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# Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict

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## Executive Summary

In the midst of war, some communities develop strategies to exempt themselves from participation in surrounding violence. This book reports stories of existing capacities and resilience on the part of multiple communities—some quite sizable and significant—that manage to prevent violent conflict when all the incentives that surround them are to become involved, to fight.

The stories of thirteen communities show that prevention of violent conflict is possible. Normal people living normal lives have the option to say no to war, and they take it. Normal leaders in systems that already exist can respond to and support their people in non-engagement, and they do. This kind of conflict prevention does not require special training, new leadership, or special funding. It occurs, repeatedly and around the world in different types of conflict.

The communities described in this book were successful because they acted with intentionality and planning to set themselves apart from the agendas of the war, for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. They did not move to avoid interaction with actors in the conflict nor attempt to be irrelevant to the battle. They were not hidden from view by remoteness or because of their insignificance in numbers.

The alternate route they chose is not war-prevention, but it does constitute prevention of violent conflict in their contexts. The communities themselves did not claim to be models of universal applicability and we do not make this claim for them. In most cases, they also did not attempt to influence other communities or the wider war dynamics as peace or anti-war activists.

## Conflict Prevention

The stories are interesting and impressive in and of themselves. Beyond that, by describing, comparing, and analyzing these thirteen examples, this book intends to add to and broaden the discussion of how conflict prevention can work in other areas. The cumulative evidence from the communities represents a strong coherent body of experience that can provide useful and practical insights for local and international actors who seek to improve the outcomes of current conflict prevention efforts.

What do these communities do that succeeds? Do their strategies hold any relevant lessons for broader peace-making efforts undertaken by international actors?

These non-war communities shared six characteristic capacities that supported and informed each other as the communities relied upon them to stay out of war.

1. Making a decision to opt out of war as a community.
2. Choosing an identity that was well known, traditional, and incompatible with the war.
3. Maintaining normal life as much as possible through continuing to provide services and promote economic activity.
4. Supporting internal cohesion through local dispute resolution and codes of conduct.
5. Achieving security through engagement with fighters and trickery.
6. Celebrating with one another through festivals, holidays, sporting events, etc.

If war breaks out and widespread violence occurs, this indicates that existing prevention systems have not been strong enough. Worse, war itself causes many pre-existing connections to fail. As a result, most observers—both insiders and outsiders—conclude that new systems need to be imagined and created to enable a warring society to become peaceful.

This conclusion is undoubtedly true, but it may be less true than we imagine. These thirteen communities provide examples of strategies and processes for avoiding participation in conflict that exist more often and in more warring areas than we usually recognize. The thirteen situations are not unique. In each of these locations and in many others around the world where conflict occurs, we have heard many stories of similar groups.

In areas where war was being waged, these communities had the capacities to opt out of the conflict and to develop strategies by which they survived without joining sides. Taken together, their stories provide useful insights into the capacities needed to prevent conflict and provide strong markers of resilience. They show that such capacities and resilience exist—even in warring areas. They deserve our attention and provide instruction for other communities and for international actors.

