ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: COVID-19 in Conflict Afflicted States

featuring
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interviewed by
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Full Transcript

Root of Conflict Introducers: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners can conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research Institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Yi Ning Wong: Hi everyone. My name is Yi Ning Wong and Sonnet and I are going to be your host for today's episode. Today we have Frances Brown here with us. Frances Brown is a senior fellow with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Democracy, Conflict and Governance Program. We're going to chat a little bit about how the pandemic has changed the political landscape of conflict regions locally and internationally. She recently co-authored Coronavirus and Conflict Zones: A Sobering Landscape, for instance.

Sonnet Frisbie: Thank you so much for joining us today. The report that you co-authored was really interesting. I really enjoyed reading it. Coronavirus and Conflict Zones: A Sobering Landscape. Could you maybe give us a quick rundown of the methodology you used in the reports, since we're a wonky data and conflict podcast, and some of the key findings?

Frances Brown: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks Sonnet. And it's great to be here with you and Yi Ning. Last month, my co-editor Jarrett Blank, who's a colleague at Carnegie Endowment, and I released this report and it's actually a compilation of twelve different essays looking twelve different conflicts in fragile states around the world. We asked us a variety of Carnegie experts to analyze their areas of expertise, their country of expertise, and look at how the coronavirus may affect these conflicts going forward. Then Jared and I, the co-editors put together a synthesis high-level report, which I believe you've read pointing out some high-level trends that we see that are shared among these various conflicts. It's worth noting that obviously, this is a really preliminary story. This report was drafted just as the coronavirus was really taking hold in many of these conflict areas and fragile states. So, some of it is speculative or some of it is trying to predict trends that we were just seeing the stirrings of at the start, but we still think it's important and informative because I think it can help us all collectively get our heads around how this virus might affect conflict dynamics in the coming months, and unfortunately, years. It's also worth saying, of course, there's a ton of local variation between these conflict areas and also among other conflict areas that we didn't cover in this report beyond these twelve.

Sonnet Frisbie: I'm going to put you on the spot. Can you list the twelve? And if not, that's totally okay, since you had a coauthor, but maybe the top four or five that you think about and worry about day to day.

Frances Brown: Absolutely. Yes. I think I can list the twelve, although not necessarily in alphabetical order. So, we profiled Afghanistan, the breakaway region of Eastern Ukraine, Iran, Libya, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. And Kashmir, and related India and Pakistan conflicts.

Yi Ning Wong: I would imagine the pandemic to really complicate the layer of local variation too, but broadly speaking, how have we seen ways in which violence or economic or health harm have increased in these countries?

Frances Brown: Yeah, it's important to know that, unfortunately, for many of these countries that we look at, the pandemic is coming on top of what were already a couple of crises underway. So, in many places we see the pandemic basically being on a collision course with preexisting violence or conflict crises and pre-existing economic strain. And now, unfortunately, the pandemic is exacerbating those trends in really harmful ways. So, a couple examples of this: we're definitely seeing these mutually reinforcing trends of conflict, health, and economics crisis in places that have a large number of conflict-displaced people or refugees. So, countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia. These are areas that already obviously had a huge displaced population, already had limitations on how they could work. Now, in many cases, they've been displaced yet again because of the virus, they fear the conflict, they fear violence in their areas, they fear working and they're unable to work from the virus. So, we're really seeing harms compound for some of the most vulnerable populations.

In a separate vein, we're seeing this trend of compounding economic conflict and virus crises in countries that are heavily reliant on oil revenues. And those of you who've been watching the oil markets are probably aware of how this is affecting a lot of these countries. So, countries like Libya, Iran, Venezuela, Iraq, heavily dependent on the hydrocarbon sector, and now they've got a fiscal crunch on top of the ongoing conflicts or political instability in their countries. And unfortunately, here again, it's the most vulnerable parts of the population who really suffer. Another element of this is, less than conflict zones per se, but just across fragile states where informal urban economy employment is a big part of the economy.

