother trying to prevent it? But it may also be a result of the inefficiency of current conflict prevention methods. Since they are so ineffective, it appears rational to channel limited resources into other areas, where they will bring about a better return. This applies not only to physical or financial resources, but also to human ingenuity, too much of which is devoted to activities that have little – or negative – social merit. It follows that increasing efficiency, as measured by conflict reduction per unit outlay would bring double benefits: the efficiencies would be valuable in their own right, but they would also lead to more resources being deployed to reduce conflict in the future.

Our quick look at root causes and conflict prevention makes clear that:

- If we are serious about conflict prevention, then, we should recognise that it is not always necessary or worthwhile trying to identify root causes. Our desired outcome - world peace - is what is important, and those who work toward peace should have incentives to pursue diverse, adaptive approaches to that end.
- Current conflict-reduction bodies have little incentive to be efficient. Increased efficiency, in terms of peace achieved per dollar spent, could bring huge benefits.

ⁱ 'The conviction that any one group has exclusive possession of truth and goodness is a root cause of prejudice and boundaries that allow for discrimination and worse.' Oliver McTernan, *War Cries*, 'the Times', 12 August 2003.

ⁱⁱ *From reaction to conflict prevention*, Fen Osler Hampson and David M. Malone, editors, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ George W Scarlett, 2012. *Spiritual Pathology: The Case of Adolf Hitler*, Religions 3, no. 2: 389-406. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020389>, sighted 1 August 2025.

^{iv} Steven James Bartlett, *The Pathology of Man: a study of human evil*, ISBN 0-398-07557-3, 2005. <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/Bartlett/Bartlett2005.pdf>, sighted 1 August 2025.

^v Cathy Widom, *The cycle of violence*, 'Science', vol 244, pages 160-66, 1989.

^{vi} Haian Dukhan (2022): *Tribal mobilisation during the Syrian civil war: the case of al-Baqqa brigade*, Small Wars & Insurgencies, 25 April 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2069970>, sighted 1 August 2025.

^{vii} *The economics of war: the intersection of need, creed and greed*, Conference Report, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C. 10 September, 2001.

^{viii} United Nations Peacekeeping, *Conflict and natural resources*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/conflict-and-natural-resources>, sighted 4 July 2025.

^{ix} See Xie X, Hao M, Ding F, Scheffran J, et al, *The impacts of climate change on violent conflict risk: a review of causal pathways*. Environmental Research Communications, 11 November 2024 doi: 10.1088/2515-7620/ad8a21.

^x Elizabeth Picard of the Institut de Recherche et d'Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Méditerranéen, speaking at: *The economics of war: the intersection of need, creed and greed*, Conference Report, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C. 10 September, 2001.

^{xi} Lewis F Richardson, *Statistics of deadly quarrels*, Edited by Quincy Wright and CC Lienau. Pittsburgh: Boxwood Press, 1960.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (translated by Ann Dunnigan), New York: Signet Classic, 1968 (page 730).

^{xv} Amanda Chicago Lewis, *Wishful Thinking: The aspirations and failures of the United Nations*, Harper's Magazine, 1 June 2025. <https://harpers.org/archive/2025/06/wishful-thinking-united-nations-amanda-chicago-lewis/>, sighted 18 July 2025.

^{xvi} Uppsala Conflict Data Program: *Sharp increase in conflicts and wars*, 11 June 2025. <https://www.uu.se/en/news/2025/2025-06-11-ucdp-sharp-increase-in-conflicts-and-wars>. Sighted 4 July 2025.

^{xvii} Christophe Zurcher, *The impact of development aid on organised violence: A systematic assessment*, August 2020, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). <https://www.3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/WP37-Systematic-Review-Aid-Violence.pdf>.