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The Moral and Political Legitimations of War and the Complex Dynamics of Peace Negotiation Processes

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Abstract

This thematic issue investigates the moral and political legitimations of war and the complex dynamics of peace negotiation processes in contemporary international politics. It brings together contributions from political science, sociology, international relations, and political psychology to examine how military interventions are justified, how peace is negotiated or prevented, and how legitimacy is constructed, challenged, and transformed over time. The articles address a wide range of empirical cases—from Afghanistan and Ukraine to Cyprus and Mozambique—while engaging with normative frameworks such as just war theory, root narrative theory, and theories of authoritarianism. Several contributions interrogate the discursive and institutional mechanisms through which states, elites, and publics justify war, be it through historical analogies, legal claims, national myths, or emotional appeals. Others highlight the psychological and ideological underpinnings of militarism, including collective narcissism, authoritarian submission, and gendered dispositions toward violence. One central theme running through the issue is the fragility of normative boundaries between aggression and defence, and how these are negotiated differently depending on regime type, political culture, and strategic interests. Particular attention is given to the interplay of moral reasoning, political communication, and affective dynamics in shaping public support for war. In doing so, this issue contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how legitimacy is contested in wartime and peacebuilding contexts alike. It also offers critical reflections on the ethical limits of just war theories and the psychosocial conditions under which war becomes normatively acceptable to democratic societies.

Keywords

just war theory; masculinity; peace negotiations; political communication; political psychology; war justification; war legitimacy

1. Introduction

The justification of war and the negotiation of peace are among the most contentious and normatively charged phenomena in international politics. The reasons for going to war are almost always multiple and contested, and the conditions under which peace processes begin, evolve, or fail are shaped by political power struggles, legal interpretations, media discourses, and moral convictions. Particularly in contemporary armed conflicts, the legitimization of war has become increasingly complex, as both aggressors and defenders craft narratives that blend legal justifications with emotional appeals, historical grievances, and ethical imperatives.

This thematic issue explores the changing nature of war legitimization and the shifting boundaries between militarism and pacifism in contemporary political contexts. While classical just war theory distinguished sharply between offensive and defensive warfare, today's conflicts often blur these lines. The rhetorical claim to “defend” democracy, human rights, or sovereignty can be (and often is) appropriated by states pursuing aggressive goals. At the same time, societies and political actors that initially oppose warfare may come to support military escalation once clear asymmetries of guilt or responsibility are established. The normative architecture of warfare is thus both fragile and malleable.

Moreover, war itself is not merely a geopolitical phenomenon but also an existential and psychological event. It is experienced and processed collectively through identity narratives, moral frames, and discursive struggles over legitimacy. In this context, distinctions between aggressor and victim, just cause and propaganda, or resistance and extremism are not fixed but dynamically negotiated. In liberal democracies, where public opinion and legitimacy play crucial roles, the politics of justification are particularly salient. But even in authoritarian regimes, the public and symbolic staging of war has become a key mechanism of internal legitimization.

This issue asks: How do states, political elites, intellectuals, and media actors construct legitimacy for war and peace? What role do historical analogies, legal arguments, and ethical tropes play? How are discourses of war and peace shaped by regime type, institutional constraints, and international alliances? And what psychological mechanisms influence public and political support for war?

Drawing on insights from political science, sociology, international relations, and political psychology, the contributions in this issue illuminate the complex mechanisms through which war is legitimised and peace becomes politically negotiable.

2. Overview of Contributions

Alayasa and Nemec (2025) compare different models of post-war reconstruction in conflict-affected countries. While security and economy-driven approaches in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine often produced authoritarian regimes and further violence, Rwanda's sustainable development model fostered stability and recovery. The study questions the universal applicability of reconstruction frameworks and advocates for context-sensitive strategies.

Uyar (2025) analyses secret negotiations between democratic governments and rebel groups, demonstrating that the level of government representation crucially shapes rebel responses. Drawing on costly signaling

theory, this author's findings show that high-level delegates in covert diplomacy increase credibility and reduce violence, while low-level representatives tend to undermine trust. The article thus sheds light on the subtle mechanisms underpinning peace negotiations.

Sempijja and Mora Brito (2025) examine how colonial and post-colonial wars were legitimized in Angola and Mozambique. Their comparative study explores how newly independent states constructed justifications for violence and how international actors, especially the United Nations, influenced peace processes. Relying on archival material and discourse analysis, the article highlights the importance of historical framing and international adaptability in war-to-peace transitions.

Feilen (2025) investigates Germany's military engagement in Afghanistan and the struggle for legitimacy surrounding the Bundeswehr's role in the International Security Assistance Force mission. His neo-institutionalist analysis shows how the German state attempted to maintain legitimacy while avoiding the terminology of war, a reflection of broader societal pacifism. The article explores the dissonance between political communication, media coverage of casualties, and public expectations in democratic societies, offering insights into how legitimacy is contested and maintained in modern military interventions.

Among the contributions that take a psychological perspective on war legitimization, the article by Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. (2025) examines how collective narcissism and different forms of authoritarianism relate to beliefs justifying war. Drawing on a community sample from Poland, the authors develop a new typology of war justification—distinguishing between morally constrained “just war” principles and more permissive views endorsing unrestricted reasons or means of warfare. Their analysis shows that left-wing authoritarianism correlates with greater support for unrestricted war justifications, while secure national identification tends to align with more morally constrained views. Surprisingly, communal national narcissism is associated with lower endorsement of just war principles and neither religious affiliation nor right-wing authoritarianism predict moral war justifications in expected ways. These findings suggest a complex and sometimes counterintuitive relationship between ideological orientation, ingroup attachment, and moral reasoning about war.

Alexandrescu's (2025) contribution develops a dynamic framework for understanding the evolving legitimization of military interventions over time. The proposed Wartime Justification Trajectory conceptualises war legitimacy not as a fixed precondition but as a contested and shifting process, shaped by changing battlefield dynamics, political communication, and public reactions. Drawing on case studies from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, the article identifies four key phases—initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations—and shows how political leaders adjust their narratives as conflicts unfold. By combining discourse analysis with public opinion data, Alexandrescu demonstrates that the perceived legitimacy of war is subject to continuous renegotiation. This contribution offers both theoretical and empirical insights into the conditions under which wars retain or lose public support, thus enriching scholarly debates in international relations and political communication.

The complex interplay between spatial boundaries and discursive legitimations is at the heart of Ulas' (2025) study of the protracted Cypriot conflict. Drawing on root narrative theory and border studies, Ulas analyzes how the physical and symbolic dimensions of the Cyprus border have sustained a state of “no war, no peace.” The article traces how narratives of identity and otherness, often embedded in everyday discourses and

spatial arrangements, reinforce conflictual self-organisation among the Republic of Cyprus, North Cyprus, and Turkey. Rather than peace being portrayed as a shared societal good, it is often framed as an unjust or dangerous compromise—particularly when grievances remain unacknowledged. Ulas’ analysis shows how intractability becomes entrenched not only through political standoffs but also through the materiality of the border and the persistence of trauma, offering broader insights into how spatial configurations shape the discursive foundations of war and peace.

Hidalgo (2025) presents a fundamental critique of the just war tradition. While just war theories have long claimed to offer a moral framework for distinguishing legitimate military interventions from illegitimate aggression, Hidalgo argues that in practice they often serve to morally embellish military force and obscure underlying political interests. Rather than calling for absolute pacifism, he offers a nuanced perspective grounded in political realism, highlighting the inherent moral uncertainties of warfare. He contends that war, if ever justified, must be embedded within a broader theory of just peace—one that reframes the normative discussion away from the legitimacy of violence towards the preconditions and ethics of sustainable peace. In doing so, the article challenges both the philosophical coherence and the political utility of just war theories as currently conceived.

This thematic issue concludes with a contribution by Yendell and Herbert (2025) that revisits classical psychoanalytic and political-psychological approaches to the legitimization of military conflict. Drawing on a population-based survey conducted in the UK in 2023, the authors analyse a wide array of psychological and ideological dispositions—including authoritarian submission, political radicalisation, and normative attitudes toward violence—that shape generalised support for war. Particular emphasis is placed on masculinity-related aggression and latent sadistic traits, both of which emerge as powerful predictors of militaristic attitudes. The study draws on theoretical frameworks ranging from Adorno et al.’s (1950) authoritarian personality concept to Theweleit’s (2019) psychoanalytic interpretation of male fantasies and violence, illustrating how affective structures, gender anxieties, and identity-related pathologies underpin the normative acceptance of war. In doing so, the article not only revives key insights from the Frankfurt School and object relations theory, but also shows how war legitimization in contemporary democracies remains deeply entangled with authoritarian, affective, and psychosocial dynamics.

Together, the contributions in this thematic issue demonstrate that the legitimacy of war and the prospects for peace cannot be understood through legal or strategic lenses alone. They must be analysed as dynamic constellations of discourse, identity, ideology, and affect, shaped by historical contingencies and sustained by collective narratives that reach far beyond the battlefield.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

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Rebuilding Countries in a War and Post-War Context: Reconstruction Models and Their Impacts

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the results from the use of a model of reconstruction driven by security and economic concerns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, and to compare those results with the situation in Rwanda, where a different model of sustainable development was used to help the country recover from conflicts. The results suggest that the frequently used reconstruction model, based on security arrangements and economic benefits, did not deliver well in selected Arab and Islamic countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine). In these countries, the approach produced dictatorial regimes that led their societies into further violence and corruption. This indicates a risk that the security- and economic-driven model would also be ineffective in current conflict-affected countries such as Yemen, Libya, and Syria. The case of Rwanda presents an alternative approach based on principles of sustainable development. This model led to interesting social, environmental, and economic development and resulted in security and stability. The comparison of findings from several case studies supports the assumption that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” model of reconstruction.

Keywords

conflict-affected countries; local environment; post-war developments; reconstruction; reconstruction models

1. Introduction

Human history has been replete with wars and local and global conflicts. Such conflicts unfortunately continue to exist today and cause death, injury, economic loss, and social harm. Conflicts negatively affect the quality of life both in the directly involved countries and in the worldwide populace (for example, because of emigration).

