

Principles of the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework

Take context as the starting point. It is essential for international actors to understand the specific context in each country, and develop a shared view of the strategic response required.

- Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations, OECD, 2007.

Introduction and Overview

Addressing the causes and consequences of weak and failed states has become an urgent priority for the U.S. Government (USG). Conflict both contributes to and results from state fragility. To effectively prevent or resolve violent conflict, the USG needs tools and approaches that enable coordination of U.S. diplomatic, development and military efforts in support of local institutions and actors seeking to resolve their disputes peacefully.

A first step toward a more effective and coordinated response to help states prevent, mitigate and recover from violent conflict is the development of shared understanding among USG agencies about the sources of violent conflict or civil strife. Achieving this shared understanding of the dynamics of a particular crisis requires both a joint interagency process for conducting the assessment and a common conceptual framework to guide the collection and analysis of information. The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) is a tool that enables an interagency team to assess conflict situations systematically and collaboratively and supports USG interagency planning for conflict prevention, mitigation, and stabilization. This document contains the key principles of and summarizes the ICAF.

Purpose

The purpose of the ICAF is to develop a commonly held understanding across relevant USG Departments and Agencies of the dynamics driving and mitigating violent conflict within a country that informs US policy and planning decisions.¹ It may also include steps to establish a strategic baseline against which USG engagement can be evaluated. It is a process and a tool available for use by any USG agency to supplement interagency planning.

These *Principles of Interagency Conflict Assessment* outline the key concepts, processes, and products essential to the conduct of an interagency assessment. Supplementary documents will be developed to provide a fuller treatment of the analytical framework, appropriate tools and data collection methods, and composition and functioning of an Interagency Conflict Assessment Team (ICAT).

ICAF draws on existing methodologies for assessing conflict currently in use by various USG agencies as well as international and non-governmental organizations. ICAF is not intended to duplicate existing independent analytical processes, such as those conducted within the intelligence community. Rather, it builds upon those and other analytical efforts to provide a common framework through which USG agencies can leverage and share the knowledge from their own assessments to establish a common interagency perspective.

¹ Agencies will be used in this document in place of Departments and Agencies.

The ICAF is distinct from early warning and other forecasting tools that identify countries at risk of instability or collapse and describe conditions that lead to outbreaks of instability or violent conflict. The ICAF builds upon this forecasting by assisting an interagency team to understand why such conditions may exist and how to best engage to transform them. To do so, ICAF draws on social science expertise to lay out a process by which an interagency team will identify societal and situational dynamics that are shown to increase or decrease the likelihood of violent conflict. In addition, ICAF provides a shared, strategic snapshot of the conflict against which future progress can be measured.

When to Use the ICAF

An ICAF should be part of the first step in any interagency planning process to inform the establishment of USG goals, design or reshaping of activities, implementation or revision of programs, or re/allocation of resources. The interagency planning process within which an ICAF is performed determines who initiates and participates in an ICAF, time and place for conducting an ICAF, type of product needed and how the product will be used, and the level of classification required.

Whenever the ICAF is used, all of its analytical steps should be completed; however, the nature and scope of the information collected and assessed may be constrained by time, security classification or access to the field.

The ICAF is a flexible, scalable interagency tool suitable for use in:

- Steady-state engagement and conflict prevention planning
- USG Reconstruction and Stabilization Contingency Planning (Contingency Planning)
- USG Reconstruction and Stabilization Crisis Response Planning (CRP).

Steady-State Engagement / Conflict Prevention Planning: May include, but is not limited to: Embassy preparation for National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) Section 1207 funding; request by an Embassy or Combatant Command for interagency assistance in understanding and planning for leveraging US interests in fragile or at-risk countries; development of Department of Defense (DoD) Theater Security Cooperation Plans; development of Country Assistance Strategies or Mission Strategic Plans; designing interagency prevention efforts for countries listed on State Failure Watchlists and Early Warning Systems. In a steady-state or conflict prevention effort, there normally will be sufficient time and a sufficiently permissive environment to allow a full-scale assessment such as a several day Washington, DC-based tabletop and several weeks of an in-country verification assessment.

