

Speech: Deal Making and Peace

Building: A new approach to reducing conflict

It is an honour to be here with you at Chatham House. This institution has a prestigious history, created in the wake of the Great War, when those coming out of that terrible conflict sought ways to better understand international affairs and prevent such wars happening again.

It is therefore the ideal place to present the Government's latest thinking on conflict, stabilisation, and long term stability. When my team set about working on this report, I asked them to frame it as an answer to some key questions:

First, how can we get better at ending violence and building peace?

Secondly, how do we deal with the fact that in order to end violence and build peace, we may have to talk to the bad guys? On what terms do we deal with them?

And thirdly, once the warring parties have been persuaded to put down their arms, how do we stop them from picking them up again?

Before tackling those questions, let me set out some of the evolving challenges that led me to ask them.

As we look out across parts of the Middle East and Africa in particular, one thing seems clear: conflicts have become more complex and more intractable.

Half of the world's current conflicts have lasted for more than 20 years.

And getting on for two thirds of all armed conflicts that ended in the early 2000s had relapsed within five years.

We have seen the rise of militant nationalism, sectarianism, and extremism; the fragmentation of insurgent forces, and the resurgence of autocrats.

Weak states, extremist insurgents, and the growth of transnational organised crime have driven cycles of violence.

Grievances build up. Political violence mutates into criminal violence. Powerful war economies emerge – and tensions and flashpoints become harder to contain and manage.

I have seen evidence of all these things in my work in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

I have also seen the enormous human cost of conflict and instability: lives lost, property destroyed, whole communities displaced and suffering appalling

trauma. All of this fuels grievances and drives further cycles of violence.

We have felt the impact here in the United Kingdom, as these cycles of conflict and violence thousands of miles away provide the seed bed for terrorism and illegal migration on European soil.

Too often, the horrors of today's conflicts are compounded and prolonged by states who work to stall and stymie the rules based international system, and by non-state actors who choose to ignore it.

We see that in Syria, where Assad and the militants of the so called Islamic State are both acting in open defiance of the rules designed to protect us all. And UN led efforts to find a political solution to the conflict have been repeatedly blocked – of all places, in the UN Security Council.

We have to acknowledge that despite the best efforts of the vast majority of UN Member States, the European Union and others, the rules based international system is being tested, and in many cases constrained.

The answer is not to give up and walk away, but to stand firm, join hands with like-minded partners and actually strengthen the international rules that have kept us safe for over 70 years. A reminder of just why they came into place in the first instance.

I strongly believe that the UK, working with our partners, and guided by these rules and norms, can help turn many of today's conflicts around.

I reject the notion that we can or should simply step away because the conflicts are too entrenched, too complicated or “nothing to do with us”. The costs of non-intervention are too great.

The scale of suffering in Syria and Iraq is testament to the fact that such conflicts should not be left to continue unabated.

As I have seen first-hand just a few weeks ago, the destruction and loss of life in places like Mosul has been appalling.

Well-meaning members of the international community will always have a crucial role to play in bringing about peace, through our diplomacy, our development support, and – in some cases – the judicious use of military force.

The UK Government's commitment to nurturing peace and stability is well-known. It runs through our National Security Strategy and our Foreign Office priorities, and it guides our Aid Strategy.

DFID is committed to spending half of its annual budget in fragile states in a way that genuinely tackles the underlying drivers of instability.

As we constantly strive to improve and refine our approach, we have not shied away from honest self-reflection.

We have sought to acknowledge and understand where our approach has not

always worked, and where it has faced major challenges – whether in Yemen, Syria or Libya. Or further back, in Afghanistan.

The Iraq Inquiry highlighted the need to better understand the consequences of our interventions before we embarked on them.

It stressed that we needed to work more effectively across government as a single team, and to be realistic about our timescales and ambitions.

Looking ahead, as we reflect on those difficult lessons, I think there is a need to be more proactive if we are to make a real difference.

As part of that process I tasked officials to undertake the major research project that I am launching here today.

This work augments the findings of DFID's Building Stability Framework, which I also want to highlight.

Our Stabilisation Unit, to which I'm indebted for this work, analysed how interventions by the UK and other international actors have – and have not – helped to reduce violence and set the conditions for more sustainable transitions out of conflict.

Their work sought to answer two of the questions I began with: how do we end violence and prevent violence from recurring? And how do we deal with the often unsavoury forces and individuals that sustain them?

It has identified lessons from 21 conflicts past and present, spanning the globe from the Middle East to Latin America and from Africa to South East Asia.

Our central finding may appear too obvious for fanfare. But I disagree: it is all the more worthy of note because it has been repeatedly underestimated in the past.

In short our central finding is this: that understanding conflict and ending violence requires a total focus on the politics and the power holders at play.

All too often in the past we have shied away from engaging with individuals or groups that our moral or political judgements deemed unpalatable.

Or alternatively we have sought to apply overly formal and technical solutions to what are essentially political problems.

We need to be honest with ourselves: our disdain – however well founded – will not persuade them to put down their guns, or put away their bombs.

And our proposed solutions will fail if they do not account for the realities of who holds the power and resources on the ground.

For example, in Sudan in 2005, the so-called Comprehensive Peace Agreement excluded many South Sudanese soldiers and civilians, leading to its collapse.

In Iraq, Libya or Afghanistan, when we have embarked on ambitious state and institution building before the power struggle has been resolved, we have seen progress reversed, and gains undone.

Only by better understanding the motivations and power bases of those calling the shots – and dealing with those realities as our priority – can we hope to move towards violence reduction.

We need to fully factor in the political dynamics at a local, national, regional and international level, and understand how they play into each other.