Conflict and post-conflict situations are characterized by the magnitude of the environmental, economic, and social damage inflicted on local communities. Some conflicts can set societies back for decades.

This article deals with the problem of post-conflict reconstruction and possible models for achieving the best possible results. Since the end of the Cold War, conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding have risen to the top of the international agenda (Ramsbotham et al., 2024). Therefore, the number of academic studies dealing with the question has grown yearly. Almost 5,000 documents are displayed by the Web of Science search engine if the expression “post-conflict” is checked in abstracts of indexed texts, and approximately 300 publications on this topic have been published yearly in recent years. Is there still a chance to add to this discussion? The fact that new studies appear on the academic level signals that such space still exists if proper methodology, a proper sample, and compelling research questions are used. Many authors (like Richmond, 2011) try to provide added value by focusing on the pros and cons of the use of the “liberal” model in selected Arab and Islamic countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine), which are still only partly covered by the academic literature. However, these countries deserve specific attention because of the local socio-political environment.

Most of the literature concerned with post-war conditions and conflicts (Cooper & Vargas, 2008) has argued that the “liberal” reconstruction model applied by the US and its allies in Iraq (after 2003), Afghanistan (after 2011), and partly also in Palestine, is inspired by the post-World War II reconstructions of Germany and Japan. This model of reconstruction focuses on security and economic dimensions. It succeeded in the past, probably because of particular aspects of the cultural context of both Germany and Japan and the Western (mainly the US) appreciation and understanding of this context (Cooper & Vargas, 2008).

The question is why this model does not deliver success in entirely different cultural, political, and social environments compared to Germany and Japan, specifically in Arab and Islamic countries. As this problem is rarely investigated by academic literature, this study examines the model of reconstruction driven by security and economic concerns used in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, and tries to explain the core failures. As a benchmark, the study compares the analyzed results with the results in Rwanda, where a different model of sustainable development was used to help the country recover from conflicts. The authors are aware that choosing Rwanda as the benchmark is not the “perfect” option. However, it is impossible to find any fully successful post-conflict country in the Arab region to serve as the benchmark.

This study is important because it confirms that different geopolitical conditions indicate that the same ideas and models that have been used successfully in the past may fail if re-applied mechanically in a different environment. Such a finding is critical today when the international situation once again becomes somewhat complicated, and the “peaceful” period (Ramsbotham et al., 2024) after the breakup of the Soviet Union is definitely over, at least from a short-term perspective.

2. Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction

A substantial body of academic and professional literature investigates the different dimensions of armed conflict. The most frequently discussed questions are the sources/drivers of conflict, the transition from conflict to peace, the relation between the conflict and the quality of public administration/governance during and after the conflict, and the impacts of the conflict on the socio-economic situation in the country.

One of the most complex publications, providing the theoretical framework for the analysis of conflict and conflict resolution options used in this article, is the book by Ramsbotham et al. (2024). This book discusses a conflict's purposes, defines a conflict resolution model, classifies conflicts into symmetric (conflict arises between relatively similar parties) and asymmetric (conflict arises between dissimilar parties), and provides several other theoretical inputs for studying the topic.

Many other academic publications deal with conflict and conflict resolution. For example, according to Rummel (1979), international conflict can be caused by opposing interests and capabilities, contact and salience, significant changes in the balance of power, individual perceptions and expectations, a disrupted structure of expectations, and a will to conflict. Such conflicts might be aggravated by socio-cultural dissimilarity, cognitive imbalance, status difference, and coercive state power.

Several publications study civil wars as a specific type of conflict. Moyer et al. (2023) investigated the drivers of civil war by applying quantitative analysis to previous works focused on the issue. The independent factors used for the study were patterns of human development (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Fox & Hoelscher, 2012), economic development (Alesina & Rodrik, 1994; Sambanis, 2004), horizontal inequality (Forsberg, 2014; Rüegger, 2019), and political institutions (Goldstone, 2002; Saideman et al., 2002). Walter (2002) delivered a really comprehensive study, investigating why some civil wars end in successfully implemented peace settlements while others are fought to the finish. This study combines a historical sweep, empirical richness, and conceptual rigor to evaluate data on every civil war fought between 1940 and 1992.

The existing studies also deal with the relationship between conflict and public administration performance. Conflict as an extreme shock changes the status quo of public administration and its performance; however, well-performing public administration may have the capacity to affect the scope and scale of the conflict. Martseniuk et al. (2020) and Unger and Van Waarden (1999) argued that conflict can serve as a catalyst for future economic growth and public administration efficiency. Peters and Savoie (1996) considered as the main sources of incoherence to be the entrepreneurship of public sector leaders, interest groups, and empowerment of limited empowerment. Many authors have indicated that conflict is expected to have negative impacts on the state and on the public sector, as the general productivity of the public sector in conflict-affected countries is problematic: Skilled professionals emigrate in large numbers due to the conflict or are directly targeted by the conflict actors, disrupting the public sector. The problem of a lack of skilled staff was illustrated by Blum et al. (2019, p. xxi) in this quote from a civil servant in Liberia: "The capable were not available, so the available became the capable." Sound public institutions and effective governance are the fundamentals of progress, growth, and development in conflict-affected countries (Blum et al., 2019). However, the reality in most conflict-affected countries is a weak public administration performance, and many governance transformation initiatives fail in such states (Nemec et al., 2024).

Turning now to non-academic publications, for example a World Bank report (World Bank, 2003) stressed that crisis conditions, especially regional wars, create chaos, civil strife, and other extraordinary challenges that impede sustainable development efforts. The report also argued that war delays development, but development also reduces and delays the chances of war. This suggests that development can lead countries to become progressively more secure and to avoid violent conflict. On the other hand, failures of development (development that considers only the security and economic dimensions) make countries vulnerable to the trap of civil and regional conflicts that drain and destroy the economy and increase the risk

of future conflicts. The report added that civil wars attract less attention, but their impact extends across borders in terms of creating regional insecurity and instability, sending refugees across borders, and forcing regional and sometimes international powers to take a position in the conflict.

Conceptually, our study deals with efforts to achieve reconstruction and build stability in states and societies in war and post-war conflict environments. In the literature, such reconstruction refers to rebuilding the infrastructure, institutions, and capabilities—especially those that focus on security—of the conflict-stricken country and to achieving stability with allied countries (Beal, 2020).

Fukuyama (2006) pointed out that the term “reconstruction and rebuilding” was used for the first time after World War II to refer to the efforts of the US military to rebuild both Germany and Japan, with a focus on building economic infrastructure and state institutions and restructuring security institutions (“liberal model”). Fukuyama (2006) specifically noted that the goals for the occupied states were limited to restructuring the political system on democratic foundations that would serve their security. This “German-Japanese” reconstruction model has been used as a model for the efforts of the US and its allies to rebuild societies in cases such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. We discuss this model more in depth in the following sections of this article.

Other models and approaches exist, too. For example, Cooper and Vargas (2004, p. 3) proposed three basic pillars of post-conflict sustainable development, or “the triangle of sustainable development,” which gives balanced attention to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Galtung and Tisné (2009) argued that an anti-corruption approach that builds on local resources and competencies in distinctive ways and that emphasizes local accountability is more likely to succeed in stemming corruption and increasing participation and trust in the reconstruction process.

Many publications (such as Alayasa, 2021) suggest that the approach to implementing development in post-war societies should include increasing partnerships within these countries to design and implement development projects and to reduce dependence on private contractors to develop, implement, and evaluate projects, to improve economic investments, and to build economic and security institutions or to reform existing ones. These publications stress that there is a lack of recognition of the importance of taking a balanced approach to the economy, the environment, and the social dimension, as well as the importance of investing in building societies’ capabilities to support themselves, based on the concept of promoting sustainable development.

The issue of post-conflict reconstruction is covered in many reports by international organizations and think tanks. In a clear criticism of the strategies of the World Bank and the major countries for reconstruction and development in the post-war environment, the Brookings Doha Center carried an article that originally appeared in the Huffington Post entitled “The Case for a Regional Reconstruction Strategy for the Middle East,” which stated: “There is an urgent need to find new ways of inducing development through international engagement” (Barakat, 2016, p. 1). This analysis implicitly acknowledged the failure of the model promoting reconstruction by focusing on security and the economy. The fact that the World Bank’s previous strategies did not deliver is even accepted by the World Bank itself—the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank report (2020, p. xi) states:

Over the past 30 years, reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts have tended to follow state-building models, with a consolidated state centrally administering resource mobilization and allocation. The protracted conflicts in MENA, characterized by prolonged fragility, call this central state-building approach into question.

2.1. The German-Japanese (“Liberal”) Reconstruction Model

After the end of World War II, the US, through the Marshall Plan, embarked on the reconstruction of Europe and the countries devastated by the war. The project aimed not only at rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by war, especially in Germany and Japan, but also at changing and developing cultural and social aspects such as the political system and social life. The project was aimed at changing economic, social, and political conditions so that democratic institutions could function well (McCullough, 1992).

Cooper and Vargas (2008) argued that the secret of the success of the German-Japanese reconstruction model is the use by the US administration and its international allies of vast capabilities and resources—including government departments, state bureaucracy, and the transfer of expertise—to help the two countries achieve democratic and economic transformation. Cooper and Vargas (2008) acknowledged that the ethnic and religious compositions of Germany and Japan played important roles in the success of the reconstruction process, in addition to the desire of the US administration and its allies to bring about radical political, social, and economic change in the two countries to ensure their transformation into democracies. This approach led to both countries becoming economically successful and stable nations and guaranteed that they did not return as international powers threatening the international system.

The model of rebuilding Germany and Japan focused on the main objectives of the US leadership, which were the democratic transformation and the reduction of the level of armaments. The US harnessed all its capabilities to support the government and society in both countries, which led to a radical change in their structures and eventually resulted in the existence of two democratic states with high and stable economic and social power (Alayasa, 2021).

The continued presence of military bases in both Germany and Japan is not generally described, at least officially, as direct military occupation. Rather, these bases are often seen as protection bases that have little direct impact on the local society in both countries. Historically, there has been some friction and abuse; this has mainly been viewed as resulting from the behavior of individuals, and the US administration hastened to rectify these events and generally acted as an ally, not as an occupier. For example, the US government declared mourning and a one-month curfew for its soldiers stationed in Okinawa, Japan, following the murder of a Japanese woman by a US military worker (“Okinawa rape and murder,” 2017).

