From ceasefire to cohesion

SUMMARY

How can societies escape the conflict trap of violence and distrust between social outgroups? Existing research offers a plethora of tools for reducing conflict through peacemaking, peacebuilding, and reconstruction efforts. Peacemaking tools are often international efforts aimed at reducing violence in the short term by changing the immediate behavior of organized actors. Once violence has been stymied, additional peacebuilding efforts are necessary to foster intergroup trust, tolerance, and a shared national identity, thereby reducing incentives for violence and building resilience against future "shocks" to tolerance in the long term. Such efforts typically occur at the grassroots level, seeking to change the attitudes of individuals in post-conflict societies. We provide an overview of the evidence base on peacemaking and peacebuilding—identifying promising policies and programs, limitations, and shared mechanisms driving positive effects. We integrate these literatures into a framework tracing the path from immediate violence reduction to durable peace, pinpointing critical empirical and theoretical gaps in our knowledge of how to break the conflict trap.

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From ceasefire to cohesion: An integrated review of peacemaking and peacebuilding

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global conflict landscape has deteriorated over the past decade. This escalation has led to devastating outcomes: rising battle-related deaths, civilian casualties, and over 114 million displaced individuals in 2023 (UNHCR 2023). Wars waged on, for example, Gaza, Lebanon, and Ukraine have pushed civilian casualties to their highest levels in a decade, leaving nearly half a billion children living in conflict-affected areas (Save the Children 2023). While global terrorist attacks and interstate wars have declined (Clauset 2018; LaFree 2018; Jackson and Pickering 2021), civil and proxy wars are responsible for a surge in armed conflicts worldwide (Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2023), leaving violent conflict as a pressing issue for the international community.

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Moreover, rising political polarization in the United States and Western Europe threatens to destabilize previously peaceful regions, underscoring the urgent need for robust conflict management and resolution efforts (Carothers and O'Donohue 2023).

Addressing these conflicts requires a dual approach that encompasses both immediate efforts to halt violence and long-term strategies to prevent its recurrence. International peacemaking serves as a critical mechanism for establishing stability in the short term, primarily by mitigating commitment problems that often prevent warring parties from reaching durable agreements. Conflict is frequently driven by the inability of parties to credibly commit to future peace, a problem exacerbated by mutual distrust and the lack of enforcement mechanisms for any negotiated settlement (Fearon 1995; Walter 2002). Through mediation, peacekeeping operations, and external security guarantees, the international community can play a crucial role in breaking deadlock and reducing violence. States and international organizations can also promote peace through development and humanitarian aid, as well as reconstruction programs, that address the economic and structural conditions contributing to conflict.

Peacemaking is essential for curbing immediate violence, but cannot alone secure lasting peace. Deliberate efforts are needed to address the underlying conflict generation process, which involves political and economic reforms to address group-based grievances, as well as social interventions that transform everyday interactions across politically salient fault lines. Prejudice against social outgroups remains a persistent barrier to intergroup cooperation: prejudice normalizes social and political exclusion, exaggerates perceived economic and cultural threats, and legitimizes discriminatory government policies. By dehumanizing outgroups, suppressing empathy, and promoting zero-sum thinking, prejudice lays the microfoundations of conflict, enabling political entrepreneurs to escalate conflict or encourage direct participation in violence (Bandura 1999; Leyens et al. 2000; Harris and Fiske 2006; Haslam 2006; Kteily et al. 2015).

The integration of peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts, each with their distinct but complementary roles, is essential for achieving both immediate cessation of hostilities and long-term social cohesion. Together, these interventions contribute to strengthening the prospects for peace by changing conflict behavior, improving attitudes, and supporting institutions.

We review the policy toolkit for international peacemaking and grassroots peacebuilding respectively, emphasizing common mechanisms across effective interventions. We also outline the empirical and theoretical frontiers in each area. As we cover several rich research fields, this review is by no means exhaustive. Instead, we focus on identifying main findings, common mechanisms, and important tensions. In peacemaking, establishing the causal impacts of peacekeeping and mediation remains challenging, though strong mandates, adequate resources, and political leverage consistently correlate with successful outcomes. There are, however, tensions between reaching short-term goals through leverage and the long-term quality of peace through legitimacy. The evidence base on development aid is also complex and contested. Additionally, we argue that better frameworks are needed to understand how peacekeeping, mediation,

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and aid interact, and how the policy environments they create influence local intergroup attitudes. In peacebuilding, indirect approaches like those centered on inclusive education, fostering tolerant social norms, and building empathy, tend to produce more consistently positive attitudes toward social outgroups than direct approaches to intergroup engagement, such as traditional intergroup contact or truth commissions, which instead require greater research and refinement to avoid unintended negative effects. Nevertheless, there remains a critical gap in both empirical evidence and conceptual frameworks linking these programs to community-level violence or resilience against future conflict escalation.

We argue that the literatures on peacemaking and peacebuilding would greatly benefit from integration. Common threads like the crucial role played by political elites in negotiating settlements, enforcing peacekeeping mandates, or shaping narratives about peace and conflict through grassroots outreach, for instance, can be leveraged to foster legitimacy and reach better settlements, sooner. A more unified framework could enhance our understanding of how top-down efforts like elite cues, and bottom-up efforts like prejudice reduction programs, reinforce or undermine each other. Connecting these domains and using a common set of outcomes, like community-level violence, policy preferences, and attitudes toward settlements, can pave the way for more coherent strategies to prevent conflict recurrence and promote long-term stability.

2. INTERNATIONAL PEACEMAKING EFFORTS

2.1 The peacemaking toolbox

The international community engages in multiple forms of peacemaking and reconstruction interventions. Peacekeeping operations have, since the end of the Cold War, emerged as a key solutions to managing armed conflict among the international community. According to the review article by Walter, Howard, and Fortna (2021), there is in fact an "extraordinary relationship between peacekeeping and peace."[1] By, for example, incentivizing peace (Fortna 2008), constraining opportunities for violence (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2014), enhancing rule of law (Blair 2020), supporting security sector reforms (Newby 2017), and aiding democratization (Blair, Di Salvatore, and Smidt 2023), peacekeeping operations contribute to peace both by changing conflict behavior and by supporting institutions. At best, peacekeeping can bring about stability. At worst, however, the research base also offers critical perspectives that highlight the limitations of outside intervention and the negative externalities of peacekeeping (Paris 1997; Jennings and Bøås 2015; Autesserre 2017; Srinivasan 2021).

1 Other reviews of the peacekeeping literature come to similar conclusions about the general effectiveness of peacekeeping, see, for example, Rohner (2024) and Di Salvatore and Ruggeri (2018).

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In order to make peace, there must be a peace process to resolve key issues underpinning the political conflict, highlighting the relevance of mediation. The UN and several regional organizations frequently offer to get involved as mediators in civil conflicts (Arı 2023). Mediation works primarily by incentivizing a change in conflict behavior. Research is relatively optimistic about the potential of mediation to assist parties to reach peace agreements and eventually a more lasting peace. Based on data classifying the outcome of each mediation effort, DeRouen, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna (2011) conclude that 76% of all mediation attempts were successful in bringing about a ceasefire, a process agreement of how to continue negotiations, or a partial or full peace agreement. According to Rohner (2024), however, research on mediation has not sufficiently managed to empirically establish a causal link between mediation and peace.

Armed conflict is a form of development in reverse, and countries risk getting stuck in a conflict trap where armed conflict impairs economic development, which in turn is a driver of conflict. Studies demonstrate that the effect of poverty on conflict is likely to be both strong and causal (Hegre, Nygård, and Ræder 2017; Braithwaite, Dasandi, and Hudson 2016). Interventions that aim to strengthen the economy and reduce poverty are therefore important for promoting peace. Development aid could support peace by affecting opportunity costs for violence, thus changing conflict behavior, as well as strengthening institutions. However, the findings on whether development aid is effective at spurring economic development are inconclusive. A meta-analysis of 97 econometrics studies concluded that development aid is not effective, despite a majority of published articles stating that it is (Doucouliagos and Paldam 2009). When it comes to the critical question of how foreign aid influences the prospects for peace, the literature is also split (Findley 2018), at times even finding that aid increases support groups like the Tailban (Zhou and Lyall 2025). When aid does foster pro-peace sentiment, it appears to work by signaling government competence rather than improving livelihoods (Zhou and Lyall 2025).

