

BRIEFING | MAY 2022

How guns fall silent

Five key components of (relatively) successful integrated stabilisation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is another devastating example of how violent conflict in many countries around the world is putting people in harm's way, forcing them to flee their homes and destroying economic development. It underlines the importance of successful stabilisation to bring these countries closer to durable peace.

A new report by Saferworld explores the processes through which states and societies have become more stable in violent contexts where criminal and proscribed groups have played a significant role. It examines the potential of more 'integrated' stabilisation processes that grapple with the political, social and economic dimensions of crises, and not just the military-security aspects. Building on Saferworld's previous research, especially in northeast Kenya in **Mandera** and **Garissa**, the report looks at three larger-scale processes during periods when parties made progress – however tentative or temporary – to tackle complex conflicts: Colombia (2010–2016), Iraq (2006–2008) and Northern Ireland (1981–1998). In each case, it examines what worked, why it did, and with what caveats, in order to inform the approach of leaders and practitioners.

INSIDE

[Five common elements for achieving sustainable peace](#) | [Read more of Saferworld and Oxford Research Group's work](#)

Despite significant differences between each of these case studies, five elements were critical for taking tentative steps towards sustainable peace:

1.

Refocusing assumptions and renewing strategy with a focus on achieving peace. In Colombia, the policies of the then President Juan Manuel Santos moved beyond his predecessor's hard security approaches to construct a way out of a mutually harmful conflict. In Northern Ireland, the election of hunger striker Bobby Sands as a Member of Parliament triggered a gradual shift whereby republicans moved towards politics as London became more willing to bring Sinn Féin to the peace table. In Iraq, as many Sunnis turned away from escalating violence, the international coalition revisited fundamental assumptions and shifted to a strategy for achieving people's security, local- and national-level reconciliation, and for addressing wider issues driving conflict. Each case demonstrates the value of:

- **integrating continual analysis into both overall strategy and day-to-day efforts to promote peace**, and using fresh understanding to catalyse new political, security, socio-economic and communications approaches to transform the situation.
- **defining the situation as 'conflict'** with political, social and economic dimensions, deviliifying violent groups, and **dropping 'terrorist/criminal' labels** (or at least signalling openness to doing so under the right circumstances).

2.

Adopting people-oriented and confidence-building security approaches. In Colombia, President Santos trod a careful line between putting military pressure on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) while keeping the group at the negotiating table. In Northern Ireland, the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland recommended a more community-oriented service that better represented both Catholics and Protestants. In the intense violence of Iraq, although the coalition continued to make some important mistakes as it wrested control from violent and sectarian actors, it moved away from remote bases to operate within neighbourhoods, working closely with Iraqi security forces and communities to restore security and trust. In each case study, decision makers:

- **reconsidered military-security responses** to conflict that had inflicted collective and/or arbitrary harm, and opted for **security approaches that protected people** and were accessible to – and guaranteed the day-to-day safety of – communities, and did so in a trust-building, respectful way with communities' own close involvement.
- **concentrated carefully, discriminately and proportionately on stopping the violence** of groups that chose not to reconcile – but with a link to a reconciliatory political offer.

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3.

Pursuing dialogue, deal-making and reconciliation across conflict lines with creativity and determination. In Northern Ireland, as Sinn Féin and the UK Government became more open, the US, Ireland, the European Union (EU) and individuals like John Hume (regarded by many as the principal architect behind the Northern Ireland peace agreement) helped move republicans and eventually loyalists towards a settlement in which they would come to cooperate in power-sharing. In pursuit of the historic peace deal of 2016, President Santos stopped using the 'terrorist' label to describe the FARC, while victims' groups played an important role in convincing the FARC to reflect on and move beyond its legacy of violence. Although US troops had 'surged' into Iraq, politics was at the centre of stabilisation efforts in the period studied. This involved pursuing reconciliation with many violent groups and working with them to restore security, encouraging Iraqi politicians to abandon sectarianism and unite in tackling core divisive issues, using diplomacy to reduce regional volatility, and encouraging Western leaders to set aside their misgivings and help sustain the fragile progress. In each, the following were important:

- **maintaining channels of communication** to conflict parties, and staying open to the potential for violent criminal and proscribed groups – or elements within them – to become 'reconcilable', with reconciliation explored, offered and pursued routinely.
- **investing in political conflict resolution and reconciliation processes** to build bridges between hitherto distant or opposing groups, move violent actors back towards the political space, dispel mistrust, build confidence, and construct platforms and agreements for tackling pressing issues.

4.

Addressing wider conflict drivers and making people a better offer. In Northern Ireland, the EU, UK and US all invested in tackling socio-economic inequality and divisions – though these challenges still remain today – and sought to bolster community relations. The overwhelming support expressed for the Good Friday Agreement in two referendums held in 1998 reflects public opinion that the process offered widespread benefits to conflict-affected communities. In Iraq, there were redoubled investments to restore power and essential services, tackle arbitrary detention, support offender rehabilitation, boost jobs and government spending, and provide an honest perspective to the public about the offer being provided under stabilisation efforts. Both cases highlight the need to:

- address wider conflict drivers and **make people a better offer by taking action on inequality, injustice, discrimination and marginalisation**, to build on security gains and windows of opportunity – and following this up with consistent attention long after stabilisation efforts have created a window for moving forward. Wherever possible such efforts should be civilian-led.

5.

Supporting and enabling society to nourish peace efforts through bargaining and accountability. Although the Iraq surge restored the possibility of nonviolent participation in Iraqi society and its politics, in other ways it failed to engage secular, less patriarchal elements of the country's society and political spectrum. This is perhaps the biggest weakness of international strategy in the period studied. In Colombia, in addition to the vital role played by victims' groups, women-led organisations successfully pushed for a peace deal that made important commitments on gender and LGBTI+ rights. In the face of much opposition, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition helped to broker peace, ensured the Good Friday Agreement backed women's equality and advancement, and was an instrumental player in the newly created Civic Forum, ensuring the new legislature would consult a wide range of civil society representatives. This shows the importance of:

- encouraging all involved in peace and stabilisation processes to: significantly increase their **meaningful engagement with civil society, including women's rights organisations and representatives of youth and other marginalised groups**; support civil society's ongoing efforts to bargain with authorities and elites; press for the emergence of more inclusive, fair, responsive and accountable governance, security, justice and service provision; and ensure momentum and accountability for progress in peace processes.

While the report attempted to find ways in which individuals and organisations moved conflicts towards peace, it also revealed how fragile peace can be. These imperfect efforts were vulnerable to neglect and changing political winds – whether due to geopolitical or domestic shifts. The case studies show key aspects which could help reduce violence, but greater investment is needed to build long-term peace. These examples challenge the validity of international strategies focused on hard security approaches in Mali, Somalia, Iraq and elsewhere, and provide an initial blueprint for countries like the UK, US and France for more successful stabilisation strategies in conflict-affected contexts.

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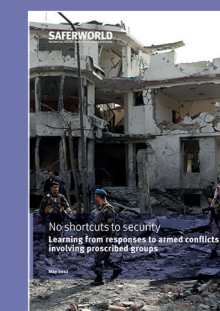
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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

This briefing (and the full report) was written by Larry Attree and Abigail Watson for Saferworld.



Read the full research report:
Attree L, Watson A (2022), 'How guns fall silent: Analysing examples of relative success in integrated stabilisation', Saferworld, May

See also:
Attree L, Street J (2022), 'No shortcuts to security: Learning from responses to armed conflicts involving proscribed groups', Saferworld, May

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*Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Programme was moved to Saferworld in August 2020 and has informed this work.