A lot of these jobs obviously can't be done remotely. So, we're seeing really huge and scary projections of how many people might lose their work and their income because of the virus. In Africa – there's just a couple citations on this that are actually beyond the compilation, but that I've encountered more recently – in Africa, an estimated 22 million people work in informal urban employment alone. And obviously, this can't be done remotely, so many millions of these could be pushed into poverty as a result. And then the final element of this to add is that because of the migration restrictions that are occurring now as a part of the coronavirus, many countries now are seeing a decline in imports that are really important for food security. So, one example of this is Afghanistan. It relies heavily on wheat from Kazakhstan. So, as border trade has been halted, as a result, and then it's now been put on a quota, that's had really damaging implications for food security. So, in short, it's a pretty bleak picture when you put together the virus, conflict areas, and economic harms.

Sonnet Frisbie: Right? And a lot of these regions have governments that don't have extremely high capacity, although I have heard some conversations about redefining how we talk about state capacity in light of government responses. But one part of my question is how do you see that compounding the response? And then the other part is, coronavirus has really brought into sharp relief, the importance of information and how information really is power in a crisis. And there have been a lot of debates, looking at data coming out of Africa, for example, is it true that they don't have a lot of cases? Is it just that they're unable to test and collect that data or is there a certain amount of even willful misreporting in some places?

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Frances Brown: Yeah, it's such a good point Sonnet. So, on governance capacity to respond. Yeah. This is a huge, huge challenge. A lot of these conflict zones that we were talking about already had really limited either government capacity or legitimacy, and that was already a challenge for their service delivery. Now we've got the coronavirus on top of it. So, what we're seeing is, the pandemic is providing a test of effectiveness for a lot of these governments, a lot of these formal state authorities and also for non-state authorities. So, a couple of examples of that, our collection looks at Kashmir. As you may know, late last year, the Indian government revoked Kashmir's special status. And a key rationale for that was that this would be a way to better deliver effective governance, effective service delivery.

So now the pandemic is here. A lot of residents are viewing this as a test to see if Delhi can actually deliver or not. So, we'll see, the jury is out. It seems like Kashmiris in general are at least accepting lockdown guidance as it occurred. Another example of this that our collection hits upon it is the breakaway in Eastern Ukraine, and our analysts there, Tom DeWaal speculated that if either Russia or Ukraine – who are the so-called parent states who are disputing claims on this area – if either of them does provide an effective service delivery response, that'll win them support. So, governance is a way to win popular support. And so, I think the jury's still out on a lot of these areas. You're absolutely right that a lot of these areas have disadvantages when it comes to service delivery, because they are conflict areas where there were already fragmented governance arrangements.

Already there wasn't a clear monopoly of state authority. So, a couple of examples of this: in Libya, we talk about how there's essentially two competing administrations. There's the UN recognized administration and government, but there's also an insurgent state of Khalifa Heftar who's been trying to exert his authority. So, when you've got that kind of bifurcation, it obviously makes responding to the pandemic that much harder because you've got internal borders, you can't do service delivery across, all kinds of issues of information sharing. So that's a real challenge.

We're seeing a similar dynamic in Afghanistan. There's the government of Afghanistan under Asher Afghani. And it's been going through its own political crisis with Abdullah Abdullah after a disputed election. But then you've also got the Taliban who controls large amounts of the population and of the territory. So here again, when you think about getting response out monitoring coronavirus cases, it's a real challenge when you've got this fragmented governance. We won't really know the full scope of this challenge for probably months and years to come.

One thing that's worth noting is that a lot of governments are recognizing that this pandemic is basically an opportunity to either demonstrate that they're effective or they will be viewed as ineffective. So, as a result, unfortunately, we're seeing some government authorities use concealments or disinformation as a tactic to deal with the coronavirus. So, unfortunately this has huge implications for human suffering. When you think about it, you can hide a pandemic for a little time, but you can't negate its effects forever. And so, as a result of this, these authorities were insisting there was no virus, and so obviously it was much lost time in terms of actually putting together a response. So, it's a really pernicious dynamic. So

Yi Ning Wong: You talked about the real time consequences of how governments handle specific information during the coronavirus. How do these strategies change? How non-state actors respond to conflict?