2.2 Peacekeeping: establishing security

Is peacekeeping effective? The answer partly depends on how we define effectiveness and what our outcome of interest is. But if we are interested in the ability to establish security and reduce violence, there is ample systematic evidence.

One persistent finding is that peacekeeping is more effective when missions have strong mandates. For peacekeeping operations, the mandates authorized by the Security Council vary greatly across missions. While some peacekeeping operations have limited mandates to monitor and verify compliance with a ceasefire, others have much more ambitious mandates, aiming to protect civilians and transform the conflict. Doyle and Sambanis (2006) provided early quantitative analyses of the importance of mandate for the likelihood that peacekeeping operations are successful in maintaining peace. However, they conclude that mandates must be accompanied by matching resources. This conclusion was confirmed in a study using simulations to assess the

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impact of transformational peacekeeping mandates: Hegre, Hultman, and Nygård (2019) estimate that the number of major armed conflicts globally could be reduced by 70% with a peacekeeping policy based on strong mandates coupled with a substantive budget. Lloyd (2021) finds that missions that are mandated to provide security guarantees and raise the cost of fighting are more effective in reducing battle deaths. However, the conclusion should not be that more is always better. Peacekeeping operations have become increasingly complex over time (Oksamytna and Lundgren 2021; Diehl, Druckman, and Mueller 2024). There is a clear risk of overly ambitious, under-resourced mandates that lack a clear priority. As noted by Blair, Di Salvatore, and Smidt (2021), fragmented mandates can also hinder effective implementation. What peacekeepers do within these mandates is, of course, central. For example, Smidt (2021) shows that peacekeeping missions reduce election-related violence only when they actively assist with securing and organizing elections.

Quantitative research has further provided evidence that the military capacity of peacekeeping missions has clear consequences for their effectiveness (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2014; Kathman and Wood 2016; Haass and Ansorg 2018). Larger military troop deployments are associated with a reduction in conflict violence and violence against civilians, as they have the capacity to patrol and separate armed actors. The UN and regional organizations are equally effective in protecting civilians from government violence—but when it comes to non-state actors, the UN outperforms regional organizations (Bara and Hultman 2020). Local populations likely perceive UN peacekeepers as unbiased and they therefore enhance trust more than other biased interveners (Nomikos 2022). However, partnership in peacekeeping is increasingly common, and such joint deployment further enhances the effectiveness in both reducing conflict violence (Schumann and Bara 2023) and protecting civilians (Kim, Chae, and Sandler 2025). Even within UN missions, diversity in terms of where troops are from enhances the protection of civilians (Bove and Ruggeri 2016). Diversity in the type of military units deployed is another way of expanding competences and improving performance (Dworschak and Cil 2022).

Establishing the effectiveness of peacekeeping is not straightforward, given that it is a political policy tool suseceptible to strategic use. The research field has adopted a number of different empirical approaches to assess how peacekeeping may generate peaceful outcomes. Several studies resort to matching techniques to account for the fact that peacekeeping is used in particularly challenging situations (Gilligan and Sergenti 2008; Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2014). Another way to address the non-exogenous treatment of peacekeeping is to use an instrumental variable approach; Carnegie and Mikulaschek (2020) leverage exogenous variation in the rotation of membership in the UN Security Council. Studies have also employed prediction methods to assess the impact of peacekeeping, using simulations to compare model results with the real-world outcome for the same period (Hegre, Hultman and Nygård 2019). Taken together, the conclusion that peacekeeping is effective in reducing overall conflict remains robust.

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While military capacity matters, some tasks are better performed by UN police, who are trained to patrol behind the frontlines and engage with criminal elements of armed conflict. As such, more police units enable more effective protection of civilians (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2013). While military troops are best suited to manage the primary belligerents, UN police are better positioned to address new armed actors that emerge in the post-conflict environment (Bara 2020). This unique role of the UN police should not be neglected. Although peacekeeping has proven effective for managing conflict, it can simultaneously generate unintended negative consequences for the host country. For example, peacekeeping troops may inadvertently spur criminal violence because economic opportunities increase competition for resources at a time when demobilized combatants have limited livelihood options; UN police, however, can counterbalance these negative effects and combat criminal violence where they are deployed (Di Salvatore 2019).

Beyond the factors introduced above, it matters how interventions are implemented. One overall finding is that local presence is important; interveners need to consider where they operate within conflict contexts. It matters greatly how peacekeeping operations deploy their troops and personnel within the host country. The local presence is critical for managing insecurity and violence through patrols and promoting peace through dialogue. Ruggeri, Dorussen, and Gizelis (2017) use geo-referenced data on peacekeeping deployments, and employ various methods for mitigate the endogenous treatment of peacekeeping, to show that local presence indeed shortens conflict episodes. Local presence also contributes to the protection of civilians. Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson (2019) also employ spatial data together with an empirical strategy to manage selection bias and endogenous effects, finding that peacekeepers are deployed where rebels target civilians—and subsequently reduce violence against civilians in those areas—but find no effects on violence by government forces. A number of studies investigating similar spatial dynamics of particular missions have confirmed the relevance of local deployments (Phayal 2019; Phayal and Prins 2020). While deployment data only tell us where the bases are located, Abbs and Duursma (2024) also show that peacekeepers do conduct patrols in high-tension areas where violence takes place.

Nevertheless, research also raises questions about the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. Measuring effectiveness locally presents challenges to inference, as the presence of peacekeepers may simply relocate violence if armed actors avoid peacekeepers but continue to use violence elsewhere (Peitz and Reisch 2019). We thus need to look at both local- and country-level outcomes. Some missions may also simply be less effective in reducing violence, which could stem from mandate or the local conflict environment. For example, a study of the mission in Bosnia find no evidence for local violence reduction (Costalli 2014). Effectiveness may also depend on the peacekeepers' ability to access remote areas through road networks (Cil et al. 2020) and on the local ethnic power balance, as it may be more challenging to manage violence in areas with one dominating actor (Di Salvatore 2020).

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Taken together, the peacekeeping literature provides strong support for a logic of increasing the cost of violence through clear mandates, sufficient capacity, and presence to patrol where violence occurs. Their main strength is thus managing conflict behavior. While there is some evidence of peacekeeping operations also contributing to positive peace outcomes by supporting local institutions, the literature is more divided, also highlighting several negative consequences of large international deployments and a robust approach to peacekeeping (Hunt 2016; Autesserre 2017; Beber et al. 2017; Srinivasan 2021). Military deployment through peacekeeping is thus a tool for establishing short-term security, but other tools are needed to achieve lasting peace, like stronger civilian peacekeeping components with a focus on human rights, rule of law, and democratization (Blair, Di Salvatore, and Smidt 2023; Duursma and Smidt 2024; Di Salvatore, Oksamytna, and Coleman 2025). Ultimately, however, there are limits to what international interveners can do. Local ownership of peace processes is therefore key for sustainable peace (Whalan 2013; von Billerbeck 2016; Campbell 2020).

2.3 Mediation: facilitating a path to peace

Mediation is an important tool for facilitating a path to peace by helping warring actors to identify solutions and compromises. This requires a willingness to participate in the process, as any outside offer to engage in mediation must be accepted by the conflict parties. For example, governments may be reluctant to negotiate with rebel organizations, since direct engagement bestows some form of recognition upon the group as a relevant political actor. As a result, mediation is more likely when rebels are militarily strong, as governments then have fewer options and may be pressured to accept the outside offer of mediation (Clayton 2013). In fact, the increased prevalence of listing armed non-state actors as terrorist groups, thereby closing the door to many potential mediators, is one reason for the decline of mediation as an international peacemaking tool (Lundgren and Svensson 2020). A more hostile regional environment also makes third parties hesitant to offer to mediate in the first place (Reid, Kadera, and Crescenzi 2023).