Neeson (2008) argued that the reconstructions of Germany and Japan were two of only four successful cases of US external interventions classified as reconstruction and stabilization operations. Describing the model used by the US in Japan, Neeson (2008) stated that General MacArthur, commander of the allied forces in Japan, in a gesture of respect for Japanese traditions and culture, did not subject the emperor of Japan to trial after the war, but instead removed him from political life while keeping him in an honorary position. In Germany, the denazification proceeded cautiously; prominent military leaders were tried, millions of Nazi activists and business people were pardoned, and state administration personnel were retrained and rehabilitated.

Many academic and professional studies deliver criticism of the “liberal” reconstruction model, which was applied relatively successfully in Germany and Japan after World War II but seems to fail in most, if not all, other cases. The “liberal” model rests on several pillars, especially on opening up to the global market, holding democratic elections as early as possible (democratic governance), human rights, and the rule of law (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2007). However, at least two main pillars of this model are somewhat problematic: Fully opening the domestic economy might be very risky for some countries, and democratic elections do not assure future democracy, as the opposite such opening may lead to violence and instability because “the civil war has ended, but inter-group antagonisms remain undimmed, political participation rates are low, and any peace dividend is unevenly shared” (Mac Ginty, 2007, p. 471).

One of the most visible criticisms of such a “liberal” model can be found in Richmond (2011). Richmond (2011, p. 26) states the following:

The key feature of the dominant liberal approach to peacebuilding, which has been mainly responsible for its recent elision with statebuilding, represents a neoliberal marketisation of peace, rather than engagement with the agents and subjects of this peace, even on more traditional liberal terms.

Almost all authors stress that the top-down implementation of “Western values” into the specific environment of most conflict-affected countries does not deliver, as both local contents and local culture are not reflected (respected or similar). Local actors are not engaged, which produces an “artificial form of civil society, disconnected from local political, social, culture, customary and economic processes and expectations” (Richmond, 2011, p. 26).

3. Methodology

The goal of this research is to examine the results of a “liberal” model of reconstruction driven by security and economic affairs used in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, and to compare those results with the situation in Rwanda, where a different model of sustainable development was used to help the country recover from conflicts. The authors are fully aware that similar studies already exist (for example, Guttal, 2005); however, the selected sample of countries has not yet been directly compared to our knowledge.

As in many other similar studies, we applied a multiple case study method to achieve our defined goal. The major advantage of this research method lies in cross-case analysis. This method shifts the focus from understanding a single case to viewing the differences and similarities between cases. The aim is not to conduct more case studies, but to develop a theory about the factors driving differences and similarities (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021, pp. 171-186).

Four countries were selected: Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Rwanda. The selection is based on several aspects. As the focus is the Arab/Islamic region, we had to choose from many countries in this region affected by conflicts. Due to article size constraints, we decided to limit the countries to be studied to three. The first aspect determining the selection was the number of deaths and affected people. The second aspect was that the model used for the post-conflict reconstruction could be determined without doubt. The final aspect related to the effective visibility of results from the use of the concrete reconstruction model. Moreover, we wanted to cover more types of conflict (Afghanistan—a combination of invasion and civil war;

Iraq—invasion; and Palestine—liberation). All these countries represent examples where the post-war reconstruction somehow failed; moreover, in Afghanistan, and especially in Palestine, the conflict continues. As there is no obvious example of successful post-conflict reconstruction in the Arab/Islamic region, we had to look at other continents, with Africa as the best (closest) option. From the most frequently mentioned “success” examples, such as Mozambique, Rwanda, and Uganda, we decided to select Rwanda, considering the size of the conflict and the fact that the results seem relatively sustainable.

The study has an exploratory character and is based on a careful study of previously published analyses and data. The research questions are the following:

- RQ1: What kind of model was used in reconstructing Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine?
- RQ2: What are the results of applying such a model?
- RQ3: What kind of model was used in reconstructing Rwanda?
- RQ4: What are the results of reconstructing Rwanda?
- RQ5: What can be learned from these cases?

To respond to RQ1 and RQ3 we use the secondary literature review method and construct our own figures to present the main features of models applied in the evaluated countries. To determine the “results” of reconstructing the country (RQ2 and RQ4), we also use the secondary literature review method, and as the measurable outcome, the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann et al., 2010). This choice was relatively simple—we are unaware of any other long-term series database mapping governance performance from a comparative perspective. Like any other international ranking, we know that the Worldwide Governance Indicators are imperfect. However, this source is entirely sufficient to determine general trends. RQ5 is responded to in Section 6.

4. Case Studies

4.1. Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, international forces led by the US empowered armed group, called the Northern Alliance, a military alliance between a minority of Uzbeks and Tajiks who helped US and allied forces in their war against the Taliban. In June 2001, the leadership of the coalition forces led by the US met with the leadership of the Northern Alliance in the German city of Bonn and signed an agreement under which the Northern Alliance took control of the capital, Kabul, with the help of the international coalition forces; the Northern Alliance also controlled the transitional government that was formed according to the Bonn Agreement, especially the important ministries such as defense, foreign relations, and interior affairs. President Hamid Karzai was chosen from the Pashtuns who make up the majority of the population of Afghanistan. The transitional government worked with the help of the coalition forces to form a *Loya jirga* (council) as a transitional parliament, the membership of which was selected to reflect tribal bases maintained by warlords who supported the goals of the coalition, not on democratic grounds (Neeson, 2008).

The results from these arrangements cannot be counted as positive. In Afghanistan, corruption and the waste of public money (especially aid funds for reconstruction and stabilization) reached their peak in 2010, according to the report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2010). The widespread corruption in Afghanistan was also confirmed by the 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index

from Transparency International published in January 2016, in which Afghanistan ranked 166 out of 168, as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

The report indicates that “6 citizens out of 10 are forced to pay bribes to facilitate their government transactions, as corruption eats away at the state’s structures, and warlords are considered a major cause of corruption” (Transparency International, 2015). In the same context, 15 years after the start of the reconstruction process, the 2017 report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction again indicates the existence of administrative and financial corruption in the reconstruction process itself, including the involvement of some retired US military personnel who were not subject to accurate accountability. Corruption also affected US soldiers (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2017). However, the situation seems to have improved recently (Figure 1).

In general, though, the performance of Afghanistan, as measured by the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann et al., 2010), does not show any systematic progress (Figure 1).

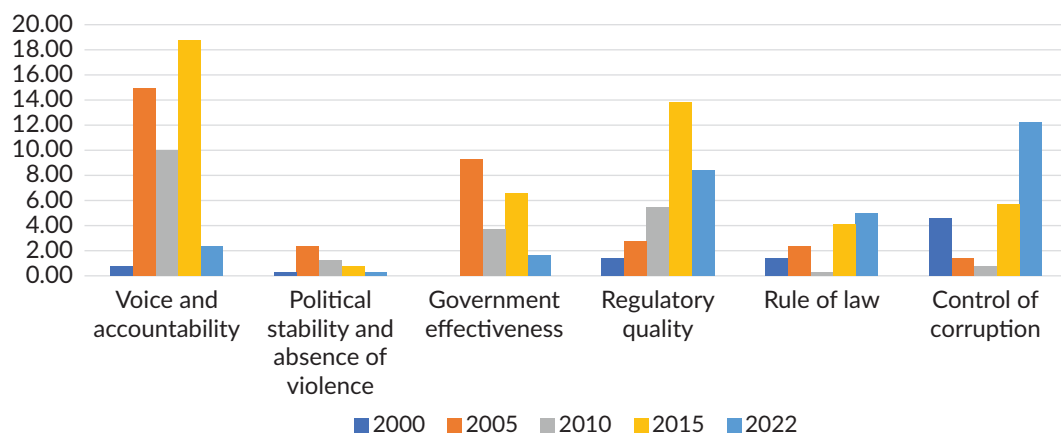


Figure 1. Worldwide Governance Indicators for Afghanistan, 2000–2022. Source: World Bank (n.d.). Note: “Voice” is the official name of the indicator as defined by the World Bank.

The final outcome of this case is really negative. In mid-2021, the Taliban rapidly started capturing major cities in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US and NATO forces. By August 2021, following the sudden collapse of the Afghan army and the escape of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the Taliban controlled Kabul. The investments that were made by the US and other international actors in Afghanistan, particularly in the security forces, just disappeared, because of the corruption and lack of accountability that Afghanistan experienced during the years of reconstruction (Bateman, 2023).

4.2. Iraq

The Saddam Hussein era ended in 2003, with international intervention and occupation of the country. After the fall of Baghdad and the occupation of Iraq, the administration of US President George Bush, Jr., initiated the dissolution of the former Iraqi army and later supported an inequitable political process in which the leaders of the opposition that helped the coalition forces participated, while all those who opposed US policies were excluded. De-Baathification (eradicating Baath Party members), which affected hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of Iraqis, deprived them of public jobs and excluded them from decision-making centers (Katzman, 2009). In 2005, national elections were held, and a new democratic constitution was adopted.

Reconstruction and rebuilding stability in Iraq did not provide real development, security, or stability. Despite billions of dollars spent on training and qualifying the army and security forces, civil peace and security still posed the biggest challenge. In 2014, a large part of Iraq's territory fell under the control of ISIS. To fight ISIS, the Iraqi government was forced to seek help from militias outside the scope of the army and internal security forces. This pushed the country into a new round of revenge and violence.

Moreover, the 2021 parliamentary electoral process culminated in low voter turnout, followed by demonstrations in some areas of the country, including Baghdad, indicating a persistent gap in trust between citizens and state institutions. A United Nations Development Program report concluded that the social contract remained fractured (United Nations Development Program, 2021).

Iraq continues to be one of the most fragile countries globally. Institutional capacity in Iraq is weak as a result of the decimation of the state following wars and sanctions and the de-Baathification decisions made by the Coalition Provisional Authority, which severely hampered reconstruction efforts. Early decisions by the Coalition Provisional Authority sharpened sectarianism and introduced a zero-sum approach to reconstruction efforts. Failure to stem the growth of sectarian groups within ministries weakened institutions, slowed decision-making, and "transformed corruption into a political agenda" (Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, 2013, p. 13).