Frances Brown: Yeah, this is another really interesting trends that our report brought out. What we're seeing across the world is that a lot of non-state actors, so terrorist groups, armed groups, militias, gangs, a lot of them are really seizing on the opportunities provided by the pandemic to instrumentalize them for their own objectives. So, for many non-state actors, they've already had a pre-existing agenda and it might be exerting

control on a population, it might be expanding the territory they control, it might be for propaganda purposes. And now, the pandemic has provided them a new way to pursue those objectives. So, a few examples of that. One is the group ISIS, the global group ISIS. In mid-March, it published a newsletter that essentially was a call to arms for its fighters worldwide, to carry out attacks while governments across the world are under stress from dealing with the pandemic, while military counter-terrorism efforts are often either on a back foot or redeployed to barracks or otherwise stretched thin.

So, as a result of that, we've seen an uptake in ISIS-affiliated attacks in places ranging from Niger to Egypt, to Afghanistan, to Mozambique. We're particularly seeing this trend in Iraq, where ISIS in Iraq is taking advantage of the fact that some of the international counter-terrorism coalition has withdrawn, others have gone back to their bases. The Iraqi government is busy dealing with coronavirus. So, ISIS has seemingly expanded its operations, which is obviously really concerning. Other examples of this, we're seeing this in Colombia where there've been really troubling reports of armed groups and death squads taking advantage of the fact that the Colombian government is stretched thin, and they're murdering land rights activists with whom they've had a beef for a long time. Another kind of related trend to this is that we're seeing a lot of armed groups instrumentalize the crisis for propaganda purposes.

So, in Yemen, the Houthi movement has stated in their media that quote, "It is better to die a martyr and heroic battles than dying at home from the coronavirus." So, they're using this as a recruitment push. Meanwhile, in Somalia, Al-Shabaab has blamed the virus on crusader forces and kept up their previous pace of attacks. So, for a lot of groups, it's really an opportunity to expand recruitment, expand their propaganda. The second big point to make about what non-state actors are doing as a result of the pandemic has to do with service delivery and trying to get more legitimacy and more popular support. So, you remember before, I mentioned that a lot of governments are viewing the pandemic as kind of an opportunity to show their effectiveness. Non-state actors view that as well, and a lot of them are trying to bolster their own popular support in the light of the pandemic.

So, one example of this is in Afghanistan. The Taliban has launched its own public awareness campaign on sanitation. It has had its own very public PR campaign showing Taliban members managing the crisis, going door to door with temperature checks and distributing hand sanitizer. There are real questions about how genuine an effort this is and how much is just window dressing. But nonetheless, they're really trying to use this opportunity to make the point that the Afghan government isn't effective at governing and they, the Taliban are. Sort of parallel efforts in the Western hemisphere, in Brazil, there've been reports of drug trafficking gangs in Rio imposing a curfew to contain the virus. There are reports that in Mexico, many gangs, including the Sinaloa cartel, which is a major cartel, are handing out food and toilet paper packages to poor residents. And they're calling these packages, Chapo packages. So, in all these cases, this is a double-edged sword, because obviously, response and assistance are badly needed. Imposing social distancing is often an appropriate response, but these groups are obviously not totally or exclusively altruistic as well. They're really trying to demonstrate their own effectiveness, build support, especially in places where the state authorities may not have the most effective or capable response.

Sonnet Frisbie: And that's Chapo packages like Chapo Guzman, the Sinaloa leaders. So non-state actors, but also state actors are trying to demonstrate their effectiveness. And one thing in your report that I thought was interesting is they're not only trying to demonstrate it to their own constituents, their own people, but on the global stage, in multilateral settings, et cetera. So, maybe you could talk a little bit about the U.S. strategy and goals and the instrumentalization of the coronavirus. For example, China has been touting their efforts and how they were able to control the virus and the outbreak at home, and then setting themselves up as this example of how to respond internationally. And I think that's really interesting as far as a model to follow.

Frances Brown: So, you're right. Many nation States are instrumentalizing either the pandemic or the response to the pandemic to start their own objectives. So, China and the United States have obviously been locked in a war of words and a war of narratives over, first, who's responsible for the virus, and then who's helpful in dealing with it. China has had some particularly high-level coverage assistance outreach to many African nations, bringing in assistance to those countries and elsewhere, trying to make the point that they're helping on a global scale. The United States for its part has insisted that the virus be called the Wu Han virus, trying to ascribe blame. I think the bottom line from my perspective is that, unfortunately, framing this as a competition between the United States and China misses the point entirely. The virus presents a competition on a global scale, but the competition is between the virus on one hand and humankind on the other.