Contingency Planning: Is defined in “Triggering Mechanisms for ‘Whole-of-Government’ Planning for Reconstruction, Stabilization and Conflict Transformation” and the “Principles of the USG Planning Framework for Reconstruction, Stabilization, and Conflict Transformation.” As Contingency planning is based on a hypothetical future, the ICAF provides relevant background concerning existing dynamics that could trigger, exacerbate or mitigate violent conflict. The ICAF should be a robust element of Contingency planning by providing critical information for the Situation Analysis. A several-day-long Washington, DC-based tabletop and/or an in-country verification assessment might prove useful when conducting an ICAF as part of this planning process.

Crisis Response Planning: Is defined in “Triggering Mechanisms for ‘Whole-of-Government’ Planning for Reconstruction, Stabilization and Conflict Transformation” and the “Principles of the USG Planning Framework for Reconstruction, Stabilization, and Conflict Transformation.” The ICAF provides critical information for the initial step of whole-of-government planning, the Situation Analysis. The ICAF may be updated as more information and better access become available to inform Policy Formulation, Strategy Development and Interagency Implementation Planning steps of the Framework. When used for crisis response, the ICAF might be a Washington, DC-based tabletop assessment that could be accomplished in as little as one and one-half days or, with longer lead-times to the crisis, could take place over several weeks with conversations back and forth between Washington and any USG field presence.

Roles & Responsibilities

The process within which an ICAF is used determines which agencies and individuals should serve on the team and in what capacities they should serve. For example, an established Country Team may use the ICAF to inform Country Assistance Strategy development; US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of State’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) or a Regional Bureau may co-lead an interagency team to assist in developing a NDAA Section 1207 request; or State Office of Political/Military Affairs or DoD may lead a team to bring an interagency perspective to its theater security cooperation planning. In whole-of-government crisis response under the Interagency Management System for Reconstruction and Stabilization (IMS), an ICAF normally will be part of the strategic planning process led by the Country Reconstruction and Stabilization Group (CRSG) Secretariat. The ICAF might also be used with a key bilateral partner as part of collaborative planning. The agency/individual responsible for managing the overall planning process is responsible for proposing the ICAF and requesting necessary agency participation.

As a principle, participants in an ICAF assessment should include the broadest possible representation of USG agencies with expertise and/or interest in a given situation. An ideal interagency field team would represent diverse skill sets and bring together the collective knowledge of USG agencies. Participants would at a minimum include relevant: regional bureaus, sectoral experts, intelligence analysts, and social science or conflict specialists. When used as part of the planning processes outlined in the “Principles of the USG Planning Framework,” the team will include members of the strategic planning team. This team could be expanded as needed to include local stakeholders and international partner representatives.

Members of the interagency team are responsible for providing all relevant information retained by his/her agency, including past assessments and related analyses, to the team for inclusion in the analysis. These representatives should also be able to reach back to their agencies to seek further information to fill critical information gaps identified through the ICAF process.