Widespread corruption was exacerbated by a weak rule of law and a massive inflow of resources. A report issued by the Iraqi Commission of Integrity in December 2017 indicated that the cost of corruption had amounted to about \$110 billion since the occupation of Iraq and the start of the reconstruction process. The report mentioned some evidence and indicators of corruption, such as "the existence of cases of non-disclosure of financial assets among senior state employees, including 273 deputies in the Iraqi Parliament, including the Vice President of the Republic" (Iraqi Commission of Integrity, 2017, p. 8). However, as in Afghanistan, the most recent data signal specific improvements regarding the control of corruption.

In general, though, the Worldwide Governance Indicators for Iraq show that the country struggled to improve the indicators between 2000 and 2022 (Figure 2).

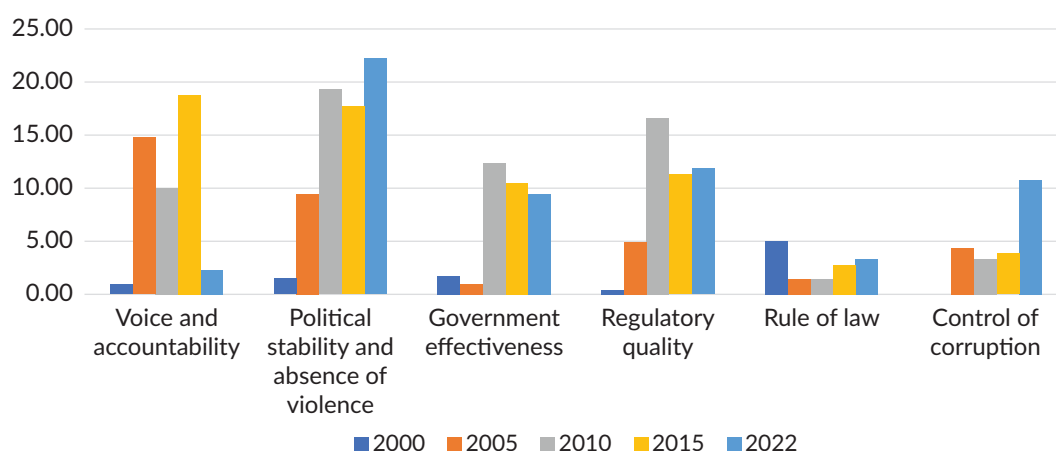


Figure 2. Worldwide Governance Indicators for Iraq, 2000–2022. Source: World Bank (n.d.).

4.3. Palestine

Palestine is an unusual case of conflict, as it has been in “semi-permanent” conflict with Israel since 1948. However, the mass destruction of the country happened during the four most recent wars, in 2008, 2012, 2014, and since October 2023 when the latest and the longest war started. The Palestinian public administration system came about as a result of a unique transformation from military resistance movements, which historically formed the Palestinian Liberation Organization, into a civil government represented by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The Palestinian Liberation Organization was established in 1964 as a political and military organization that represented Palestinian people inside historical Palestine and in the diaspora. Between 1967 and 1994, all Palestinian civil affairs were controlled by military orders and managed by Israel. The Oslo I Accord led to the establishment of the PNA in May 1994. In 1996, the first general election for the presidency of the PNA and the Palestinian Legislative Council took place. However, the PNA was not granted full sovereignty according to the Oslo I Accord. The PNA was granted full control over an area that constituted just 17% of the total area of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Israeli forces have the right to act in this area when there is any security need). In other areas, which comprise 23% of the land, the PNA has control over civilian affairs, while security matters remain in the hands of Israeli security forces. In the rest of the land, both security and civil administrative affairs remain in Israeli hands. This territorial arrangement has prevented any real reconstruction of Palestine. Because of this limitation, the government performance of Palestine before 2023 shows problematic trends (Figure 3).

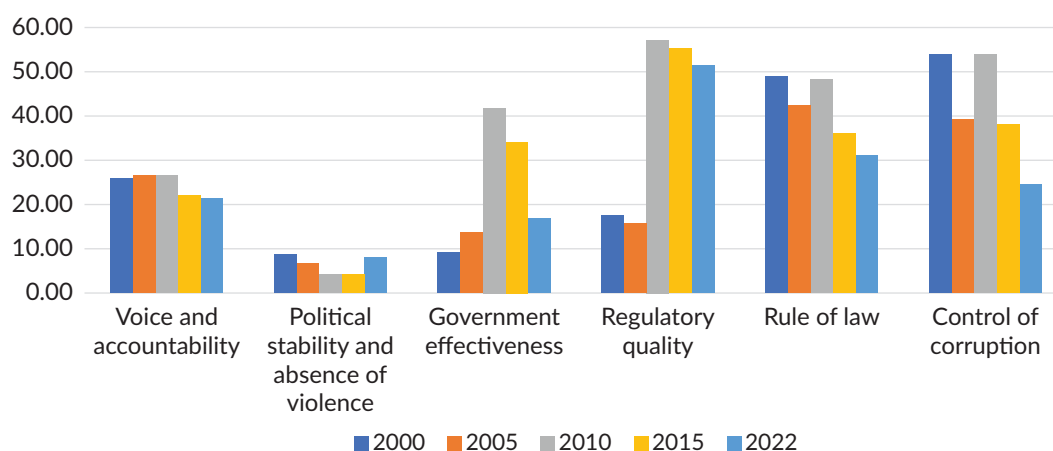


Figure 3. Worldwide Governance Indicators for Palestine, 2000–2022. Source: World Bank (n.d.).

Similar to Afghanistan, the most recent developments have brought reconstruction efforts back to the beginning. The current war started in 2023, and it has destructively affected Palestinian society in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In addition to the arrest of thousands of people (men, women, and children), thousands of homes and infrastructure have been totally or partially destroyed. Table 1 shows the situation in November 2024. Moreover, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has disrupted economic activities, leading to unemployment and poverty.

Table 1. Results of the current war in Palestine (as of November 2024).

Item	Gaza	West Bank	Notes
Killed (total)	44,383	301	
Injuries	109,179	3,365	
Children killed	17,029	70	More than 8,000 are missing in Gaza
Women killed	11,558	n/a	
Journalists killed	177	0	
Houses destroyed	360,000	n/a	69.1% of houses in Gaza
Schools destroyed	300	0	
Mosques destroyed	610	0	
Churches destroyed	3	0	
Bombings	100,000 tons	unknown	

Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (n.d.).

4.4. Rwanda

The civil war in Rwanda started in 1990, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel group composed of Tutsi refugees, invaded northern Rwanda. In 1993, the Arusha Accords were signed; a ceasefire started, but it ended on April 6, 1994, when the Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana was killed. The Rwandan genocide began within a few hours after this assassination. Over the course of approximately 100 days, between half a million and a million people were killed. After this, the RPF restarted their offensive; they had taken control of the whole country by mid-July 1994. When the RPF took over, approximately two million people fled to neighboring countries. The RPF-led army was later a key aggressor in the First and Second Congo Wars (Jessee, 2017).

The people of Rwanda embarked on a rebuilding process driven by a shared *Vision 2020* based on three fundamental pillars: unity, ambition, and accountability. Rwanda's vision focused on five pillars of sustainable development (United Nations, 2019, p. 23): human capital development (quality of education and learning, and progress on nutrition); inclusive economic growth; sustainable environment and climate change; good governance and access to justice; and domestic resource mobilization, prudent debt management, and macroeconomic stability. Rwanda has adopted post-genocide strategies based on institutional reform, justice and accountability, economic reconstruction, reconciliation programs, security and stability, ethnicity and political dynamics, and local-level rebuilding (Rahman, 2025).

Regarding the results, the *Rwanda Voluntary National Review* report from 2019 (United Nations, 2019) indicates that since 2000, the country has registered inclusive growth, averaging 8% annually and leading to millions being lifted out of poverty, and good progress in all development sectors. Moreover, Rwanda has integrated the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the SDGs into its national development agenda through the draft *Vision 2050*, *National Strategy for Transformation* and related strategies at different levels.

Rwanda also adopted the international sustainable development strategic theme grounded in the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Agenda which is Leaving No One Behind. Women, youth, and people with disabilities are represented at all levels of decision-making, with the highest African parliamentary

representation of women (61.3%) and an equal number of women in the cabinet. The extremely poor are supported through social protection programs. Rwanda is also piloting a comprehensive refugee response framework for the socio-economic inclusion of refugees (United Nations, 2019).

However, it is necessary to mention that Rwanda prioritized national development (launching programs that have led to development on key indicators including healthcare, education, economic growth, and other sustainable development areas); however, President Kagame's regime is considered authoritarian, and human rights groups accuse him of political repression (Weerdesteijn, 2019).

The Worldwide Governance Indicator trends for Rwanda confirm that the country's reconstruction model delivers results (Figure 4), although some recent stagnation is visible.

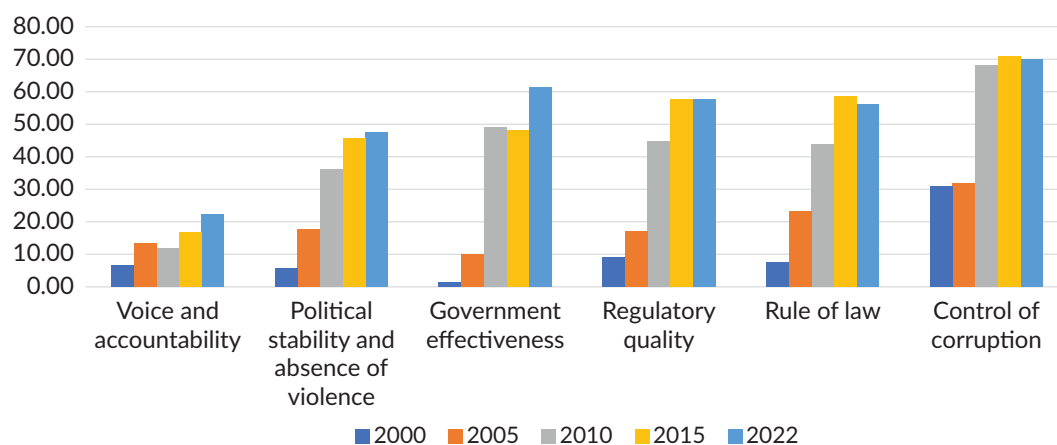


Figure 4. Worldwide Governance Indicators for Rwanda, 2020–2022. Source: World Bank (n.d.).