So, every moment and every policy decision that's spent trying to win this war of images is a moment that spent not trying to deal with the virus. We've obviously learned over the past few months that the virus doesn't respect borders. It doesn't respect immigration restrictions. It doesn't restrict respect, trade restrictions. So really the only effective response has to be a global and multilateral one, but unfortunately, we're seeing trends really in the opposite direction, especially from those two major players. But we're seeing a lot of hunkering down in general as looking inward and even among other countries as well as they try to deal with the pandemic at home. So, I think this is a trend that we will continue to see, many countries jockeying either to provide assistance and win prestige as a result, or to get other policy breakthroughs because of the way that the pandemic has really shuffled the deck on the global stage.

Sonnet Frisbie: And do you think that there should be policy changes as a result of the pandemic as far as U.S. foreign policy? So, you mentioned sanctions against places like Iran and Venezuela. Obviously, there are governments, as you said, who are looking at this as an opportunity rather than purely in the interests of their own populaces but, are some changes maybe merited?

Frances Brown: Yeah, I think on a case to case basis, that's entirely possible. I think the magnitude of humanitarian crisis that the pandemic is bringing up – combined with the fact that again, its ramifications are global, so they can't really be contained – I think it's worth rethinking, again on a case-by-case basis, and so, I don't want to prescribe for any blanket policy on, "Should the United States rethink particular sanctions regimes?" because I think there's a lot of considerations on them. And I think sometimes humanitarian exceptions are totally appropriate because often times, sanctions are meant to be punishing leadership or political decision-makers. If it turns out that they're causing suffering among the population, I think that's worth a serious rethink. So that's my general feeling. Overall, I think the biggest policy rethink that I would like to see the United States make is a move towards a more global, multilateral, cooperative response in many domains. And I think we're seeing the consequences of that in the pandemic. I think the framing of competition and great power competition is having really tangible, detrimental effects to our own U.S. interests in dealing with this pandemic as well as the rest of humankind.

Root of Conflict Introducers: We'll be right back. Hey, thanks for listening to UC3P, The Main Page. We know you're enjoying this episode and we really want to get you back to it as soon as possible. The problem is, if you're listening to this, there's a really good chance you haven't subscribed to the show yet. Don't worry. That's super easy to fix. Just go on your phone, pick your favorite podcast app and type in UC3P, or The Main Page. It's easy to subscribe and we know you don't want to miss any more episodes. Again, typing UC3P or The Main Page and subscribe. Now go tell a friend.

Sonnet Frisbie: You know, beyond great power and competition and all of these issues there are real people and real lives behind all of these issues as you've mentioned. Humanitarian workers are not able to get access

to a lot of the places where they worked before. I think we'd be really interested to hear - you have been a practitioner, work a lot with practitioners on the ground – what are you seeing during this pandemic for the people who are actually onsite?

Frances Brown: Yeah, it's such an important point. We can get in these lofty conversations about the big trends, but the harsh reality is that people on the ground are being affected in really concrete ways. And unfortunately, the international community's efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, resolve conflicts on the ground is being undermined in really concrete ways as well. So, a couple of examples of this: as you may know, Afghanistan was on the brink of a dialogue among many parts of the Afghan polity on what's the future for Afghanistan.

There was a preliminary U.S. Taliban deal, but then the next step really had to be a broader inter-Afghan dialogue. Unfortunately, now with the pandemic, it's stalled those talks. It's really hard to build trust remotely. It's really hard to conduct peace talks remotely. And the upshot that is that the incredible level of violence in Afghanistan, the incredible level of civilian casualties just continues on, continues on. So, without peace talks, this horrible, violent stalemate continues. Other examples of this kind of thing, of this impact on the people on the ground. We can look at Somalia. So, Somalia was on the brink of its own dialogue process between the federal government and regional states. It's a very fragile governments there and it needed a lot of in-person international support to these efforts. And now the international community had to downsize in a really dramatic way. So, there's just going to be much less in-person support as a result.