The Elements of the ICAF

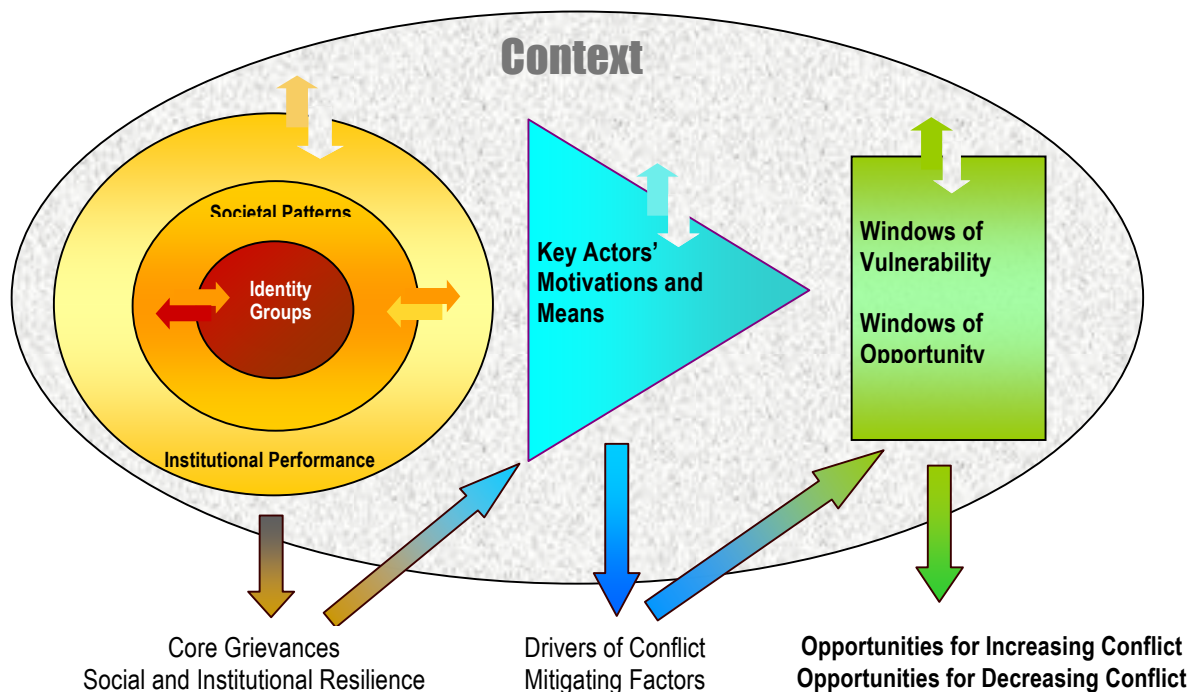
ICAF can be used by the full range of USG agencies at any planning level. Conducting an ICAF might be an iterative process with initial results built upon as the USG engagement expands. For example, an ICAF done in Washington at the start of a crisis might be enhanced later by a more

in-depth examination in-country. The level of detail into which the ICAF goes will depend upon the conflict and type of USG engagement.

The two major components of the ICAF are the Conflict Diagnosis and the Segue into Planning.

Task 1: Conflict Diagnosis

The following graphic depicts the conceptual framework for diagnosing a conflict.



From this process, the interagency team will deliver a product that describes the: 1) Context; 2) Core Grievances and Social / Institutional Resilience; 3) Drivers / Mitigators of Conflict; and 4) Opportunities for Increasing / Decreasing Conflict.

1. Context

The team should evaluate and outline key contextual issues of the conflict environment. Context does not cause conflict but describes often long-standing conditions resistant to change. Context may create pre-conditions for conflict by reinforcing fault lines between communities or contribute to pressures making violence appear as a more attractive means for advancing one’s interests. Context can shape perceptions of identity groups and be used by key actors to manipulate and mobilize constituencies. Context includes, for example: environmental conditions, poverty, recent history of conflict, youth bulge, or conflict-ridden region.

2. Core Grievances and Sources of Social/Institutional Resilience

The team should understand, agree upon, and communicate the concepts of Core Grievance and Sources of Social/Institutional Resilience as defined here and describe them within the specific situation being assessed.

Core Grievance: The perception, by various groups in a society, that their needs for physical security, livelihood, interests or values are threatened by one or more other groups and/or social institutions.

Sources of Social/Institutional Resilience: The perception, by various groups in a society, that social relationships, structures or processes are in place and able to provide dispute resolution and meet basic needs through non-violent means.

3. Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors

The team should understand and outline Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating factors as defined here and enumerate those identified within the specific situation being assessed.

Drivers of Conflict: The dynamic situation resulting from Key Actors' mobilization of social groups around Core Grievances. *Core Grievances* can be understood as the potential energy of conflict; Key Actors translate that potential energy into *Drivers of Conflict* which are the active energy moving conflict.

Mitigating Factors: The dynamic situation resulting from Key Actors' mobilization of social groups around Sources of Social/Institutional Resilience. Mitigating Factors can be understood as the kinetic energy produced when key actors mobilize the potential energy of Social and Institutional Resilience.

4. Windows of Vulnerability and Windows of Opportunity

The team should specify Opportunities for Increasing and Decreasing Conflict as defined here and describe those expected in the near-term and where possible, in the longer-term.

Windows of Vulnerability are moments when events threaten to rapidly and fundamentally change the balance of political or economic power. Elections, devolution of power and legislative changes are examples of possible windows of vulnerability. Key Actors may seize on these moments to magnify the *Drivers of Conflict*.