5. Research Results

This study used a multiple case study method based on data from four countries as the background input for a discussion of post-war reconstruction models. The five research questions, RQ1–RQ5 (see Section 3), are answered in the following sections.

5.1. The Model of Rebuilding Stability in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine

Cooper and Vargas (2008) suggested that the processes of rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan were nothing more than foreign policy tools to achieve security and advance the economic goals of the US. They asserted that the reconstruction model that had been used in Germany and Japan was adopted with the aim of establishing security and economic stability only in limited areas of Iraq and Afghanistan, accompanied by the building of institutions that achieved the required objectives while falling short of achieving the level of development, democratization, or positive change in society that had been reached in Germany and Japan.

Figure 5 shows the main features of this reconstruction model, using four main axes, namely: involving (US and allied) military teams in direct occupation of regions, including major cities and capitals; providing humanitarian relief and support; providing political support for groups and parties supporting the objectives of the coalition; and providing military support (training and equipment) to the security forces and the army.

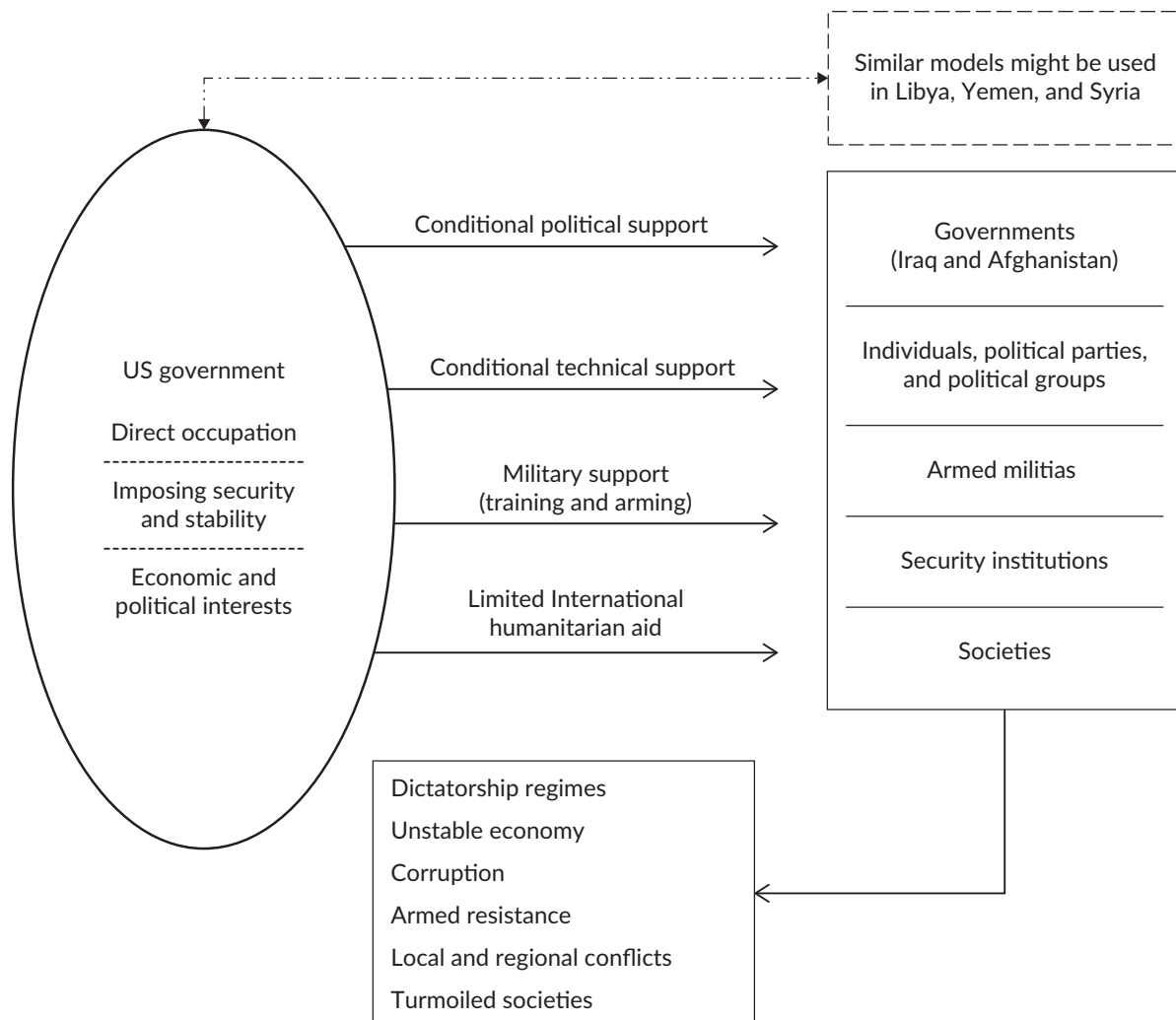


Figure 5. The model of reconstruction and stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan. Notes: Dotted lines mean that the cases do not exist now but could exist in the future because it has similar conditions; all information mentioned in different boxes are related to Iraq and Afghanistan (e.g., armed militias = armed militias in Iraq and Afghanistan).

This model marginalizes or distorts the expected post-war development process; it also concerns incompatible or inconsistent elements, such as building corrupt armies and institutions. The government is weak and lacks legitimacy, and political parties and groups are feuding, sometimes with support from armed militias operating outside the scope of the government. All of this creates a fertile environment for the growth of corruption, the systematic waste of public money, and the obstruction of sustainable development, if any.

A very similar model was applied in Palestine, without direct US military involvement. In Palestine, the US, the United Nations, and other international players have produced security- and economic-based peace plans, including the Road Map for Peace (2003), Lt. Gen. Dayton's efforts to rebuild the Palestinian security forces (2010), and the John Kerry Parameters (2016). US president John Kerry's 2013 plan was criticized for focusing on "economy for peace."

This model, as applied today, serves mainly elites and large corporations. The reconstruction of physical assets is in the interest of companies that win reconstruction contracts and of the lobbies behind these companies that would enjoy applying the same model in the future. It is also in the interest of regimes ruling in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. By comparison, the people of these countries pay a heavy price for the occupation, and sustainable development guaranteeing a decent life for the current and subsequent generations is absent.

5.2. Results of the Model of Rebuilding Stability in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine

The case studies document that despite the hundreds of millions of dollars paid by the US administration and its allies in the process of rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq, the result was not satisfactory to any of the parties; rather, it was plagued by administrative and financial corruption in both countries. The inevitable result of the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan was the growing hatred of the official political system in both countries because of the dictatorial approach taken by the government and the exclusion and marginalization of key constituents, which also led to the presence of strong and armed oppositions to both governments and to destabilized civil and social peace. The focus of development investments was limited to rebuilding security forces and institutions that worked in support of the goals of the coalition and the US governments and parties supporting it.

Both countries entered a new cycle of violence and conflict, with ISIS taking control of large parts of Iraq in 2014. The Taliban took over Afghanistan after the sudden collapse of the Afghan army in August 2021 and the abrupt withdrawal of the US army. The Afghan army, despite the billions of dollars spent on its preparation and training, did not manage to defend its positions.

The results in Palestine are very similar. The compact Palestinian state territory does not exist, and the territory ruled by the Palestinian government represents “bits and pieces” of land, cantons surrounded by territories partly or fully controlled by Israel. The quality of governance in Palestine improved slightly during the previous decade, but the 2022 data show its critical deterioration. The new war started in 2023 and almost fully destroyed major parts of the Palestinian territory. The end of this war was still not certain in late 2024 when this article was prepared.

5.3. Rwanda: The Alternative Model—Sustainable Development Model That Leaves No One Behind

In contrast, Rwanda applied an alternative model: one of sustainable development. This model is characterized by focusing on providing solutions that address the problems of the present post-war conditions and go on to ensure the opportunity for future generations to live a decent and sustainable life. The model also focuses on the “triangle of sustainable development” that covers economic, social, and environmental development in a balanced manner (Cooper & Vargas, 2008, p. 6).

Figure 6 shows the model of sustainable development in the post-war period. This model is based on the assumption that internal leadership (national and local) is more capable of understanding and responding to the economic, social, and environmental needs of the society and adopting realistic overlapping solutions to deep problems imposed by the conditions of war, such as the destruction of infrastructure (food, water, air, soil, etc.), the economic structure (job opportunities, , business environment, etc.), and, most importantly, social

conditions (such as death, disability, displacement, asylum, destruction of education, increase in poverty, loss of security, etc.).

Compared to the model of reconstruction and building stability that was applied in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, the economic dimension of sustainable development focuses on building an economy that responds to the needs of society instead of focusing on corporate profit (domestic and foreign) or investments that benefit corrupt regimes and warlords. Sustainable development also focuses on environmental and social dimensions, starting by addressing the impacts of war on the environment and addressing the social and psychological impacts of war. Also, from the point of view of the sustainable development model, stability refers to the stability of society, and not simply military security (see Figure 6).

