



INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

IFIT GUIDANCE NOTE

Violence Prevention: Understanding the Quiet but Critical Role of ‘Civic Diplomats’

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In contexts of crisis and conflict, public-facing actions and initiatives are indispensable but insufficient. *Secret and confidential* actions and initiatives are equally critical. Examples:

- 1. Back-channel mechanisms:** These are akin to political shock absorbers. A typical back-channel mechanism involves one or two high-level civic or political insiders from each side of a conflict divide who meet secretly to exchange info and intel. Back-channel mechanisms reduce the risk of dangerous miscalculations by helping conflicted sides to disabuse rumours, preview planned actions and test redlines.
- 2. Confidence-building measures (CBMs):** These are purposeful actions and initiatives to increase trust between conflicted sides. While they are sometimes carried out in public, they are most often done in private where there is no public cost to be paid. The best CBMs take the form of unexpected words and gestures of recognition or dignity toward an adversary that have the effect of transforming mutual perceptions.
- 3. ‘Good offices’ mechanisms:** These are third-party facilitation initiatives. They require heavy pre-consultation and sophisticated process design. A famous example is the Nobel-prize winning Tunisian Quartet: four national civic institutions – representing employers, trade unions, the legal profession and human rights – that came together to initiate a “National Dialogue” and mediate a dangerous national crisis between Tunisia’s political parties.

Leaders of civic institutions (business, labor, philanthropy, academia, non-profits) tend to be the initiators of secret and confidential actions and initiatives. They lead behind the scenes – sometimes alone, often in concert. We could call them *civic diplomats*. Three rules of thumb should inform their efforts:

- 1.** Secret and confidential actions and initiatives – and the relationships of trust that they rely upon – **need to be in place before an anticipated crisis**. At the peak of crisis, they can’t be mounted fast enough to stop the fall or even slow it down.
- 2.** Secret and confidential actions and initiatives require risk taking and **direct contact**. The initial outreach is often indirect but requires a clear intention of moving to direct. The alternative is to remain wedded to caricature, delusion and misperception, thus guaranteeing deeper crisis and conflict.
- 3.** Secret and confidential actions and initiatives need to be **pre-communicated and scripted down to the last detail**. Details like phone numbers, locations, names and roles cannot be left vague or informal.

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