But is mediation powerful enough to change the behavior of warring parties by facilitating peace agreements and identifying durable solutions for post-conflict peace? When opening a peace process, actors may be temporarily incentivized to increase violence in order to strengthen their bargaining position at the negotiation table, or to spoil the peace process if they are excluded from the process (Pospieszna and DeRouen, Jr. 2017). However, beyond that, quantitative analyses suggest that conflicts with mediation are more likely to be resolved and reach durable peace DeRouen, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna (2011); Regan and Aydin (2006); Regan, Frank, and Aydin (2009). This also plays out more locally, as local mediation efforts are associated with a reduction of violence within conflict landscapes (Duursma 2021). However, the literature demonstrates that effectiveness depends on who mediates and what strategy they employ.

Research has debated whether mediators should be impartial actors, thereby facilitating trust and reducing tensions, or part conflict actors who can exercise more influence.

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While early studies tended to emphasize the importance of neutrality, more recent work has demonstrated the benefits of partial mediators (Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). Biased mediators are in fact better positioned to reveal credible information (Kydd 2003; Savun 2008). Accepting a mediator biased in favor of the opponent can also be a way of reducing the commitment problem. (Svensson 2007a).

Nevertheless, successful mediation should not consist solely of outside pressure on the warring parties. Legitimacy of the mediator is also central. Mediators who come from the same region may understand the conflict context better and therefore bring more legitimacy to the process. Duursma (2020) shows that mediators from the same region can enable better outcomes. Accounting for the selection process by which regional organizations tend to deal with the civil wars that are the hardest to resolve, Gartner (2011) finds that they are effective in facilitating dispute resolution. According to Bercovitch and Sigmund Gartner (2006), however, the effectiveness differs depending on the conflict: while regional mediators are effective in low-intensity conflicts, international mediators are instead more successful in bringing high-intensity conflicts to an end. Who the mediators invite to the table is also a critical question. For example, including civil society actors in the process is another strategy for increasing legitimacy and enhancing successful outcomes (Nilsson 2012).

If we turn to mediation strategy, the field has identified different approaches that mediators can take. According to one approach, leverage is key to pushing conflict actors to engage in dialogue and make concessions (Sisk 2009). Mediators can exert leverage through capabilities and credibility; mediators with capability leverage are more successful in enabling a peace agreement (Reid 2017). Mediating with muscles is thus an effective way of getting parties to accept a peace agreement (Svensson 2007b). Economically resourceful international organizations can enable mediation among their members and also increase the likelihood that the actors sign a peace agreement (Karreth et al. 2024). Böhmelt (2010) concludes that leverage is imost effective when combined with more unofficial channels of communication and lower-track mediation.

The alternative to leverage and power mediation is to adopt a more facilitative approach, the effectiveness of which depends on what mediators are expected to achieve. Ifediora (2021) suggests that African mediators often take a facilitative approach when addressing atrocities, which makes them more legitimate but simultaneously less effective. Beardsley et al. (2006) nuance the analysis by acknowledging that different strategies may be beneficial for different outcomes. Their analysis shows that a "manipulative strategy" increases the chances of reaching an agreement and managing violence—thus aligning with the leverage hypothesis—whereas a facilitative strategy is more successful in reducing tensions in the long-term. It also matters what issues mediation processes bring up; according to Ruhe (2021), mediation that attempts to resolve core conflict issues can significantly reduce fatalities.

While the literature review above highlights the tensions between reaching an agreement and resolving the underlying conflict more longterm, some theoretic frameworks critique external mediation and peacemaking. Beardsley (2008), for instance, formulates

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the problem as a temporal one: mediators are good at getting parties to an agreement, but their influence wanes in the implementation phase. Others extend this framework by arguing that the very fact that a conflict is resolved through outside pressure makes the settlement less stable. External leverage may generate short-term agreements without resolving the underlying conflict; this may lead to a fragile peace where parties think that they can gain a better deal by using violence in the future (Greig and Diehl 2005; Werner and Yuen 2005).

On the whole, the mediation literature provides optimistic evidence for outside pressure to bring conflict parties to a settlement. However, for a more durable solution, mediators need to consider the legitimacy of the process and the extent to which the underlying source of conflict has been resolved. Like peacekeeping, mediation alone cannot take actors all the way from violent conflict to stable peace.

2.4 Aid: incentivizing peace

While peacekeeping and mediation intend to manage a conflict and enable a transition to peace, post-conflict recovery requires reconstruction efforts. Development aid is one tool wielded by international donors to support economic growth, thereby reducing the risk of armed conflict in the future. However, its potential for incentivizing peace is debated. The first question is whether development aid at all contributes to economic growth as intended. Doucouliagos and Paldam (2009) concludes that the evidence is weak. Unpacking aid provides more nuanced conclusions. According to Minoiu and Reddy (2010), development aid does spur economic growth, whereas non-development aid does not. They suggest that development aid is used for infrastructure and human capabilities, which results in a visible long-term effect. Another study finds that only development aid by non-allies has a strong effect on economic growth; aid by allies even has a negative impact (Bobba and Powell 2007). The main question we focus on here, however, is whether aid can also be a useful tool for supporting peace. As argued by Boyce (2002), aid can be effective in supporting peacebuilding if combining performance criteria with informal dialogue, referred to as peace conditionality. Nevertheless, donors often have other priorities and aid is therefore not used to its full potential.

A number of studies identify positive effects of development aid. Drawing on the analogy of winning hearts and minds in counterinsurgency, a study from Iraq shows that development programs that provide needed services to the population are able to reduce violence (Berman, Shapiro, and Felter 2011). Lyall (2019) provides evidence from Afghanistan that counterinsurgency forces can reduce attacks by insurgents also through the provision of humanitarian assistance. These effects are corroborated in a cross-sectional analysis using instrumental variable estimation, showing that humanitarian food aid reduces the incidence of civil conflicts (Mary and Mishra 2020). An experimental study from Liberia provides more insights into the mechanism of how development aid may promote peace. Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2015) show that development aid in the form of community-driven reconstruction programs

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enhances social cohesion and cooperation. Whether aid really works by winning hearts and minds is questioned by three studies from Afghanistan; they do not find evidence for this mechanism, but instead suggest another whereby aid increases state legitimacy and signals competence (Böhnke and Zürcher 2013; Sexton and Zürcher 2024; Zhou and Lyall 2025). Sexton and Zürcher (2024) conclude that "foreign aid can improve human development but rarely meaningfully brings political stabilization."

Nevertheless, there are multiple studies suggesting the very opposite, namely that aid spurs conflict. One mechanisms by which aid could trigger conflict is by challenging insurgents' territorial control. This is compatible with the idea above that aid strengthens state legitimacy. However, the hypothesis here is instead that it drives insurgents to ramp up their violence in an attempt to regain control and influence. According to Weintraub (2016), development assistance during civil conflict increases the risk for violence, and in particular indiscriminate violence hitting the civilian population, since it challenges insurgents' territorial control. Crost, Felter, and Johnston (2014) focus on community development programs, suggesting that they can trigger violence by insurgents, as their political influence and popular support is threatened by the intervention.

Lootable aid, such as food aid or other forms of humanitarian aid, can also incentivize violence as insurgents try to control resources (Nunn and Qian 2014; Wood and Sullivan 2015). The solution, however, is not simply to cut back on aid. Negative aid shocks can also induce violence as the domestic balance of power is significantly changed (Nielsen et al. 2011). Moreover, the negative effects identified do not take into account the lives potentially saved by the delivery of humanitarian aid. These studies highlight the need for careful implementation of aid projects.

Taken together, research suggests that if done right, aid can reduce grievances in society, strengthen local institutions, and reduce opportunity costs for engaging in violence. However, aid also comes with significant risks; it may instead incentivize violence and undermine institutions. It is therefore important to consider alternative approaches to post-conflict recovery, and research should pay more attention to the potential for autonomous recovery without the involvement of international intervention (Weinstein 2005).