The output of this model, at least in theory, is a stable government, a stable society, and development for the well-being of future generations. The government's reliance, according to the model, on the community's capabilities to lead development enhances the trust that can be lost or shaken by the war, helps empower

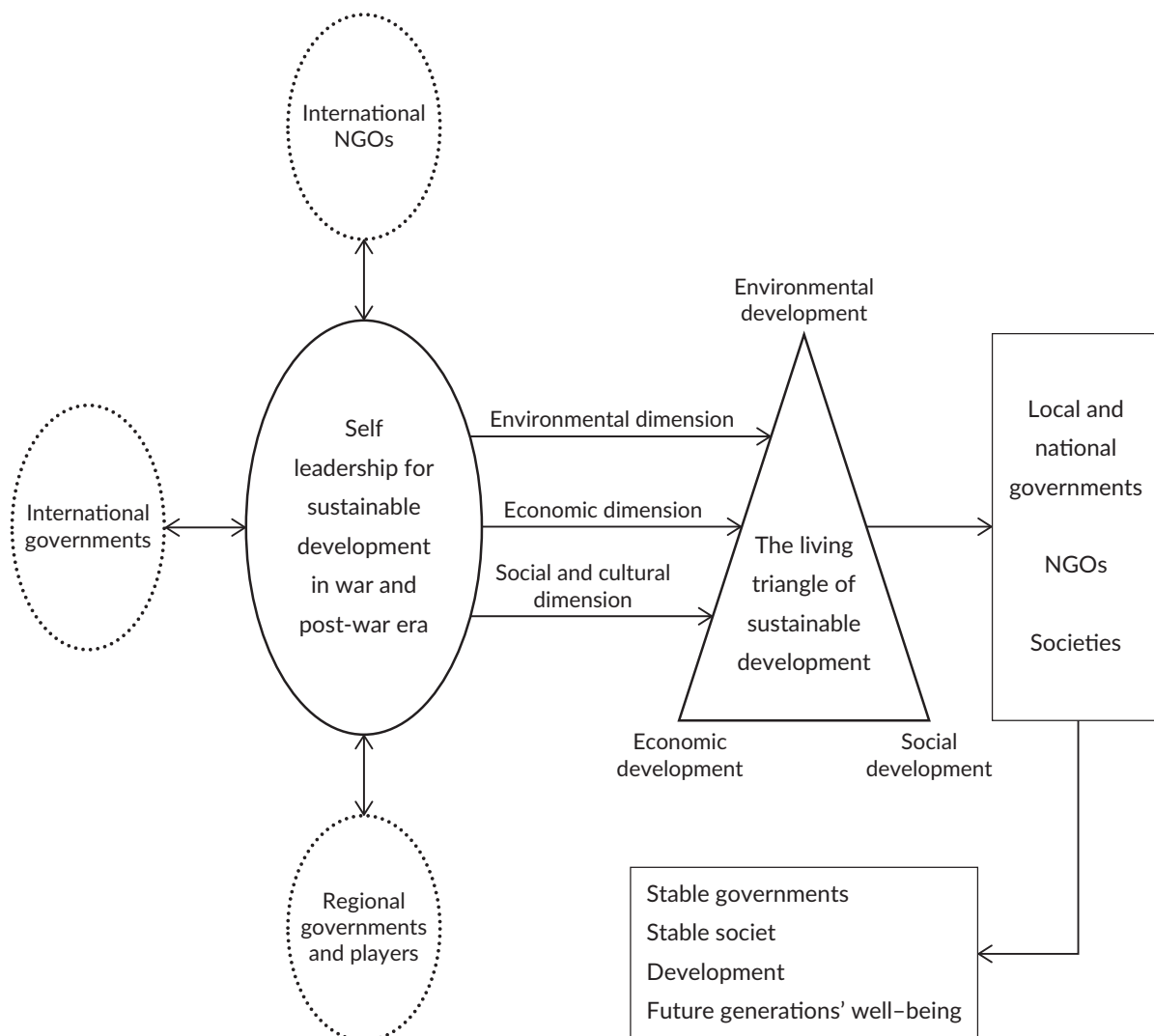


Figure 6. Rwanda's sustainable development model. Notes: Dotted lines indicate players who are supporters from outside; the information in the other boxes relates to the sustainable development model in Rwanda.

key elements of society (giving them rights and opportunities to participate), and promotes the longer-term sustainability of development instead of importing it from abroad.

5.3.1. Results of the Model of Rebuilding Stability in Rwanda

The data about the development of the quality of governance in Rwanda and many other indicators have suggested that the country is significantly and quickly progressing (at least as of 2020). The most important lesson to be learned from the Rwandan approach to sustainable development is the fact that visionary leadership, effective governance, and accountability are critical for achieving sustainable development goals. Solutions rooted in the Rwandan culture are resource-efficient and play a major role in enhancing ownership and accelerating development outcomes. Rwandan culture and its people's needs played a critical role in the success of the country's post-conflict reconstruction.

Technically speaking, Rwanda succeeded in fully integrating SDGs in the national planning besides building a monitoring framework which was critical for effective implementation (United Nations, 2019). Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, by adopting a sustainable development approach, Rwanda continued to achieve more sustainable development and progress, and the country succeeded in putting an end to what was historically considered one of the worst conflicts in modern history. However, the Rwanda model is not perfect, as President Kagame's regime is often criticized for the regime's authoritarian character (McNamee, 2020).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study discussed comparative models of post-conflict reconstruction. Specifically, it highlighted the challenges encountered during attempts to apply the "liberal" model of reconstruction of Germany and Japan, as enacted by the US after World War II, to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, and the reasons for the attempts' failures. The study showed that the approaches to reconstruction in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine did not consider the culture of these countries or the needs of their people, resulting in regimes that led their societies to more violence and wars, corruption, and an absence of meaningful development outcomes. These findings are unsurprising—many other studies delivered similar results (for example, Nemec & Reddy, 2021). Moreover, the fact that the peacebuilding and reconstruction attempts may fail in these countries can be connected with the character of the investigated conflicts. Ramsbotham et al. (2024) argue that asymmetric conflict does not have an effective solution, which is the case for all three countries analyzed. The main reasons for reconstruction failure have been proposed, for example, by Richmond (2011), who argues that successful peacebuilding and reconstruction are impossible without involving all stakeholders. Also, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank report (2020) argues that the top-down approach is insufficient; the same position is provided by Barakat (2016), Hughes et al. (2015), and many other authors.

Using the example of Rwanda, this article presented an alternative model, the sustainable development model, characterized by a focus on the most important needs of societies in the post-war phase, including cleaning the war environment, rehabilitating the resources of the state and society, and building an economy based on self-capabilities supported by available international aid instead of relying heavily on this aid. The sustainable development model also focuses on facing the social challenges left by wars, such as

homelessness and persons disabilities. However, regarding Rwanda, the democratic flaws connected with peacebuilding and reconstruction should be stressed—political persecution, arbitrary imprisonment, and even the disappearance of dissidents represent its non-separable part (see, for example, McNamee, 2020). Thus, success is just partial and controversial.

Based on our findings, it is possible to conclude that security is ensured not only by stopping bullets and cannons, but also by guaranteeing that current and future generations have social and personal stability, a clean environment, and job opportunities. Successful sustainable development would mean that, in addition to not fearing violence, an individual need not fear poverty or lack of access to water, clean air, and healthy food. Perhaps the most important characteristic of the sustainable development model is that it centers the human right to participate in development. Building security institutions and infrastructure is undoubtedly important for the post-war environment, but these must be integrated into a development framework that provides for social development, environmental quality, and broad economic welfare (see, for example, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development & World Bank, 2020).

This text does not propose that the sustainable model applied in Rwanda would be successful everywhere and under any social, political, economic, and cultural conditions. It is worth acknowledging that this model may seem difficult to achieve in corrupt regimes that seek to achieve their narrow interests and/or the interests of the major countries that support them. Moreover, Rwanda's solution lacks one dimension— democracy (McNamee, 2020).

The findings also suggest that each country should try to find its own way, based on its existing experience, its internal environment, and its external surroundings. The progress in Rwanda seemed to be mainly connected to its positive internal environment and the will to change. This precondition appears absent in Iraq and especially in Afghanistan. It may exist in Palestine; however, without ending the armed conflict and under the current institutional arrangements, which limit the chances of the Palestinian government to develop its territory, the opportunities for progress are more than limited.

To conclude, it is important to try to reorient the compass of reconstruction strategies towards sustainable development, and not to despair and accept the status quo. It is necessary to learn from the lessons of the past, from failures and successes, and to consider concrete local conditions and critical factors of the external environment, like the position of concerned governments and international and regional institutions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Exploring Covert Diplomacy in Peace Negotiations

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Abstract

Armed groups seeking political or territorial change frequently challenge governments, leading to protracted armed conflicts. However, not all conflicts are resolved through decisive military victories. As a result, states have increasingly turned to secret negotiations as an alternative means of engagement. While secrecy can facilitate diplomatic flexibility, its effectiveness depends on the credibility of the government's commitment to cooperation. This study examines how the selection of government representatives in secret negotiations influences rebel group behavior and the likelihood of cooperation. Drawing on costly signaling theory and research on secrecy in diplomacy, this study argues that the level of government representation in secret negotiations serves as a key mechanism for signaling credibility. Specifically, high-level representatives function as costly signals, reassuring rebels of the government's seriousness and increasing the likelihood of cooperation. By contrast, low-level representatives provide strategic deniability but fail to generate trust, making negotiations less effective. This dynamic is particularly relevant in democratic settings, where governments face domestic audience costs if secret negotiations are exposed. To test these claims, the study employs a large-N quantitative analysis of secret negotiations between democratic governments and rebel groups. The findings indicate that secret negotiations led by high-level representatives significantly reduce rebel violence. In contrast, those conducted by low-level representatives fail to establish credibility and do not contribute to de-escalation. These results highlight the importance of credibility, the choice of representatives, and secrecy in conflict resolution, with implications for backchannel diplomacy and long-term cooperation outcomes.

Keywords

civil war; costly signaling; non-state armed groups; secret negotiations

1. Introduction

The prolonged conflict in Northern Ireland came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. A key factor in this success was the inclusion of secret negotiations with the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which began under Edward Heath in the early 1970s and continued across successive administrations. Even Margaret Thatcher, despite her staunch public opposition to negotiating with the IRA, secretly authorized covert meetings with them in the early 1990s, as revealed in 1999 (Watt, 1999). These talks were instrumental in advancing the peace process, culminating in the IRA's 1994 ceasefire and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Moloney, 2002; Mumford, 2011; Powell, 2008; Taylor, 1997).

Parallel to the Northern Ireland peace process, Spain faced a similar challenge with ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), which escalated its violent activities during the country's transition to democracy in the 1970s. In response, the Spanish government intermittently held secret negotiations with ETA in an effort to reduce violence (Bew et al., 2009; Clark, 1990; Esser & Bridges, 2011; Whitfield, 2014). However, these talks were undermined by persistent mistrust and ineffective negotiation strategies, ultimately limiting their success.