Windows of Opportunity are moments when over-arching identities become more important than sub-group identities, for example, when natural disaster impacts multiple groups and requires a unified response. These occasions may present openings for USG efforts to provide additional support for a conflict's *Mitigating Factors*.

Task 1 Steps

In order to determine the preceding elements of the conflict dynamic, the Interagency Conflict Assessment Team (ICAT) should follow a series of analytical steps.

Step 1: Establish Context

All ICAF steps begin with acknowledging the context within which the conflict arises. This is depicted in the graphic by placing each analytical task within a larger circle labeled "Context". The arrows going in and out of the concentric circles, the rectangle and the triangle remind the analyst that context affects and is affected by each of the other components.

Step 2: Understand Core Grievances and Sources of Social and Institutional Resilience

Interacting with Context in Step 1 are the concentric circles labeled “Identity Groups,” “Societal Patterns” and “Institutional Performance.” In Step 2, the ICAT:

- a) Describes Identity Groups who believe others threaten their identity, security or livelihood.
 - **Identity Groups** are groups of people that identify with each other, often on the basis of characteristics used by outsiders to describe them (*e.g.*, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, political affiliation, age, gender, economic activity or socio-economic status); identity groups are inclined to conflict when they perceive that other groups’ interests, needs and aspirations compete with and jeopardize their identity, security or other fundamental interests.
- b) Articulates how Societal Patterns reinforce perceived deprivation, blame and inter-group cleavages and/or how they promote comity and peaceful resolution of inter-group disputes.
 - **Societal Patterns** associated with conflict reinforce group cleavages, for example: elitism, exclusion, corruption/rent-seeking, chronic state capacity deficits (*e.g.*, systematic economic stagnation, scarcity of necessary resources, ungoverned space), and unmet expectations (*e.g.*, lack of a peace dividend, land tenure issues, disillusionment and alienation). Impacts of societal patterns often include negative economic consequences for disadvantaged groups.
- c) Explains how poor or good Institutional Performance aggravates or contributes to the resolution of conflict.
 - **Institutional Performance** considers formal (*e.g.*, governments, legal systems, religious organizations, public schools, security forces, banks and economic institutions) and informal (*e.g.*, traditional mechanisms for resolving disputes, family, clan/tribe, armed groups and patrimonialism) social structures to see whether they are performing poorly or well and whether they contribute to conflict and instability or manage or mitigate it. In assessing institutional performance it is important to distinguish between outcomes and perceptions. Institutional outcomes are results that can be measured objectively; perceptions are the evaluative judgments of those outcomes. Understanding how outcomes are perceived by various groups within a society, especially in terms of their perceived effectiveness and legitimacy, is an important component of conflict diagnosis.

The ICAT completes Step 2 by listing **Core Grievances and Sources of Social and Institutional Resilience**.

Step 3: Identify Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors

In Step 3 of the analysis, the Interagency Team identifies Key Actors that are central to producing, perpetuating or profoundly changing the Societal Patterns or Institutional Performance identified in Step 2. The ICAT should identify whether Key Actors are motivated to mobilize constituencies toward inflaming or mitigating violent conflict and what means are at their disposal. To perform the analysis in Step 3, the ICAT:

- a) Identifies Key Actors:

- WHO: People, organizations or groups who, because of their leadership abilities and/or power (e.g., political position, moral authority, charisma, money, weapons)
 - Have an impact on Societal Patterns/ Institutional Performance
 - Are able to shape perceptions and actions and mobilize people around Core Grievances or Social and Institutional Resilience
 - Are able to provide the means (money, weapons, information) to support other key actors who are mobilizing people around Core Grievances or Social and Institutional Resilience
- WHERE: Look for Key Actors in:
 - Leadership positions in governing, social or professional organizations or networks (either within or external to a state or territory), including private business, religious organizations, government positions (including, police forces, judicial system, and military), informal and illicit power structures, media, and academic institutions
- WHAT & HOW: Understand Key Actors' Motivations and Means by describing
 - What motivates Key Actors to exert influence on each of the Political, Economic, Social and Security systems in a country or area.
 - How they exert influence (e.g. leadership capacity, moral authority, personal charisma, money, access to resources or weapons, networks or connections).