2.5 Remaining gaps: multiple interventions and micro-level effects

One gap that warrants more research attention is whether multiple interventions amplify overall effectiveness, or whether some forms of intervention may undermine the effect of another. Most studies focus on intervention at a time. Reality, however, is more complex, and civil wars often see multiple interventions either in parallel or in sequence. Existing work suggests that peacekeeping in combination with mediation can enhance the effectiveness in reducing conflict violence (Beardsley, Cunningham, and White 2019), ending armed conflict (Clayton and Dorussen 2022), and reducing the risk of failed peace agreements (DeRouen and Chowdhury 2018). However, international attention goes beyond only peacekeeping and mediation, and Beardsley (2013) suggests

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that not all combinations of international involvement are conducive to peace. As an example, attempts to promote international criminal justice may sometimes inhibit the work by peacekeepers and humanitarian organizations (Duursma and Müller 2019). More work is needed to explore how different combinations of international attention either amplify or work counter to each other, and how this may play out differently at the local and the national level.

Another research frontier is how international peacemaking interventions influence local intergroup relationships. Nomikos (2022) analyzes the relevance of impartial intervention through the UN, showing experimentally that peacekeepers can influence intergroup relations by making individuals more willing to cooperate. Scholars can also look directly at how peacekeeping activities contribute to intergroup peace. For instance, Smidt (2020) finds that intergroup dialogue activities organized by peacekeeping missions can reduce the risk of communal conflict as they "revive intergroup coordination and diminish negative biases against other groups."

These findings suggest that peacekeeping operations can improve local relationships, especially through specific activities aimed at intergroup dialogue and understanding. However, we cannot infer that larger military deployments, which are better at providing security, would also enhance intergroup trust. The opposite may be true: military components may inhibit the trust-building efforts by civilian peacekeepers through a robust posture. Indeed, a survey in Haiti suggest that observing security activities enhances people's willingness to cooperate with peacekeepers, but observing an excessive use of force has the opposite effect (Gordon and Young 2017). Moreover, since UN operations are dependent on host state consent, and missions are often mandated to support the state in various functions, their presence may cement existing power structures. The UN may thereby inadvertently enable authoritarianism, as argued by von Billerbeck and Tansey (2019). Even short of supporting the state, an international intervention that aims at creating stability risks benefiting some political elites over others, and in doing so, neglects the varied interests of the local population.

While the possibility of humanitarian aid incentivizing violence may be discouraging, a few studies provide a more optimistic outlook. According to Greig (2021), the negative externalities of humanitarian aid can also be alleviated when combined with mediation, while Zhang and Dorussen (2025) show with sub-national data that peacekeeping deployments can counteract the negative effects of aid. However, there is also a strong argument against conflating impartial humanitarian projects with military operations like peacekeeping. More research is needed to tease out the conditions under which different forms of international peacemaking efforts, like peacekeeping and mediation, can safeguard humanitarian aid and enable much needed reconstruction in countries suffering from civil conflict. Peacekeeping operations may themselves also contribute to local economic development, either directly through their own programming, or by enabling humanitarian projects (Cil et al. 2025). But again, research suggests that the reality is more complex as short-term humanitarian or infrastructure projects implemented by peacekeeping operations have also been found to increase violence against civilians

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(Sauter 2022). More research is thus needed on how different interventions interact with aid and reconstruction programs in shaping the conflict landscape, and in particular what mechanisms are at play.

3. GRASSROOTS PEACEBUILDING

While peacekeeping and reconstruction establish security and rebuild formal institutions, lasting peace depends on grassroots efforts that foster positive intergroup interactions, rebuild trust, and reduce prejudice. These bottom-up initiatives reinforce and sustain the broader gains achieved through top-down interventions. This section synthesizes the causal evidence base on grassroots peacebuilding interventions aimed at improving intergroup attitudes, behaviors, and social norms. We focus on four intervention classes: (1) direct intergroup contact; (2) indirect exposure and perspective-taking; (3) inclusive nation-building; and (4) transitional justice programs. We take advantage of the fact that many interventions straddle the border between these categories, allowing us to identify shared psychosocial mechanisms driving attitudinal and behavioral change. Expanding on Matanock's (2020) review of experiments in post-conflict settings, we focus entirely on studies aiming to build social cohesion. We prioritize randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and studies in active or post-conflict societies.

Our synthesis reveals a sobering pattern: in active or post-conflict environments, efforts that bring opposing groups together to directly engage often yield limited or inconsistent gains to social cohesion. While some programs do improve attitudes toward individual outgroup members, these effects struggle to generalize to the broader group in the absence of political stability or institutional safeguards, or come at the cost of worsened personal well-being. By contrast, indirect approaches such as empathy-based education and symbolic efforts to promote inclusive national identities show more consistently positive outcomes, although questions remain about their longevity. Cutting across intervention areas, elite messaging and education campaigns emerge as powerful levers that can scale grassroots efforts by shifting social norms, catalyzing broader public support for peace and reconciliation. The potential for different classes of interventions is described in Tables 1 and 2. While neither summary is exhaustive, Table 2 is focused on RCTs to help inform future meta-analyses.

3.1 Intergroup contact

Allport's seminal contact hypothesis holds that interpersonal contact across social lines—when that contact involves cooperating toward a common goal, equal power status within the context of the intervention, and endorsement by local laws, norms, and authorities on both sides—can reduce prejudice, forge friendships, and improve intergroup relations on the whole (Allport 1954). While meta-analytic evidence confirms that contact typically reduces prejudice, average effect sizes shrink with each iteration.

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Table 1. Heat map of promising peacebuilding interventions.

Intervention	Intergroup engagement	Potential	Mechanisms	Examples
Intergroup exposure	Direct	Low	Contact	Hangartner et al. (2019); Enos (2014); Steinmayr (2021)
Intergroup contact	Direct	Low-Medium	Contact	Scacco and Warren (2018); Mousa (2020); Weiss (2021)
Transitional justice programs	Direct	Medium	Contact, reparations	Voytas and Crisman (2024); Cilliers, Dube, and Siddiqi (2016)
Salient national identity	Indirect	Medium-High	Expanded ingroup boundaries, elite cues	Robinson (2016); Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh (2015); Depetris-Chauvin, Durante, and Campante (2020)
Elite messaging	Indirect	Medium-High	Social norms	Siegel and Badaan (2020); Grossman, Nomikos, and Siddiqui (2023); Blair et al. (2021b)
Perspective-taking	Indirect	Medium-High	Empathy induction	Alan et al. (2021); Dinas, Fouka, and Schläpfer (2021); Sambanis, Simonson, and Yaylacı (2025); Adida, Lo, and Platas (2018)
Edutainment, narratives, and parasocial contact	Indirect	High	Contact, education	Paluck (2009); Unan (2025); Alrababah et al. (2021)
Inclusive histories and commemoration	Indirect	High	Education, empathy induction, expanded ingroup boundaries	Balcells, Palanza, and Voytas (2022); Firestone, Ditlmann, and Turkoglu (2025); Haas and Lindstam (2024)

Note: Potential is determined based on three factors: the size of the causal evidence base, the portion of the evidence base in active or recently post-conflict settings, and, given heightened ethical considerations, the prevalence of negative treatment effects. These criteria are described in more detail in Table 2.

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Table 2. Snapshot of Peacebuilding RCTs by conflict status and backlash effects.

