Rethinking UK policy towards conflict: evidence from comparative research on the drivers of conflict

Mary Kaldor and Henry Radice argue that the UK can only reduce global conflict unilaterally by working with partners, including through the multilateral system. This requires a decade-long, joined-up strategic approach focused on reducing conflict by applying the best diplomatic, development, and defence resources available. Adopting such an approach would enable policymakers to continuously assess how UK and partner interventions interact with conflict at regional, national, and local levels and to adapt them accordingly.

The UK Government is currently undertaking an Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, with the aim of setting out a vision for the UK's role in the world over the next decade. The LSE-led Conflict Research Programme (CRP) contributed to this review in the form of a short summary submission and a longer evidence paper, in which we summarised the main findings and the implications for UK policy of almost four years of research on the drivers of contemporary conflict, based on extensive fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria.

The evidence paper emphasises the continued need to understand and address contemporary conflicts, not just because of the plight of their victims (though that is surely the main reason), but also because they are inextricably linked to other global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, extreme poverty, mass distress migration, high-level corruption, and the risk of nuclear war.

The need for a holistic and granular approach to addressing conflict

The overall conclusions of the CRP of particular relevance to policy are twofold. First, contemporary conflict can largely be understood as a pervasive and persistent social condition in which multiple groups associated with fragmented forms of authority depend on violence, both for finance and for political mobilisation. Violence generates revenue, and can underpin political authority, both as a consequence of fear, and of the ideologies that emerge out of fear. This contrasts with the idea of conflict as a deep-rooted political contest between two sides, for example government and rebel, where the aim is outright victory.

The implication of this first conclusion is that the traditional toolbox for addressing conflict no longer works. Military intervention on one side or another tends to exacerbate violence. Top-down political diplomacy aimed at reaching a peace agreement usually formalises and entrenches the power structures inherent to the social condition. Humanitarian assistance, while it may be necessary, often fuels the political economy of conflict. What is needed instead is a holistic and granular approach, using a range of redesigned tools, aimed at chipping away at this social condition by changing the logics that characterise the exercise of authority.

Second, interventions designed to reduce the violent consequences of conflicts need to take account of their global and regional drivers and consequences. Contemporary conflicts are usually neither purely inter-state (international) nor purely intra-state (internal). In fragmented or disassembled states, the difference between internal and international is eroded. Conflicts are globalised and regionalised, involving transnational flows of arms, money, people (refugees, trafficked persons, international personnel, and volunteer fighters), smuggled commodities (for example oil, drugs, or antiquities) as well as basic necessities, such as food.

This is why no individual country can insulate itself from the risks that arise from contemporary conflict. The UK , in particular, does not have the capacity to deal unilaterally with global challenges, or to engage in geopolitical rivalries on equal terms, especially after Brexit. Thus, an alternative holistic and granular approach for addressing conflict needs to be designed and located within a multilateral context.

The logics of public authority

The CRP has developed a conceptual framework for analysing the social condition of contemporary conflict. All our sites are characterised by fragmented or disassembled states. We use the term public authority to refer to a state, a municipality, a customary or religious authority or an international institution. We argue that levels of violence depend on what we call the logics of public authority. We highlight three such logics: the political marketplace, where competition for power is monetised; identity politics, where exclusivist ideologies based on ethnicity or religion shape and are shaped by the distribution of power; and civicness, where something akin to a social contract between authority and citizen exists. We argue that the first two logics are the main drivers of violence.

All our sites are characterised by the political marketplace but we find different expressions in each of our sites, including a classic rentier political marketplace (South Sudan), a deregulated political marketplace (Somalia), an amalgamation of interlocking but relatively autonomous political markets (DRC), an unstable and often violent coalition-based competition for control over oil resources, associated contracts, and government ministries and payrolls (Iraq), and a highly segmented political marketplace (Syria). We have developed a toolkit for analysing political marketplaces in specific contexts.

In all our sites we find the co-occurrence of identity politics and the political marketplace. Irrespective of how conflicts begin, whether a struggle for democracy or a rivalry among elites, exclusivist identity politics are constructed through violence, and conflicts get framed in ethnic or sectarian terms. The dominant international approaches to conflict management and intervention tend to reinforce this process. Indeed, peace agreements, when they are achieved, usually consolidate political marketplaces defined in identity terms. Yet identity politics and the political marketplace are by no means harmonious, since they follow different logics.

In all our sites, there is evidence of a logic of civicness, including civic-minded forms of resistance to corruption or exclusivism, mutual assistance within communities, and attempts to preserve or build forms of public authority more oriented towards the public good. Civicness is not the same as civil society, which tends refer to NGOs or grassroots community groups, who are often at risk of becoming ethnicised and/or drawn into the political marketplace. Our research has uncovered three forms of civicness: civicness as activism or protest; civicness in the behaviour of individuals, whether officials such as uncorrupted judges or impartial doctors and nurses, or those who engage in self-help and mutual assistance at community level; and safe spaces and local authorities that are protected from the dominant logics.

External interventions: what works?

The CRP has undertaken research on external interventions to explore what 'works'. Our research finds that, in conflict situations dominated by the logics of the political marketplace and identity politics, external interventions tend to be subverted. We find that interventions 'work' when they open up space for a shift of logic, weaken the dominant logics and nurture existing or potential pockets of civicness. The implication is that the UK itself needs to act and position itself as an agent of civicness, which is not always the case. The main lessons learned from CRP investigations of external interventions include:

- The importance of research, analysis and communication to build a granular knowledge of context and the need to 'decolonise' research.
- The need to redesign peace talks so that they are: aligned with interventions on the ground; multilevel, including local as well as global and regional talks; and inclusive. In the UN-led Syrian political talks, for example, the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) not only enriched UN mediation efforts by improving analysis of conflict dynamics and signposting the way forward on key areas of agreement, but it also helped to facilitate humanitarian action on the ground and create the space for constituencies of change.
- Justice is crucial and should not be postponed until an overall settlement is reached, since the very nature of the political marketplace and identity politics involves a systematic disregard for the rule of law. In particular, there is a need to support legal activism, legal empowerment, community paralegalism and efforts to document crimes committed during conflict.
- Humanitarian assistance is needed to save lives, but in all our sites, it has also fuelled the political marketplace. Longer-term programmes that support livelihoods and civicness, and draw on detailed knowledge of context to avoid fuelling the political marketplace and identity politics, are likely to be more effective.
- Security Sector Reform works only in the context of civic coalitions that are able to articulate effective political demand for reform. It is possible to promote such coalitions through fostering security dialogues and transparency initiatives, capacity building for civic-minded actors in and outside government, and including

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discussion of such issues in peace talks.

- Targeted sanctions are an instrument that affects the internal functioning of a political marketplace, and may be instrumentalised by the elites of the target country in their own transactional politics. Political marketplace analysis is a useful tool for analysing their intended and unintended political consequences.
- The salience of taxation, as an alternative from of revenue to rents, as a way of shifting the logic of the political marketplace.

At the current moment in time, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move away from multilateralism threaten to reinforce the dominant logics of the political marketplace and identity politics world-wide. This is why it is so important to develop tools and capabilities that could enable the UK, along with others, to reverse these tendencies.

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Note: findings from the below research will be the subject of an online LSE Ideas event on Wednesday 14 October 2020. See here for more information.

About the Authors

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