These cases are part of a broader pattern where democracies engage in secret negotiations with nonstate armed groups (NAGs), often yielding mixed results (San-Akca, 2009). Examples include the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel's Oslo Accords in 1993 (Wanis-St. John, 2006) and the Colombian government's peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016, facilitated by secret talks in Havana (Segura & Mechoulam, 2017). This study explores the factors influencing the outcomes of these covert engagements, shedding light on the role of secrecy in conflict resolution (broadly defined here to include elements of conflict management and the use of secret negotiations at any stage of the resolution process) within democratic contexts. Specifically, it argues that the selection of government representatives plays a crucial role in determining the success of these negotiations. It links secret negotiations to the larger process of forging peace through trust-building, particularly through the selection of representatives by the government, signaling legitimacy and credibility to the rebels. Secret negotiations play a critical role in shaping perceptions of credibility, where government representatives function as signals of commitment or strategic deniability.

This article first discusses the existing literature on secret negotiations in intrastate conflicts, then develops a theoretical framework grounded in signaling theory and costly signals to examine how government representative selection influences secret negotiations. The next section outlines the research design and methodological approach, followed by an empirical analysis using large-*N* quantitative data. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of findings, policy implications, and avenues for future research.

2. The Role of Secrecy in Peace Negotiation Processes

The use of secrecy in democratic regimes has been the subject of much debate, with some arguing that it undermines the principles of democratic governance and limits the ability of citizens to hold their government accountable (Fenster, 2006; Haufler, 2010; Holmström, 1979; Scholtes, 2012). The debates about how much secrecy does not abuse democratic principles, whether secrecy threatens democracy (Sagar, 2007, 2013), whether "unconditional secrecy" is a requirement of democracy (Thompson, 1999), and how to prevent politicians from abusing power through secret policies (Colaresi, 2014) continue.

Recent research highlights the significance of secret negotiations on conflict outcomes as a vital precursor to formal talks, acting as a socializing platform for parties to interact confidentially (Dochartaigh, 2021; Doyle & Hegele, 2021; Pruitt, 2006, 2008). Building upon existing studies on interstate secret negotiations, scholars argue that these covert dialogues facilitate a shift from adversarial bargaining to cooperative problem-solving (Fisher, 1989, 2007; Kelman, 1997; Schiff, 2008). Secret negotiations are also crucial in overcoming deadlocks during official discussions, providing a trusting environment for open dialogue on sensitive matters, and enhancing the likelihood of reaching mutually beneficial agreements (Pruitt, 2006; Wanis-St. John, 2006). There is also a recent attempt to explore how and why back-channel negotiations are gendered (Corredor & Anderson, 2024). However, existing studies have yet to comprehensively explore how various methods of secret negotiations employed by democracies might influence the initiation of official talks and the resolution of deadlocks throughout the negotiation process.

Recent research by Doyle and Hegele (2021) focuses on secret talks that occur before official negotiations, referred to as pre-negotiation efforts. Once parties commence official negotiations, the emphasis on secret talks ends. One potential disadvantage of focusing solely on pre-negotiation backchannel communication and disregarding any subsequent secret talks during official negotiations is that it underestimates the impact of secret negotiations on the ongoing peace process and the conflict outcome. In some cases, secret negotiations continue to play a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the conflict, even after official negotiations have commenced. Therefore, the research misses essential factors contributing to resolving the conflict by limiting the analysis to pre-negotiation backchannel communication. Additionally, assuming that secret talks cease once official negotiations begin, the researcher may overlook the possibility that parties sometimes use secret negotiations to overcome deadlocks during official negotiations. Official negotiations may reach an impasse due to various reasons, such as intractable issues or rigid positions of the conflicting parties. In such situations, secret talks can help identify areas of common ground and explore potential solutions that can break the deadlock. In the case of the Israel-PLO conflict, secret negotiations took place parallel to unproductive official negotiations (Corbin, 1994; Savir, 2008; Wanis-St. John, 2006). While official negotiations struggled to progress, secret back-channel negotiations allowed the parties to engage in more candid and open discussions away from public scrutiny and political pressures. The official negotiations were conducted under the framework of the Madrid Conference, which began in 1991. The Madrid Conference aimed to facilitate peace talks between Israel and its neighboring Arab countries and Palestinian representatives. However, these official negotiations were marked by deep mistrust and limited progress. In contrast, the secret negotiations that led to the Oslo Accords were conducted discreetly in Norway and facilitated by Norwegian diplomats Mona Juul and Terje Rød-Larsen (Corbin, 1994). These secret talks provided an informal and confidential setting where Israeli and PLO representatives could build trust and explore potential solutions to the conflict without the pressures associated with the official negotiations. The success of secret negotiations in breaking the deadlock and leading to the Oslo Accords highlighted the importance of having parallel communication channels in complex negotiations (Wanis-St. John, 2011).

A key gap in the research lies in understanding how states conduct secret negotiations. Putnam and Carcasson (1997), in their analysis of the Oslo talks between the Israeli government and the PLO, underscored the central role of trust-building in the success of secret negotiations. They argued that trust was cultivated through representatives who could assert their authority, demonstrating their ability to negotiate on their governing bodies' behalf and influence decision-making. Without such legitimacy, secret diplomatic channels would have

been ineffective, leading to insubstantial agreements. For negotiations to be meaningful, concessions and compromises had to be recognized as genuine commitments endorsed by actual decision-makers.

Building on this idea, this study examines the role of government representatives in secret negotiations, specifically focusing on democratic governments engaging with rebel groups. It explores how the strategic selection of representatives influences the rebels' commitment to the negotiation process and, ultimately, the outcomes of these talks. The core hypothesis suggests that the credibility and authority of negotiators directly affect the rebels' willingness to engage constructively, leading to more productive negotiations and a higher likelihood of reducing violence. When governments assign representatives with recognized authority and legitimacy, they send a strong signal of commitment, increasing the likelihood of meaningful dialogue and concessions.

Furthermore, the role of secret negotiations extends beyond direct interactions between warring parties. Ignoring these covert engagements risks an incomplete understanding of how conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, arbitration, and third-party interventions, function in practice. Secret negotiations likely shape the broader trajectory of conflict resolution efforts, influencing when and how formal peace processes emerge. While much of the research on civil wars focuses on external interventions, whether economic, military, or diplomatic, and their impact on belligerents' preferences, far less attention has been given to how warring parties negotiate in secret and how these covert interactions shape the course of violent conflicts.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Establishing cooperation in secret negotiations requires overcoming fundamental challenges of trust and credibility. When governments engage in covert diplomatic exchanges, adversaries must assess whether the other side is genuinely interested in cooperation or merely using negotiations as a tactical maneuver. Signaling theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how credibility is established in these interactions. Drawing on costly signaling theory (Fearon, 1994; Kydd, 2000) and research on secrecy in diplomacy (Yarhi-Milo, 2013), this study argues that the choice of government representatives in secret negotiations serves as a key mechanism of reassurance. Specifically, in secret negotiations between democratic governments and rebel groups, the costs associated with sending high-level representatives serve as a credible signal of the government's commitment to cooperation and peace.

Signaling theory suggests that actors in strategic interactions attempt to convey their intentions to the other party through signals. However, not all signals carry the same weight. If a signal is costless, an untrustworthy actor can easily mimic it, rendering it meaningless in distinguishing genuine cooperation from deception. Costly signals, by contrast, impose risks or costs on the sender, making them credible because only those who are truly committed to cooperation would be willing to bear those costs (Fearon, 1994; Morrow, 1999). Kydd (2000) develops this idea further in his theory of reassurance, arguing that trust can be built when actors send signals that separate the "trustworthy" from the "untrustworthy." According to Kydd, trust is conceived as a belief that the other side is likely to be trustworthy and will, therefore, want to reciprocate cooperation rather than exploit it (Kydd, 2000, p. 326). Trustworthy actors, who prefer to reciprocate cooperation, are willing to send costly signals because they seek stability in the long run. Untrustworthy actors, who would exploit cooperation if given the chance, avoid sending costly signals because doing so would expose them to risks they are unwilling to take.

While much of the literature on costly signaling has focused on public interactions, secrecy can also function as a costly signal under certain conditions (Banks, 1991; Farrell & Gibbons, 1989). Yarhi-Milo (2013) argues that secret diplomacy itself can serve as a reassurance mechanism because engaging in covert negotiations entails political and reputational risks. If secret negotiations are exposed, governments, particularly democratic ones, may face domestic backlash, opposition scrutiny, or diplomatic fallout. The very fact that a government is willing to engage in secret diplomacy, knowing that exposure carries costs, can, therefore, enhance the credibility of its cooperative intentions. However, this study contends that secrecy alone is not inherently costly, as governments may rely on plausible deniability to avoid taking responsibility for a leak. Therefore, in secret negotiations, a costly signal refers to any action that imposes significant costs or risks on the sender in the event of a leak, particularly one where the sender cannot easily deny their involvement in the negotiation process. In secret negotiations, what minimizes plausible deniability is the involvement of high-level representatives in the negotiation. This is because once senior officials are engaged, the government cannot easily escape the political and reputational costs that come with their participation, making it evident to the rebels that the government's commitment to the negotiations is genuine and serious.

Democratic governments carefully calculate the risks and benefits of engaging in secret negotiations, particularly regarding political exposure and deniability. The costs associated with a leak for democratic governments involve political and reputational risks, as exposure can lead to domestic backlash, loss of legitimacy, and potential political instability. These risks become particularly significant when high-level representatives are involved in the negotiations, as the exposure of senior officials makes it more difficult for the government to deny its involvement. One of the least costly ways for a government to initiate secret talks is by deploying low-level representatives, as their involvement carries minimal political risk. If negotiations are leaked, governments can easily deny official engagement, attributing the talks to unauthorized actions or informal channels. Rebels, however, are well aware of this strategic ambiguity. They recognize that low-level representatives do not necessarily reflect the government's true intentions or level of commitment. In contrast, when a democratic government chooses to send high-level representatives, the nature of secrecy fundamentally changes; it becomes a costly signal. High-ranking officials have clear political visibility, making it far more difficult for the government to deny its involvement if the talks are exposed. This raises the stakes of secrecy, as leaks could result in domestic political backlash, diplomatic repercussions, or pressure from opposition groups and the public. Understanding this risk, rebels interpret the presence of high-level representatives as a strong indicator of the government's genuine commitment to negotiations. By taking on these political risks, democratic governments credibly signal their willingness to engage in serious bargaining, making it more likely that rebels will perceive the process as legitimate and worth pursuing. High-level representation, by contrast, provides reassurance that the government is making a genuine effort to engage. This aligns with Kydd's (2000) argument that reassurance works best when it imposes costs on the sender, as only actors who genuinely seek cooperation would be willing to take on these risks. Just as costly signals in public diplomacy separate trustworthy actors from untrustworthy ones, high-level representatives in secret negotiations help distinguish serious commitments from strategic deception.