Intervention	No active conflict	Active conflict	Post-conflict
Intergroup contact	**Mousa, Scacco, and Naumann (2023); Scacco and Warren (2018); Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin (2010), Samii and Ditlmann (2016);** Greene et al. (2024); Lowe (2021)	**Mousa and Yang (2024); Ghosh et al. (2024); Porat et al. (2025); Samii and Ditlmann (2016);** Zhou and Lyall (2025); Asimovic, Ditlmann, and Samii (2024); Chaudhry and Hussain (2023); Grady et al. (2023); Weiss (2021)	Mousa (2020)
Narratives and perspective-taking	**Sambanis, Simonson, and Yaylacı (2025)**, Bandiera et al. (2024); Unan (2025); Alan et al. (2021); Dinas, Fouka, and Schläpfer (2021); Alrababah et al. (2021); Williamson et al. (2021); Kalla and Broockman (2020); Simonovits, Kezdi, and Kardos (2018); Adida, Lo, and Platas (2018)	**Kalin and Siddiqui (2020)**; Bruneau and Saxe (2012); Weiss, Ran, and Halperin (2023)	Paluck (2009)
Inclusive national identities	**Rosenzweig and Zhou (2021)**, Siegel and Badaan (2020); Robinson (2016)	**Grossman, Nomikos, and Siddiqui (2023)**, Haas and Lindstam (2024); Blair et al. (2021b); Condra, Isaqzadeh, and Linardi (2019); Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh (2015)	—
Transitional justice and healing	—	Fabbe, Hazlett, and Sınmazdemir (2019)	**Cilliers, Dube, and Siddiqi (2016); Balcells and Voytas (2025);** Garbiras-Díaz, García-Sánchez, and Matanock (2024); Firestone, Ditlmann, and Turkoglu (2025); Balcells, Palanza, and Voytas (2022); Christia, Grigorieff, and Stanig (2012); Turkoglu, Ditlmann, and Firestone (2023)

Note. Studies in bold report negative treatment effects on primary outcomes, either on average or for key demographic subgroups, indicating a need to proceed cautiously. "Active conflict" refers to country-years with regular conflict-related fatalities (typically annual and in the tens or more); "Post-conflict" to contexts where such violence ended within the past 15 years; and "No active conflict" to country-years that do not meet either criterion. Interventions in active or post-conflict settings do not necessarily involve the primary belligerent groups (Mousa 2020; Zhou and Lyall 2025).

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Contact "effects" are largest when looking at correlational evidence rife with selection bias (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), smaller when focusing on randomized-controlled trials (Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Clochard 2022), and smaller still when focusing on pre-registered reports to reduce publication bias (Lowe 2024). This gradual filtering leaves us with a handful of pre-registered contact experiments that are conducted in active or recently post-war settings.

Findings from contact experiments conducted in these settings are largely discouraging. Prolonged wartime contact between internally displaced people (IDPs) and host communities in an Afghan vocational program failed to shift intergroup attitudes (Zhou and Lyall 2025), Muslim-Christian contact through soccer leagues among Iraqis displaced by ISIS did not generalize to broader social trust toward outgroup strangers (Mousa 2020), and in Nigeria's religious riot-prone Kaduna province, positive contact effects in a computer training course were driven by worsened discrimination in the homogeneous control group (Scacco and Warren 2018). A youth sports league in Israel required two years of Jewish-Palestinian contact before positive effects on outgroup regard materialized, and even then, were modest in size and limited only to Jewish participants (Asimovic, Ditlmann, and Samii 2024). Even more concerning, several experiments report backlash among dominant group members (see Table 1 for a summary of negative treatment effects). Hindu-Muslim contact in Indian youth camps increased exclusionary attitudes among Hindus (Ghosh et al. 2024); Lebanese-Syrian contact in a psychosocial support program reduced Lebanese participants' willingness to engage in tolerant behaviors like attending outgroup cultural events (Mousa, Scacco, and Naumann 2023); and Jewish-Palestinian contact modestly improved Jewish students' attitudes in both an Israeli university course (Porat et al. 2025) and a youth sports league (Samii and Ditlmann 2016), but worsened evaluations of the course itself and reduced outgroup regard among Palestinian youth, respectively. Together, these findings underscore the limited—and sometimes counterproductive—impact of contact in the very settings where it is most urgently needed.

A few studies defy the broader trend of limited or negative contact effects in conflict-prone settings, offering clues about the conditions under which contact can promote peace. In Nigeria, a cluster-randomized intervention formed mixed-group committees of farmers and pastoralists to manage shared infrastructure. The intervention increased willingness to engage in future contact and reduced insecurity among both participants and the wider community, pointing to the diffusion of pro-social norms (Grady et al. 2023). In Israel, Jewish patients randomly assigned to Palestinian doctors reported warmer feelings, greater perceived similarity, and more optimism about peace (Weiss 2021).

What explains these exceptions? Institutional context appears crucial (Ditlmann et al. 2017). Contact theory assumes that positive experiences with an outgroup member can generalize to broader attitudes, but generalization is far from guaranteed, especially in settings marked by structural inequality or insecurity (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2005; Lowe 2024). Contact may require highly structured environments, like well-

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funded community commissions in Nigeria or hospitals in Israel (Weiss 2021; Grady et al. 2023), tangible outputs like community boreholes in Nigeria (Grady et al. 2023), or years-long exposure high in both duration and depth (Nathan and Sands 2023, Asimovic, Ditlmann, and Samii 2024), to make generalization more rational and likely. Indeed, Grady et al. (2023) find a direct link between contact effectiveness and perceived security, suggesting that a baseline level of safety is necessary, although insufficient, for contact to durably change attitudes.

The internal conditions of contact, particularly equal status and cooperation, are perhaps just as important as the external environment. These criteria are hypothesized to be critical for prejudice reduction (Allport 1954), but are rare in fragile settings—where intergroup contact is instead more likely to reinforce power imbalances and make generalization to outgroup strangers less rational, especially during periods of active violence (Ditlmann et al. 2017). Experimental evidence shows that equal power status (Greene et al. 2024), collaboration (Lowe 2021), and the endorsement of elites (Chaudhry and Hussain 2023) enhance the prejudice-reducing effects of contact. By contrast, hierarchical contact—the modal form of contact during periods of transition away from structural oppression—can trigger backlash effects. Black troops assigned to White lieutenants in World War II, for instance, were less likely to believe that equality was realistic or that integration was desirable, driven by a more negative contact experience (Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin 2010; Mousa and Yang 2024). Future work should validate Allport's original conditions, explore the conditions under which contact is more likely to be considered positive or negative, and investigate when results will generalize to other outgroup members or stagnate.

3.2 Indirect contact, narratives, and perspective-taking

Given the mixed results of intergroup contact in conflict-affected settings, lighter-touch interventions that operate through similar socio-emotional pathways—such as perspective-taking, parasocial contact, and inclusive identity-building—offer promising alternatives. Empathy education, which treats cognitive empathy as a teachable skill (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000), has shown positive effects in several contexts. In Turkish schools, such education reduced bullying and improved attitudes toward Syrian refugees, who also performed better in language exams as a result (Alan et al. 2021). Brief perspective-taking exercises have likewise reduced prejudice toward refugees and migrants in Colombia (Bandiera et al. 2024), Hungary (Simonovits, Kezdi, and Kardos 2018), and the USA (Adida, Lo, and Platas 2018; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Williamson et al. 2021). Because these exercises require slow, reflective thinking, their effects align with broader evidence on deliberation and self-regulation in reducing violence and antisocial behavior (Blattman, Jamison, and Sheridan 2017; Heller et al. 2017; Alan and Ertac 2018). In Lebanon, a head-to-head comparison found empathy education more effective than intergroup contact at reducing prejudice toward Syrian

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refugees, without the backlash effects seen in contact-based interventions (Mousa, Scacco, and Naumann 2023).

Although largely untested in active conflict zones, one exception from Israel/Palestine finds that attitude change occurred only when Palestinians shared their perspective, highlighting that perspective-taking alone is insufficient without power symmetry (Bruneau and Saxe 2012). This finding mirrors results from the contact literature, where positive effects were most likely to emerge under conditions of equal status and cooperation (Lowe 2021; Greene et al. 2024; Mousa and Yang 2024). These results suggest that both empathy- and contact-based interventions are unlikely to change minorities' attitudes without addressing underlying power imbalances. Further adding to skepticism around the use of perspective-taking in contentious settings, evidence from former conflict zones is mixed. Interventions that draw parallels between the forced displacement experience of European natives to that of Syrian refugees, for instance, improved pro-refugee attitudes and behaviors in Greece and Germany (Dinas, Fouka, and Schläpfer 2021), but not among the descendants of displaced Turks, Greek-Cypriots, and Greeks, in a replication study (Sambanis, Simonson, and Yaylacı 2025). In some cases, hostility worsened. Taken together, these studies suggest that perspective-taking may backfire or fall flat when power, identity, and historical grievance remain unresolved.