We're also seeing this kind of consequence in peacekeeping efforts across, particularly across Africa. So, in a lot of African union countries, there's lockdowns and distancing measures. So, it has made it a lot harder for new peacekeeping staffers to be deployed. It obviously undermines peace-building work as well. And then the final, huge way that this is affecting people on the ground, systems on the ground is just the modalities of aid distribution. Gone are the days where you can put five people in a Jeep and go somewhere. It's really undermined the mechanics of aid distribution. We're also seeing a really troubling trend in some places about perceptions of the inequities and distribution of aid and how this might incite more violence. So, as the coronavirus is bringing its own shift in aid in some ways, a lot of citizens, and we're seeing this in Afghanistan, in particular, citizens feel like it's not being distributed in a fair, equal manner, and that's led to more violence.

So, you see this compounding series of challenges as the virus takes hold that unfortunately are making international assistance efforts, which were already really hard. And then the final point to make on this is obviously a lot of these challenges in terms of doing the international community's work are pretty parallel to what we in the United States are facing in our own jobs. We've moved to remote work, et cetera, but the problem is in a lot of these countries, you can't really do that. You can do some aid delivery remotely from the air, but not much. And you can't do a lot of remote technology in a lot of these areas that have much lesser communications technology capability. So, it's really hard to think about how some of these realms could be shifted online or to a remote setting.

Yi Ning Wing: So, kind of looking forward. I know you mentioned that a lot of the report is still preliminary. What are the recommendations that we can take away?

Sonnet Frisbie: I think as we've covered, unfortunately, it paints a pretty bleak picture. I think I and my co-editor Jarrett really agreed that in most ways the coronavirus is making a bad situation worse in many conflict areas. But we also wanted to stress that that doesn't need to be the full picture, and going forward, we hope it's not the full picture. So, we do know historically that natural disasters when they occur, can potentially provide a window of opportunity or some positive disruption. It can shuffle the decks in ways that might be positive. So, one example we hear about a lot is the 2004 tsunami that helped a pathway emerge towards peace in Aceh.

That's one example. Unfortunately, the same 2004 tsunami did not lead to peace in Sri Lanka, which was also affected by it. So, you can see these things can go either way. But the point being, there are ways in which positive disruption could emerge from this, and what I'm going to be looking at, going forward in my own research, and many other colleagues are as well, is "What might be some of those positive ways, and how can we mobilize around them?" At this early stage and from the 30,000 feet view that I've discussed with you both today, it's really hard to predict what those opportunities might be and what chances might emerge in specific conflicts or specific fragile states. They will likely be very localized and specific to that area. You may have seen that the UN Secretary General issued a call for a global ceasefire a few weeks ago. Subsequent to that, we did see a number of arms groups or armed actors or claim that they were temporarily stopping fighting to facilitate humanitarian response. So, we saw this in places ranging from Cameroon to Central African Republic, to Colombia, to Libya, to Myanmar to the Philippines, to South Sudan, to Ukraine, to Yemen.

Many of these declarations of ceasefire have since been overturned or did not stick. This isn't to actually say that this is a rosy picture, but it just gives you an opportunity to sense that there may be opportunities. So, what I would like to see going forward, and what I'm going to be looking at is "How can we on the international community be prepared to respond to these positive opportunities when they do come? How can we be ready to capitalize on them? Or at least how can we be ready to stave off the worst outcomes that can occur in these conflict areas?" Do we need to think of a different way to monitor developments on the ground, especially as many of us have gone more remote in our own presence on the ground in these areas, especially as many journalists in conflict-affected places are either under siege, still in war or have to be reporting remotely?

So, how do we even get our information? A related question is, do we need to change our assistance modalities somehow to respond to this universe? Do we need more expeditionary negotiation support? Are there other ways we can look at technology to help address these challenges? So these are all the questions that I'm going to be looking at in the coming months, as I, in my own research, try to pivot from laying out all the problems that I've discussed with you two today, to some of the potential, if not, solutions, at least recommended way forward.

Sonnet Frisbie: And it sounds like that would be making the best of a bad situation. If you could look at this shock and see ways in which peace could break out in the midst of a really bad situation.
Frances Brown: That's the best we can hope for in this pretty bleak picture.

Sonnet Frisbie: Right. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today. We really enjoyed the conversation.

Root of Conflict Introducers: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Frances Brown of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Thanks to our interviewers, Sonnet Frisbie, and Yi Ning Wong and to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. To learn more about the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit thepearsoninstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.