Increase Efficiency, Reduce Violence

Peacebuilding Perspectives on Reforms to USAID and the State Department

The world is becoming increasingly violent. Over the past 15 years, political, criminal, interpersonal, and social violence, and violent extremism have all increased dramatically. Violent conflict lies at the root of other global threats, such as forced migration, disease, famine, violent extremism, and insecurity. This violence is costly not only in human lives, but for US national security and the global economy. An estimated two billion people live in conflict-affected and fragile states and the cost of violence to the world economy is $14.3 trillion a year, 13.4 percent of world GDP.

This violent conflict knows no boundaries. As many as 65 million people have been forced from their homes. Refugees fleeing violent conflicts from Syria to Central America pour over borders. Deadly diseases such as Ebola can quickly move across borders, especially when a fragile country’s infrastructure has been war-torn. Violent extremist attacks, driven by violent conflict, can be directed from remote areas to strike thousands of miles away. Even though violent conflict significantly impacts US security and the global economy, less than one percent of all foreign aid is spent on managing and preventing conflict. This approach to allocating resources is not strategic because we cannot fight our way out of it. It is time to evaluate and reform how international development assistance and diplomacy, in coordination with defense, can address the threat violent conflict poses to the US and its global allies.

This growing epidemic of violence comes at a time of shifting US foreign policy priorities. President Trump has issued an executive order requesting all federal departments and agencies create reorganization plans to “improve efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability” by late 2017. Additionally, the administration has proposed a 30% cut to foreign assistance funding in Fiscal Year 2018, claiming the budget, “focuses on making the Department of State and USAID leaner, more efficient, and more effective, and…will allow the Department of State and USAID to support their core missions, while ensuring the best use of American taxpayer dollars in ways that advance national security as we work to build a more prosperous and peaceful world.”

The peacebuilding and development communities are deeply concerned about the proposed cuts to core State and USAID accounts, the possibility of folding USAID into the State Department, and the downgrading or eliminating of offices in USAID and the Department of State created under prior Republican leadership.

In 2002, more than 2/3 of the USAID missions were operating in fragile and conflict affected countries. New threats had emerged post-9/11, including ungoverned spaces, violent extremism, and significant conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to the new and existing threats, the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM) was created in 2002 to expand and improve USAID’s capacity to address the causes and consequences of violent conflict by providing analytical and operational support to USAID overseas missions, development officers, and program partners.
The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) is a global membership association of nearly 100 peacebuilding organizations, and a network of more than 15,000 people developing processes for change in complex conflict environments. AfP amplifies the strengths of its members and works collaboratively on issues that are too large for any one organization to tackle by itself.

The Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), then reorganized into the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO), was also created at that time to advance the Department of State’s understanding of violent conflict through analysis and planning; monitoring, evaluation, and learning; and targeted, in-country efforts that help the U.S. government anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflict and promote long-term stability. CMM and CSO work across functional and geographic lines. In whatever form these offices take, we need this cross-cutting functionality and expertise to be more robust and integrated throughout the Department of State and USAID.

With support from these offices, peacebuilding practitioners have developed a wide range of successful programs that reduce violence by addressing the multiple causes of conflict. The results are increasingly measurable, as showcased in the Alliance for Peacebuilding publication, Violence Reduction: Evidence from Around the World. There is now a need for proactive, preventative measures at scale to curb violence and conflict regionally. The effects of conflict do not know boundaries, as evident in mass migrations from Central America to the US and international terrorism.

The military is a critical component to stabilization, and it is tempting to believe a military approach alone can stabilize fragile and conflict-affected regions. However, military capacities are ill-suited to address the drivers of violent conflict, especially violent extremism, which is principally the result of failed politics and development. Civilian responses to violence can be more effective than military action. Eighty-three percent of terrorist movements ended 1968-2006 were done so through political settlements or improvements in policing. Both diplomacy and development are critical to achieve the President’s goal to best use taxpayer dollars to advance national security and “build a more prosperous and peaceful world.” Military leaders agree; General Mattis stated, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.”