Media-based strategies can similarly reduce prejudice at scale. Sidestepping the logistical and psychological barriers of face-to-face contact—and better-positioned to overcome selection bias given the wide appeal of high-quality shows—the edutainment literature identifies prejudice reduction as a positive externality of scripted radio, television, and film narratives with tolerant messages. In Rwanda, for instance, narratives aiming to reduce intergroup prejudice, violence, and trauma boosted social norms and behaviors related to intergroup marriage, trust, and trauma healing, albeit with no changes to self-reported attitudes (Paluck 2009). A meta-analysis of edutainment experiments shows that edutainment yields consistent effects on prejudice reduction comparable in size to public health campaigns (Rahmani et al. 2025). Edutainment appears to operate through similar socio-emotional pathways as perspective-taking and intergroup contact, both of which typically reduce perceived social distance and induce empathy.

A related body of work examines parasocial contact—exposure to minority-group "role models" in the media. As with edutainment, these studies find positive effects: public admiration for a Muslim soccer player in the UK, a Nobel laureate from the persecuted Ahmadi sect in Pakistan, and the Turkish-German COVID-19 vaccine developers all reduced prejudicial attitudes and behaviors toward those groups more broadly (Kalin and Siddiqui 2020; Alrababah et al. 2021; Unan 2025). These mediated approaches may outperform direct contact in some cases but remain underexplored in conflict-prone contexts; Rahmani et al. (2025) find that few such interventions are designed explicitly to reduce prejudice.

It bears noting that not all forms of exposure improve intergroup relations; incidental exposure to stigmatized groups can worsen attitudes. Studies in Greece, the USA, and

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Germany show that brief, unstructured exposure to refugees, migrants, and the poor increased exclusionary attitudes and support for far-right parties (Hangartner et al. 2019; Enos 2014; Sands 2017), whereas exposure coupled with opportunities for meaningful interaction mitigated these effects in France, Austria, and Colombia (Steinmayr 2021; Vertier, Viskanic, and Gamalerio 2023; Lebow et al. 2024). In volatile environments, incidental exposure may not only fail to reduce tensions, but may deepen them. Empathy education, leveraging minority "ambassadors," and purpose-built edutainment are therefore well-positioned to counter the unintended negative effects of mere exposure alone, but remain underexplored in conflict settings, with only a handful of RCTs in active or post-conflict settings (Table 2).

3.3 Building inclusive national identities

While previous sections focus on improving everyday cross-group interactions, governments can also foster social cohesion through symbolic efforts to build a shared national identity. Several studies highlight the role that even subtle reminders of shared national identity can play. For example, priming the salience of national identity by spotlighting the national flag—a form of "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995)—encouraged Malawians to prioritize national over parochial identity Robinson (2016) and Hindus to engage in pro-social behavior toward the Muslim minority in India (Charnysh, Lucas, and Singh 2015).

The relationship between national identity salience and conflict is more complex, however. In Africa, national team victories in the African Cup of Nations reduced ethnic identification and increased trust across groups (Depetris-Chauvin, Durante, and Campante 2020). Quasi-experimental evidence links these surges in national pride to lower rates of civil conflict, in a rare use of actual violence as an outcome. These effects are not uniformly positive, however: Rosenzweig and Zhou (2021) find that narrow victories worsened native attitudes toward refugees in Kenya and Tanzania. Likewise, Bertoli (2017) finds that nationalism stoked by sports victories can heighten interstate aggression. These results underscore the fluidity of ingroup-outgroup boundaries, which shift in response to demographic trends (Fouka, Mazumder, and Tabellini 2022) or elite framing (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Inclusive nationalism toward fellow citizens of different ethnic backgrounds can sometimes morph into exclusionary sentiment toward outsiders.

Given the ambiguous effects of nationalist surges on social cohesion, elite efforts to define national identities in inclusive ways become all the more critical. Elite messages emphasizing diversity's role in national success can mitigate the uglier aspects of nationalism. Such messages reversed anti-refugee sentiment caused by spikes in nationalism (Rosenzweig and Zhou 2021), and inclusive historical narratives stressing the contributions of minorities increased both the supply and demand for minority leadership in India, by strengthening the perceived centrality of Muslims to national identity (Haas and Lindstam 2024). Messages delivered by communal elites, like religious authorities,

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can be even more effective: radio messages delivered by trusted Nigerian clerics emphasizing forgiveness significantly increased support for re-integrating ex-Boko Haram fighters in various aspects of social, political, and economic life (Blair et al. 2021b), and priming a shared religious identity among Lebanese Twitter users on Twitter reduced sectarian hate speech, while appeals based on ethnic identity failed to do so (Siegel and Badaan 2020).

The public nature of elite appeals makes them well-suited to change social norms. Elite messages delivered on the radio waves or via prayer sermons (Sumaktoyo 2025) serve as a "rational ritual" conveying common knowledge (Chwe 2013), explaining positive effects of elite cues on perceived support for message-congruent norms among neighbors (Blair et al. 2021b). Elite messages can therefore foster acceptance not only through direct means, by endorsing pro-peace messaging among receptive listeners, but also through indirect means, by signaling a shift in social norms.

We should remain somewhat wary of relying on elite cues, however. Grossman, Nomikos, and Siddiqui (2023) find that even pro-peace religious messages spark backlash among particular ethnic groups in Burkina Faso, suggesting that priming some identities, like religion, may have unintended consequences on the salience of others, like ethnicity. At the most extreme end, elite messages that dehumanize outgroups can have tragic consequences on mass violence, as demonstrated by work on radio broadcasts in Rwanda (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Fortunately, evidence from Afghanistan suggests that the content of such communal messages drive effects on pro-social behaviors more so than endorsement from particular authority figures, pointing to the potential for disseminating pro-peace messages at scale (Condra, Isaqzadeh, and Linardi 2019). These findings underscore the need to carefully consider both the source and content of messages in efforts to instill long-term peace.

3.4 Transitional justice and healing programs

While strategies like elite messaging and intergroup contact can improve intergroup attitudes, they often do so without directly confronting the structural roots of conflict. In contrast, transitional justice programs explicitly aim to address those underlying causes by acknowledging past harms, promoting accountability, and pursuing institutional reforms. Understanding how these deeper, structural approaches resonate with public preferences is essential for boosting the legitimacy and effectiveness of transitional justice programs, while helping create a durable foundation for peace.

Which forms of transitional justice tend to garner public support? As victim-centered approaches gain traction, researchers increasingly use survey and conjoint experiments to examine preferences for punishment versus rehabilitation. These preferences vary widely: in Burundi, attitudes tend toward leniency (Samii 2013), while Iraqis are sharply divided between no punishment and capital punishment (Kao and Revkin 2023). The impact of victimization itself is inconsistent: exposure to violence increased retributive attitudes in Bosnia (Hall et al. 2018), reduced them in Colombia (Tellez 2019) and

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Syria (Fabbe et al. 2024), had no clear effect in Guatemala, Nepal, or Northern Ireland (Dyrstad and Binningsbø 2019), and only marginal effects among ISIS victims in Iraq (Revkin and Kao 2023). Even within the same context, findings diverge: in Sudan, exposure to violence increased support for secession—consistent with making the concessions needed for peace, or, conversely, wanting to avoid co-existence with the outgroup (Beber, Roessler, and Scacco 2014)—while in another study, direct physical harm led to greater optimism about peace and reduced support for execution (Hazlett 2020).