Determines Key Actors':

- Objectives that promote violence or promote peaceful alternatives;
- Means and resources available to actors to accomplish those objectives, including:
 - Capacity for violence/intimidation
 - Financial resources (including taxes, "protection" fees, support from external actors or parties, etc.)
 - Valuable primary commodities (labor, information, forest products, minerals, high value crops, etc.)
 - Control of media outlets
 - Mass support

Using the information generated on Key Actors, the ICAT draft brief narrative statements describing "why" and "how" **Key Actors** mobilize constituencies around **Core Grievances** and, separately, around **sources of Social and Institutional Resilience**. Each statement relating to Core Grievances becomes an entry in the list of Drivers of Conflict and each relating to sources of Social and Institutional Resilience becomes an entry in the list of Mitigating Factors.

The ICAT completes Step 3 of the analysis by listing the **Drivers of Conflict** and, separately, the **Mitigating Factors** by the strength of their impact on the conflict.

Step 4: Describe Windows of Vulnerability and Windows of Opportunity

"Windows" are moments in time when events or occasions – contrasted with descriptions of Context – provoke negative or positive changes in the *status quo*. In Step 4 the ICAT:

- a) Identifies potential situations that could contribute to an increase in violent conflict.
 - **Windows of Vulnerability** are potential situations that could trigger escalation of conflict (e.g., by contributing to confirmation of the perceptions underlying Core

Grievances), and often result from large-scale responses to: an increase of uncertainty during elections or following an assassination; an exclusion of parties from important events such as negotiations or elections; or attempts to marginalize disgruntled followers.

- b) Identifies potential situations that might offer opportunities for mitigating violent conflict and promoting stability.
 - **Windows of Opportunity** describe the potential situations that could enable significant progress toward stable peace (*e.g.*, through conditions where Core Grievances can be reconciled and sources of Social and Institutional Resilience can be bolstered) such as those where overarching identities become important to disputing groups, where natural disasters impact multiple identity groups and externalities require a unified response or a key leader driving the conflict is killed.

The ICAT completes Step 4 by considering **Windows of Vulnerability** and **Windows of Opportunity** and prioritizing **Drivers and Mitigating Factors** identified in **Step 3**. The ICAT uses the list of prioritized Drivers and Mitigating Factors as the basis for its findings whether those findings are, for example: priorities for the whole-of-government Assistance Working Group setting parameters for a State Department Office of Foreign Assistance Country Assistance Strategy; recommendations to a Country Team preparing an application for NDAA Section 1207 funding; or recommendations to a whole-of-government CRP or Contingency planning team.

Task 2: Segue into Planning

When an ICAF is undertaken to support Crisis Response Planning or Contingency Planning, the findings of the conflict diagnosis feed into situation analysis and policy formulation steps of the planning process in the “Principles of the USG Planning Framework for Reconstruction, Stabilization and Conflict Transformation.”

When an ICAF is undertaken to support interagency steady-state engagement or conflict prevention planning, after completing the Diagnosis, the ICAT begins Pre-planning activities. During the segue into these types of planning, the ICAT maps existing diplomatic and programmatic activities against the prioritized lists of Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors to identify gaps in current efforts as they relate to conflict dynamics, it is not intended as an evaluation of the overall impact or value of any program or initiative. The ICAT uses these findings as a basis for making recommendations to planners on potential entry points for USG activities.

Task 2 Steps for Steady-State Engagement and Conflict Prevention Planning

- Specify current USG activities (listing USG agencies present in the country and the nature and scope of their efforts)
 - Identify the impact of these efforts on Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors
 - Identify efforts that target similar outcomes and coordination mechanisms in place
- Specify current efforts of non-USG actors, including bilateral agencies, multi-lateral agencies, NGOs, the private sector and local entities

- Identify the impact of the efforts on the Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors
- Identify efforts that target similar outcomes (including USG efforts) and coordinating mechanisms in place
- Identify Drivers of Conflict and Mitigating Factors not sufficiently addressed by existing efforts, *i.e.*, Gaps
- Specify challenges to addressing the Gaps
- Referring to Windows of Vulnerability, describe risks associated with failure to address the Gaps
- Referring to Windows of Opportunity, describe opportunities to address the Gaps

The ICAT draws on the information generated in Task 2 to determine potential entry points for USG efforts. The description of these entry points should explain how the dynamics outlined in the ICAF diagnosis may be susceptible to outside influence.