This volume of case studies and policy recommendations in conflict prevention comes as a part of a three-year research and policy project by the International Peace Academy (IPA), From Promise to Practice: Strengthening UN Capacities for the Prevention of Violent Conflict. The project seeks to identify opportunities to strengthen the conflict prevention capacity within the UN system, with an emphasis on structural prevention, in particular development and capacity-building.

We hope readers of this volume will learn as much from the cases as we have. In the course of this project, we have come to understand how important, in conflict prevention, is the notion of partnership—between the UN, relevant regional organizations, key nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with useful local networks, and experts (academic and otherwise) who can help steer international actors away from those many mistakes born of ignorance. Recent “lessons learned” exercises make clear that knowledge and analytical capacities within key governments and international agencies have failed to keep pace with the growing complexity of international and internal transactions and also with the emerging understanding of the need for “specificity” in international efforts to prevent deadly conflict. Cookie-cutter solutions generally fail. Carefully crafted strategies aware and respectful of divergent political cultures, economic patterns, and societal structures stand a better chance. But they require much greater, concerted effort.

All of IPA’s research aims to inform decisionmaking at the policy level and to encourage the strengthening of institutional capacities to address preconflict, conflict, and postconflict situations in the UN system, within
regional organizations and arrangements, and within key governments, including those of the countries most affected and their neighbors.

The research project examines nine country cases where preventive actions have been taken, drawing upon experiences of the UN, regional organizations, bilateral actors, and NGOs. The project was informed throughout by insights provided by expert academics and practitioners, in particular from key experts within the UN system. The case studies, written by a diverse set of country experts, seek to identify what tools and strategies for conflict prevention are best suited to respond to specific risks and challenges in conflict-prone countries and regions. This research effort is itself an integral part of the broader project, which seeks, through analysis and policy-oriented networking, to examine key issues in conflict prevention. The project has examined the role of local actors and of regional actors in relation to the UN in conflict prevention, and the work of intergovernmental UN bodies in peacebuilding.

These cases point to the importance not only of context-specific preventive strategies, but also of comprehensive strategies. In particular, they make clear the linked nature of development and security issues, and the fact that neither “pillar” can be addressed in a vacuum. Rather, development strategies must be sensitive to their impact on the potential for conflict, and can be designed to better aid in preventing conflict and conflict escalation. Similarly, strategies oriented toward security issues are an integral part of stable development. The importance of building the capacity of national governments to peacefully manage conflict is a constant theme in the volume—many cases involve weak or unstable states struggling to control what in more established states would be normal social conflict. At the same time, the volume makes clear just how difficult it is for actors in the development domain to directly address more explicitly political “security” issues. Development actors, in the UN and the international financial institutions, as well as bilateral donors, are increasingly engaged in activities that seek to prevent conflict; the cases make clear the challenges they face as well as illustrate their myriad options.

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