In addition to victim-level predictors of preferences, features of transitional justice programs themselves as well as perpetrator-level characteristics also shape attitudes. Colombians are nearly double as likely to support programs that enshrine leniency for military actors (46%) than for FARC members (25%) (Matanock and Garbiras-Díaz 2018), for instance. In Iraq, the most punitive preferences were reserved for those viewed as willing collaborators with ISIS (Kao and Revkin 2023). Yet even in these high-retribution settings, victims often support non-carceral alternatives, such as community-based reconciliation, as much as or more so than long-term imprisonment (Revkin and Kao 2023). Together, this body of work reveals that public support for transitional justice is highly context-dependent, shaped not only by personal experience and group identity but also by how justice mechanisms are framed and who they are applied to.

Attitudes toward post-war reconciliation are flexible rather than fixed, and respond to the influence of political, religious, and ethnic elites. Garbiras-Díaz, García-Sánchez, and Matanock (2024) find that Colombian citizens rely heavily on cues from political elites when deciding their stance on peace settlement provisions, and Revkin and Kao (2023) find the same in Iraq, estimating that 15% of Mosul residents who initially opposed reintegration of ISIS collaborators changed their stance when encouraged by tribal or religious leaders. Similarly, Fabbe, Hazlett, and Sınmazdemir (2019) show that framing Syrian refugees' experiences as "suffering" rather than "sacrifice" increases willingness to compromise with the Assad regime. Further, Tellez (2019) and Samii (2013) demonstrate that expectations of future political gains can lead victims in Colombia and Burundi to prioritize settlement over retribution. Settlement-seeking intentions are thus sensitive to future-oriented group interests, and can be induced through appeals from trusted authorities as part of transitional peace processes.

Several studies sit at the intersection of inclusive nation-building and transitional justice, revealing shared identity and education mechanisms at play. For example, Christia, Grigorieff, and Stanig (2012) show that reconstructing the iconic Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia, a symbol of unity, fostered social cohesion among previously warring groups. Other work emphasizes memorialization: a survey experiment finds that Holocaust education increased intentions to commemorate and counter antisemitism (Firestone, Ditlmann, and Turkoglu 2025), while exposure to Berlin's Stolpersteine memorials reduced local far-right vote share Turkoglu, Ditlmann and Firestone (2023). Testing a more immersive memorialization intervention, a field experiment deployed in

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Santiago, Chile, finds that being encouraged to visit the Museum of Memory and Human Rights makes university students more likely to support democratic institutions, reject institutions from the repressive period, and endorse restorative transitional justice policies regardless of their baseline ideological affiliations (Balcells, Palanza, and Voytas 2022). These studies indicate that state-led healing initiatives, when they acknowledge past harms and promote shared futures, can reduce prejudice and support transitional justice. Effects are weaker, however, when exhibits adopt deliberate neutrality, as was found in Northern Ireland (Voytas and Balcells 2025). Commemoration may thus require a unified national war narrative to emerge, or resources catered to visitors' asymmetric grief and guilt, to succeed.

Strikingly, a single study tests the causal effects of direct participation in truth and reconciliation commissions on intergroup relations.[2] In a cluster-randomized evaluation, Cilliers, Dube, and Siddiqi (2016) find that participation increased social capital and forgiveness but also retraumatized victims, exacerbating depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a related study, Voytas and Crisman (2024) find that victims of state-organized violence in Colombia, as opposed to victims of guerrillas or other armed groups, are less likely to participate in state-run victim registration drives, effectively excluding them from reparation programs. Two insights stand out when considering these studies in parallel: there exists a large selection bias when it comes to accessing programs that require confronting the past, and conditional on access, these confrontations are more successful than traditional contact at addressing the root causes of conflict. More research is needed to assess the average impacts of transitional justice programs, however, and the added effects of providing psychosocial support to encourage positive engagement among participants drawn from both victim and perpetrator backgrounds.

3.5 Taking stock of the peacebuilding research

Three shared mechanisms weave through different peacebuilding interventions, speaking to shared emotional, social, and cognitive pathways: contact, elite cues, and education. Contact-based interventions and truth commissions both rely on structured intergroup engagement to build trust between hostile groups. Truth commissions represent a politicized form of contact that directly addresses the roots of conflict, but may re-traumatize participants or deepen divisions. Traditional contact interventions, by contrast, focus on shared identities and positive experiences but often fail to shift deeper attitudes. Future research should directly compare political contact that confronts group grievances with apolitical contact that avoids them to better understand these trade-offs. Future work should also investigate whether the dampened effects of contact in conflict

2 Studies of transitional justice programs often take democratization and accountability as outcomes, e.g. Nalepa et al. (2019).

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settings are driven by this failure to address the structural sources of conflict or by the irrationality of trusting outgroup strangers—the goal of intergroup contact—in unstable settings. Where generalization is unlikely, more work is needed to understand whether localized social trust is nonetheless worthwhile, either by activating spillover effects or diffusing cooperative social norms (Hartman, Blair, and Blattman 2021; Grady et al. 2023; Mousa, Scacco, and Naumann 2023).

Lighter-touch forms of exposure to outgroup contact and narratives, like perspective-taking, edutainment, and parasocial contact, seem to be more consistently positive, but important gaps in our knowledge remain. More research is needed to link these interventions to real-world behaviors, particularly in post-conflict settings.[3] The mechanisms behind their success are also unclear: do edutainment effects stem from parasocial contact with outgroup characters or from the narratives themselves? Similarly, while parasocial contact with fictional characters can improve attitudes, these effects may not translate to real-world behaviors toward outgroups. Existing studies focus on positive contact with elite role models, leaving open the question of how negative or politicized parasocial contact shapes prejudice.

Second, elite cues play a powerful role across intervention types. They influence attitudes directly and, when delivered publicly, can shift norms by creating shared knowledge. Yet a core tension remains: civic identities rooted in shared values—'chronically accessible' rather than 'situationally accessible'—are better suited for broad social cohesion than identities based on immutable traits like ethnicity or religion (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993; Varshney 2003; Fukuyama 2006). However, appeals to identities based on fixed traits may resonate more strongly with certain audiences and prove more effective for mobilization (Siegel and Badaan 2020; Blair et al. 2021b). More research is therefore needed to understand when superordinate versus parochial identities are more effective in mobilizing prosocial behavior toward outgroups.

Finally, transitional justice programs and nation-building policies both rely on education to forge inclusive national identities. Commemoration programs and inclusive historical narratives, often delivered through textbooks and museum exhibits, both rely on education to legitimize new national narratives. Public education thus serves as both a mechanism and a unifying tool: it can induce intergroup contact in schools (Billings, Chyn, and Haggag 2021) and universities (Corno, La Ferrara, and Burns 2022), incorporate inclusive national histories (Haas and Lindstam 2024), and support empathy-based curricula (Alan et al. 2021).

3 Although not in a post-conflict setting, Alan et al. (2021) provide an excellent example of measuring real-world behaviors; using school administrative data to measure reductions in bullying.

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4. FRONTIERS: TOWARD AN INTEGRATED UNDERSTANDING OF PEACEMAKING, PEACEKEEPING, AND PEACEBUILDING

Bridging the fields of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding requires understanding how local interventions generate broader societal outcomes. Research on international peacemaking demonstrates that well-designed peacekeeping and mediation efforts can reduce violence and enhance stability. However, most studies focus on observational, macro-level outcomes like conflict recurrence and violence reduction, neglecting the mechanisms driving these results. Conversely, grassroots peacebuilding research provides robust, causal evidence of how interventions can improve trust and intergroup attitudes at the individual level, but struggles to show how these changes translate to sustained peace at the community level.

Research on international intervention has sought to bridge the micro- and macrofoundations of peace by increasingly shifting from global studies of country-level outcomes to more disaggregated analyses, often using fine-grained spatial data. This trend reflects a growing recognition that understanding how interventions influence local perceptions, attitudes, and relationships is critical to evaluating their broader societal impact. Survey data, lab-in-the-field experiments, and spatial data analysis have become prominent tools for examining micro-level mechanisms, but these approaches are often limited to specific empirical cases. As a result, findings from these studies can lack external validity, and there remains a need for methods that can better capture the mechanisms tying international interventions to local perceptions and trust, and heterogeneity in these responses.