Reducing global violence is a national security imperative, and investing in violence reduction programming is cost effective. The State Department and USAID need to be strengthened in their ability to respond to global threats more quickly, robustly, and effectively. With violence on the rise, it is not the time to decrease their ability to address these increasingly complex conflicts.

Conflict prevention and violence reduction must become central pillars of foreign policy. Smarter, flexible, and more targeted investments in conflict mitigation and violence reduction programming need to be developed and adequately resourced.

Core Principles for Reform and Restructuring – A Way Forward

Innovative Solutions for Violence Reduction and Mass Atrocities
Nearly 97 percent of the Foreign Operations budget is intended for specific projects or line items. This constrains the ability to develop any real country or regional strategy, especially in fragile and conflict affected countries. The US government must reform how it develops strategy so it can program funding that will reduce violence differently. Through an interagency, long term violence reduction strategy, the US could demonstrate its global leadership to reduce global levels of violence against civilians, prevent atrocities and violent conflict, and address the drivers of chronic instability in the world’s most fragile states. Effective legislation would deploy the full force of relevant American resources and foreign policy tools towards solving a clear, focused problem set, like President Bush’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Such an initiative would reform how the government addresses violence and instability in countries of strategic importance by mitigating the drivers of violence and measurably reducing violence.

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There is also an opportunity to develop innovative mechanisms to prevent genocide and mass atrocities. As seen in Syria, failing to prevent atrocities can result in repeated cycles of violence, undermining American leadership, values, and economic interests. This violence ultimately calls for a costly military response long after lives are lost and whole regions are made less stable. A Mass Atrocities Task Force and required training for Foreign Service Officers in violent conflict and atrocities prevention would give the US government tools to prevent and mitigate atrocities.

**Greater Need to Deploy Resources and Personnel Quickly**
It is critical to protect the current funding accounts used to address violent conflict. The Complex Crises Fund (CCF) is a rapid response funding mechanism to prevent violent conflict that is appropriated by Congress. This funding fills a critical gap by providing flexible money to USAID to prevent and respond to emerging or unforeseen crises. CCF is the only mechanism of its kind, and allows flexible funding that enables USAID to respond beyond its planned long term development programming. The US government needs these funds to engage quickly; without them, the ability of the USG to respond to crises will be significantly reduced. This fund is consistently zeroed out by the House of the Representatives Appropriations Committee.

However, even with the CCF, USAID and the Department of State’s personnel and funding capacity are greatly hindered by their lack of ability to be nimble. While offices like the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) have flexible funding for programs and staffing, unfortunately, other offices at USAID and US Department of State cannot mobilize quickly when needed in conflict affected environments and adapt to the ever-changing conflict affected regions. There is often a small window for communities to see gains consolidated after a violent conflict. Consequently, there is a need to be able to move resources more quickly and nimbly to stabilize regions; otherwise, military wins will easily be lost.

**Better Coordination and Longer-term Staffing Commitments**
In conflict affected and fragile countries, the tour of foreign service officers is limited, and programs and offices working on conflict affected and stabilization efforts are scattered among different offices and agencies. Conflict, post-conflict, and stabilization functions from the State Department and USAID should be combined into a new Bureau for Conflict & Fragility at USAID. Additionally, personnel must commit to working on a conflict, post conflict and stabilization effort for at least 5 years both in the field and in the coordination unit in Washington, DC. Finally, there needs to be better coordination with our international partners because the US alone can’t solve these problems.

**Investing in Evidence-Based Approaches**
To conduct better programming, we need to develop better measurement tools so that we can understand what works and what does not. It is critical to increase efforts to support expanded research into effective approaches for violence reduction, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention.

**Support for Civil Society and Communities**
Stabilization and violence reduction are local. Development assistance should be reformed to better support local civil society and reduce the costs of international interventions by ensuring that all conflict analysis, design, and implementation of programs is rooted in local knowledge and lead by local civil society. Supporting civil society builds local capacity to hold governments accountable and help build peaceful societies, reducing the need for the US to intervene and providing stable and prosperous partners to work with.
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iii Alliance for Peacebuilding, “Violence Reduction: Evidence from Around the World,” (June 2017)