Of course, building peace in this way means we will face many more uncomfortable questions and choices. There will be times we have to hold our nose and support dialogue with those who oppose our values, or who may have committed war crimes.

Let me be clear. Supporting dialogue must not imply recognition or support of those who are party to views and values we abhor.

We may have to be more ready to recognise that the very existence of armed groups reflects genuine grievances felt by certain communities, and is an expression of their sense of political and social exclusion – whether real or imagined.

This will require a change in mindset for many of us – politicians, activists, academics, and the media. As Hilary Clinton once said, you do not make peace with your friends.

I do not want to overstate a shift in our approach, rather I want to make the case that the international community should apply the lessons of our previous successes more consistently.

There are plenty of examples of international interventions that have successfully balanced the political and military realities on the ground.

Close to home, in Northern Ireland, we showed that it was possible to accommodate the interests of diametrically opposed armed groups in a political process that has brought two decades of peace.

And further afield in Afghanistan we have supported initiatives to engage with the Taliban.

We welcome President Ghani's declaration of a ceasefire last week – a bold move I very much welcome. I was pleased to see the Taliban had agreed to the cessation in hostilities over the latter part of Eid, and I hope this provides an opportunity for real confidence building measures and dialogue.

In the Philippines, through the unique model of the International Contact Group, we supported negotiations between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Government.

And in Liberia we saw how deft international engagement put pressure on

former leader Charles Taylor, and helped bring peace to Sierra Leone.

Even in Iraq and Afghanistan, where our stabilisation work has had mixed results, our diplomacy has, from time to time, been able positively to shape local level elite politics, and reduce violence.

These experiences show that it is possible to add momentum to highly political deal making between warring parties.

We have the diplomatic assets, expertise, and influence to build trust.

We have political and economic levers to help bring parties to the table and make deals stick.

We have military and peacekeeping assets at our disposal to provide security guarantees so parties can come to the negotiating table when they wouldn't otherwise.

What we sometimes lack is the political will to attempt the most uncomfortable but pragmatic solutions.

But getting the sequencing right is also vital.

Part of doing that successfully is about acknowledging when the time has not yet come for a political breakthrough. Standing back and allowing for deals to emerge slowly is sometimes more productive than intervening, however frustrating it might be for politicians involved.

Such an approach brings real challenges and trade-offs. How should we respond to the legitimate aspirations of those who seek peaceful change and reform? Aspirations that are based on values with which we have overwhelming sympathy, but which are met with violence and repression, as happened in Syria in 2011. How do we best prevent violence or shorten conflict in these circumstances?

We have to get better at recognising that all good things do not come together at the same time. If we force state building and institutional reform before political agreement has been forged, then there is a high risk we will be setting ourselves up for failure.

In Libya in 2012, and I was the Minister responsible for the Middle East and North Africa at the time, working with David Cameron and William Hague, we rushed to build capacity to enable the new government to govern. But it was all done in the absence of a political settlement which reflected both the interests of the warring elites, and the aspirations of the Libyan population. We should have prioritised the politics over technocratic state-building.

We also have to acknowledge that there will be times when our interests will not all be aligned. For example, the tension between our counter terrorism priorities and supporting an inclusive political process with the Taliban in Afghanistan has made progress on the latter really challenging.

So we need to ruthlessly prioritise our efforts, recognise the trade-offs and have an appropriate, sequenced strategy of engagement.

Finally let me turn to my final question: how do we prevent conflicts from reigniting?

We have seen in Bosnia and Libya how much investment is required to bring about a sustainable peace, and in both countries, despite all our engagement, that there is still much work to do.

With that in mind, my fellow Ministers tasked DFID teams to develop the Building Stability Framework, to identify what determines long term stability.

This allows us to ensure that we design and implement our development programmes appropriately.

We have identified five key factors for stability: fair power structures, inclusive economic development, mechanisms for ongoing conflict resolution, effective and legitimate institutions, and supportive regional environments.

The Stability Framework recognises that development results are not alone enough to reduce instability and violence. The Framework sets out how we need to help countries and communities to manage change peacefully.

Building stability is a political process. Every decision we make has to be grounded in an understanding of how power is distributed and used. Development cannot afford to be framed in apolitical, technical terms. Otherwise it will be done in silos and will miss the wider picture.

We are putting this framework into action in countries across the world, and ensuring that political realities are not merely skimmed over. We believe it is having a positive impact from Sudan to Somalia, from Lebanon to Kenya and from Jordan to Nepal.

And finally, we must not overlook the importance of increasingly involving women in peace building, because they're rarely involved in causing the conflict in the first place. The evidence is clear that when women are able to participate in a peace process, there is a greater chance of reaching agreement, and crucially, of that agreement being sustained.

In Colombia, women's groups spearheaded a campaign demanding a vote to approve the peace deals. In Northern Ireland, women from across the political spectrum worked together to gain seats around the main negotiating table.

We recognise that removing barriers to women's participation in peace processes is as important as promoting their opportunities to engage. We are working towards both these goals, through our National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

Let me conclude: I come back to the stark challenges we face as we look across the seemingly intractable conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Libya and beyond.

I believe we have a moral obligation to do what we can to reduce their terrible consequences. But we have a more hard-headed interest in doing so too, as we seek to minimise the dangers that poverty, exclusion, and radicalisation pose to global stability and our own national security.

There's nothing new in that, but we do need to keep reviewing our approach in light of experience, and that is what this report seeks to do.

It is an expression of the UK's continuing commitment to work in the interests of our citizens, our neighbours and the rest of the world to bring peace, stability and prosperity for all. So I commend it to you.