The evidence base on grassroots peacebuilding, on the other hand, provides ample evidence on individual-level mechanisms perpetuating or disrupting conflict. Drawing on insights from social psychology, this literature has enriched multiple disciplines while addressing the ever-enduring policy question of how to build unity in diverse societies. Still, key empirical and conceptual gaps remain for the next generation of research. Most notably, the core outcome of interest—intergroup violence—is rarely measured directly. This is partly due to the dominance of individual-level interventions, which are easier to randomize, implement, and power statistically relative to clustered designs. Yet intergroup violence is a community-level phenomenon, creating an inherent mismatch between the level at which the interventions and outcomes occur.[4] Commendable examples of studies that successfully measure community violence include Blattman, Hartman, and Blair (2014), who measure ethnic violence using leader surveys, Collier and Vicente (2014), and Fafchamps and Vicente (2013), who leverage reports of electoral violence compiled by independent observers.

To move the field forward, peacebuilding research must demonstrate—rather than assume—aggregated effects on violence. One path forward involves forming

4 Because violence is rare, measuring it at the individual level often fails to capture meaningful intervention effects.

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partnerships with meso-level institutions, such as local governments or schools (e.g., Alan et al. 2021), which can also yield high-quality administrative data on violence outcomes (e.g., Blair et al. 2021a). In the absence of administrative data, researchers can turn to creative proxy measures such as observed cross-group market interactions, which get us closer to the outcome of interest relative to survey-based or lab-based measures of trust and discrimination, and have the added benefit of low measurement error (Grady et al. 2023). Finally, historical records can provide opportunities to analyze natural experiments or difference-in-differences designs centered on key policy changes, and access rich administrative records reflecting intergroup behaviors (e.g., Hangartner et al. 2019; Fouka 2020; Billings, Chyn, and Haggag 2021). Given the fragility of the research setting, we note that "do no harm" obligations suggest that slow, positive shifts in intergroup attitudes may be preferable to prematurely targeting behavioral change, especially given the prevalence of unintended negative effects among some subgroups (Tables 1 and 2).

Even without measuring community-level violence, individually targeted peacebuilding programs can generate more meaningful insights by assessing the resilience of treatment effects. Resilience refers not only to the persistence of effects over time, but also to their durability in the face of shocks to tolerance, such as inflammatory rhetoric from political elites or nearby outbreaks of violence. In studies of conflict settings, real-world events during the study period can serve as ethical and natural tests of resilience. Firestone, Ditlmann, and Turkoglu (2025), for instance, track antisemitic attitudes across multiple waves of a survey experiment during the Israel-Hamas war to assess whether the effects of Holocaust memorialization hold. Only by measuring long-term outcomes can we hope to understand whether individuals revert back to previous attitudes when faced with triggers in their social environment.

Critical for the integration of peacemaking and peacebuilding, it remains unclear whether public opinion meaningfully influences the success of peace negotiations, their implementation, or the long-term durability of peace. Public support for negotiated settlements or peacekeeping missions may also depend on how accountable elites are to their domestic audiences, and whether these elites actively work to cultivate grassroots backing for their efforts. Exploring these connections could help clarify whether building popular support is essential for lasting peace or whether elite-driven agreements can succeed independently of public buy-in. Inspired by conjoint- or survey experiment-based studies support for transitional justice programs, a similar approach can be taken to understand support for different peacemaking and peacekeeping arrangements at earlier points in the conflict cycle. Nomikos (2022), for an example, represents a rare study linking intergroup cooperation at the grassroots level to international peacekeeping interventions. To further align disparate literatures, studies of grassroots programs should measure support for pro-peace political parties and different peacemaking and peacekeeping arrangements as outcomes, as in Jha and Shayo (2019), who study how granting Israeli citizens shares in the Palestinian stock exchange influences voting intentions.

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Theoretically, we know much about the effects of conflict on attitudes, but very little about the effect of attitudes on conflict (Green and Seher 2003). Scholars have struggled to develop a clear conceptual framework linking grassroots interventions to communal violence; theory tends to connect stabilization programs, not peacebuilding programs, to enduring peace (Matanock 2020). An effective approach could focus on contexts where violence is driven by communal actors rather than organized groups, and therefore where grassroots peacebuilding is more likely to succeed. For example, conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in West Africa, ethnic riots in urban India, and tensions between displaced persons and host communities in Colombia provide promising ground for grassroots peacebuilding efforts. In such contexts, alternative dispute mediation institutions (Read and Michelson 2008; Blattman, Hartman, and Blair 2014), as well as educational campaigns intended to encourage their use (Paluck and Green 2009), offer a promising but underexplored avenue for peacebuilding. This approach has led to large and lasting reductions in violence stemming from disputes in Liberia (Hartman, Blair, and Blattman 2021) and increased the share of disputes resolved in Bangladesh (Mattsson and Mushfiq Mobarak 2024), even when the overall number of disputes remains unchanged. By combining the benefits of institutional reform with grassroots peacebuilding, these interventions also represent an appealing target for development aid.[5]

Even within the realm of local conflict, we lack a theory of conflict aggregation. Local disputes are often thought to escalate into communal violence by enmeshing wider groups based on ethnicity, reinforcing negative perceptions about these outgroups' intentions, and undermining the ability to commit to a bargain. We still do not fully understand when, how, and why this happens, however.[6] The influence of macro-level factors on aggression, like civil war and economic downturns, further complicates possible theories of conflict aggregation. Theorizing how conflict aggregates is the critical first step to understanding how peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding interventions can disrupt this cycle.

In contrast, efforts to improve relations between Rohingya and Bamar in Myanmar, Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank, or Uyghurs and Han in China face greater challenges because the primary perpetrators of violence are state actors or well-organized groups that typically enjoy state backing. One opportunity for both theoretic and empirical contributions may lie in electoral democracies that experience state-

5 For instance, a 2020 policy report commissioned by the British government found that local land commissions (Commissions Foncières or COFOs) were anecdotally effective at mediating conflicts between herders and farmers in Mali, but that they were often slow to get established, and local officials were not always aware that they existed (International Alert 2020). The same report concludes that "external support from development programmes" was needed to fund and expand COFOs. Note, however, that investments in formal policing yield mixed results on crime and citizen trust in institutions (Blair, Karim, and Morse 2019; Blair et al. 2021a).

6 An exception here is Nomikos (2025), which proposes a micro-level theory of conflict aggregation in communities with and without impartial UN peacekeeping forces.

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backed intercommunal violence (e.g. Israel, India). A possible theory of change could entail peacebuilding efforts like elite messaging, inclusive education, or mass media campaigns to sway voters away from hawkish parties on the margins (Table 1). This sort of electoral impact would likely require buy-in from civil society or other elites to achieve the necessary scale, however, which may be at odds with attempting to vote out populist incumbents. Settings where democratic mechanisms can translate popular prejudice into support for exclusionary parties and policies, even if at the local level, nevertheless hold promise as study sites. Relatedly, prejudice reduction interventions are more suitable in settings where taste-based discrimination ('old-fashioned prejudice') plays a larger role in sustaining conflict relative to structural grievances (Becker 1957). While reducing prejudice may be valuable in its own right, interventions aimed at mitigating spontaneous intergroup violence are more likely to yield tangible results and appeal to policymakers as pragmatic solutions.

Ultimately, developing an integrated framework for peacemaking, peacebuilding, and reconstruction entails asking research questions like: How do international interventions influence intergroup relationships and trust at the local level? Is peace more durable in communities that have experienced grassroots peacebuilding efforts? Can interventions aimed at individuals create broader societal resilience through spillover effects or shifts in social norms? How can elites use their influence to support peace rather than exacerbate conflict? Bridging micro- and macro-level approaches involves more than improving existing interventions, it demands a comprehensive framework that connects individual attitudes, community-level outcomes, and institutional efforts. Only by linking these evidence silos can we address the complex, overlapping challenges of building sustainable peace.

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