The choice of representatives interacts with domestic audience costs. Fearon (1994) argues that democratic leaders face unique constraints in foreign policy because their actions are subject to domestic scrutiny. If a democratic government publicly commits to a course of action and then reneges, it risks being punished by voters or political opponents. Yarhi-Milo (2013) refers to audience costs as the expected costs within secret negotiation contexts (p. 409). Following her approach, the cost is related to how leaders might anticipate

domestic backlash for pursuing covert foreign policy actions, especially when an adversary or a third party exposes these actions. The expected cost level in this study depends on representative selection: If a government engages in covert talks with rebels and those talks are exposed, the level of representatives involved affects the extent to which the government is held accountable. If low-level representatives were involved, the government could downplay the significance of the talks and avoid political repercussions. However, if high-level representatives were engaged, exposure raises the political stakes, making it more costly for the government to abandon the negotiation process. Therefore, the presence of senior officials makes it more difficult for the government to defect from its commitments, reinforcing the credibility of its cooperative intentions for the rebels. In the context of the Basque conflict, the firm stance of former Spanish Prime Minister Aznar against negotiating with terrorists was widely perceived as a strong electoral advantage for his party (Tremlett, 2004). Consequently, Aznar's decision to negotiate secretly with the Basque separatist group ETA the following year represented a significant political gamble (Wood, 2006).

In the worst-case scenario, secret negotiations with the enemy in pursuit of peace can cost leaders' lives, as it did with Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat. Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, was assassinated in 1995 by a Jewish extremist who opposed Rabin's peace initiatives with the Palestinians. Rabin had signed the Oslo Accords with the PLO, which included secret negotiations and concessions on both sides. Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, was assassinated in 1981 by Islamic extremists who opposed Sadat's peace treaty with Israel. The peace treaty was signed in 1979 and included secret negotiations between Egypt and Israel. In both cases, the leaders' efforts to negotiate peace with their enemies were seen as a betrayal by some within their own country, particularly those who opposed making concessions to the other side

2.1.1. Effects of Representatives on the Process of Secret Negotiations

Whether a government dispatches a high- or low-level representative affects how secret negotiations unfold. This study argues that the government representatives matter in building trust with the rebels. Trust-building is a complex and delicate process that requires consistent effort and demonstration of goodwill from the government side so that rebels cease violence. The trust and credibility of the government are vital in establishing a lasting commitment to the peace process in secret negotiations. Governments often demand the cessation of violence by rebel groups as a prerequisite for further talks, both in secret and eventually in public. This demand for a cessation of violence has been evident in various cases, such as the UK government's insistence on the Provisional IRA's renouncement of violence in confidential meetings, the Indian government's discussions on a ceasefire with the NSCN-IM, and the Spanish government's requirement for ETA to declare a ceasefire before engaging in secret negotiations. However, rebel groups face challenges in deciding to declare and uphold a ceasefire, as doing so carries the risk of losing support from followers who expect continued pursuit of their goals. The long-term commitment of rebel groups to a ceasefire depends on their trust in the government's willingness to address grievances and accommodate their demands. While rebel groups may make promises and publicly declare ceasefires during secret negotiations, the actual adherence to these commitments varies. In the case of Spain, the government's hesitation to send high-level officials resulted in anger and distrust among ETA leadership, leading to a breakdown in maintaining the ceasefire and sporadic acts of violence.

The involvement of low-level participants in secret negotiations can also hinder the decision-making process and prolong the negotiation timeline. One of the primary challenges of secret negotiations is the potential

for communication distortions. Secret negotiations often rely on intermediaries and complex communication chains, increasing the likelihood that critical information may be misinterpreted or altered as it passes through various channels (Dochartaigh, 2011; Pruitt, 2008). These distortions can lead to misaligned expectations, misunderstandings, or even unintended escalations in conflict.

The case studies illustrate how the involvement of low-level participants in secret negotiations results in limited decision-making authority, causing the process to last longer. In a specific instance, the Portuguese colonial authority in Angola utilized timber merchants as intermediaries in their interactions with an envoy representing UNITA's leader. However, upon the authority's report to Lisbon, it became evident that further engagement was required to address the uncertainties and ambiguities arising from the meeting between the Portuguese timber merchants and the group's envoy:

The loggers' statements left a lot of questions unanswered and many obscure points. This is why the president of the Group dismissed them and told them that in due time they would be convened for another meeting through the DGS [General Directorate of Security], and they would be given more instructions to pursue the contacts. (Minter, 1988, p. 47)

These back-and-forth interactions contributed to a prolonged conflict process and increased mistrust on the rebel side. As a result, the leader of the group felt compelled to address a letter to a higher authority, expressing frustration with the lack of progress in previous correspondence and seeking to engage with decision-makers who possessed the necessary authority (Minter, 1988). The involvement of low-level participants and the need for multiple rounds of discussions prolonged the negotiation process, hindered effective communication, and heightened mistrust. The case illustrates the importance of having representatives with sufficient decision-making authority involved in secret negotiations to facilitate more efficient and productive dialogue.

In another instance, the direct involvement of the Colombian President in a meeting with the leader of the FARC played a pivotal role in restarting peace negotiations. Recognizing the significant power held by the FARC at that time, the President's presence demonstrated a genuine commitment to finding a peaceful resolution (Dudley, 2004; Kline, 2007). This high-level engagement signaled a renewed effort to rebuild trust and engage in substantive discussions, representing a readiness to explore potential avenues for resolving the conflict.

Rebel groups occasionally declare ceasefires; however, these declarations often hold symbolic value as the rebels continue to engage in acts of violence. In this regard, this study underscores the significance of evaluating the success of secret negotiations based on the rebels' dedication to ending violence during the negotiation process, which requires upholding the ceasefires they declare. Such commitment holds the potential to pave the way for establishing lasting peace agreements. The evaluation process involves monitoring the occurrence of violent incidents or attacks attributed to the rebel group and assessing whether there is a significant decrease in such occurrences.

The effectiveness of a ceasefire by rebel groups is closely linked to the level of trust they have in the government, and this trust is influenced by the selection of government representatives in secret talks. Trust plays a pivotal role in the decision-making process of rebel groups regarding the cessation of violence, as they seek assurance that the government will honor its commitments and engage in genuine negotiations.

To demonstrate its seriousness and commitment to resolving the conflict, the governments are expected to choose high-level representatives who possess credibility and the ability to follow through on agreements. This selection sends a strong message to the rebel groups about the government's determination to achieve a peaceful resolution. Therefore, this article's main hypothesis is the following:

Secret negotiations are more likely to reduce the level of violence caused by the rebel groups if governments choose to send high-level representatives to these negotiations.

The hypotheses suggest that to reduce violence effectively, the involvement of high-level government representatives in secret negotiations is crucial. It is argued that the presence of authoritative representatives signals seriousness and enhances the commitment of rebel groups to the negotiation process. Low-level engagements are likely to signal a lack of seriousness, which in turn decreases the level of trust rebels have in the government in question. This was evident in the case of the IRA, which declared two ceasefires following secret negotiations in 1972. However, rather than leading to a decrease in violence, this period witnessed the highest level of violence throughout the Troubles. This outcome is attributed to the IRA's skepticism and lack of trust in the British government (Moloney, 2002; Mumford, 2011).

While secrecy allows for flexibility in diplomatic interactions, it does not inherently guarantee trust. Instead, the credibility of secret negotiations depends on the costs that governments are willing to bear. High-level representation functions as a costly signal of reassurance by raising the risks associated with exposure, increasing domestic accountability, and signaling a stronger commitment to cooperation. This theoretical framework sets the stage for the empirical analysis that follows, examining how variations in government representation in secret negotiations influence cooperation outcomes.

3. Research Design

In this study, secret negotiation refers to the covert diplomatic engagement process between conflicting parties to resolve their dispute. This process includes various forms of secret communication, such as letters, phone calls, and in-person meetings, which are all coded as secret contacts in the empirical dataset. I define a secret contact as a contact, manifesting as a meeting, phone call, or letter, between a rebel group and the state it targets, which occurs without public notice, to resolve the conflict between the parties. Secrecy pertains to the act of concealing the existence, presence, or occurrence of contact with the domestic public. The term "contact" is employed to denote various forms of communication between a state and an NAG, including message delivery, even in the absence of the involved parties' physical presence. It should be noted that the government must approve all such contacts, either prior to or following the communication, and any initiatives or contacts initiated by individuals acting in a private capacity will be excluded from this study. This definition ensures that the analysis focuses solely on official, government-sanctioned contacts between a state and an NAG. For instance, on one occasion, a former British General engaged in an unofficial dialogue with an IRA army council member. After contacting him through a phone call, he told the secretary of state that the IRA was willing to negotiate, and the secretary of state asked him to withdraw from any further contacts (Whitelaw, 1989). I excluded this initiative since it was not approved by the government in the first place. Examples of government approval directly extracted from the sources include:

The first secret talks with the IRA came when opposition leader Harold Wilson, with the permission of Prime Minister Edward Heath [then prime minister of the UK], attended a meeting with the leadership of the IRA while on a visit to Dublin in March 1972. (Mumford, 2011, p. 634)

In conditions of utmost secrecy, Zapatero [then prime minister of Spain] authorized initial meetings between Jesus Eguiguren and ETA, facilitated by the HD Centre, in June and July 2005. (Whitfield, 2014, p. 150)

Governments acknowledged some secret contacts at later stages, while others came to light through media leaks and were approved by the government.

In the dataset, secret contacts have been excluded if their existence is acknowledged, despite the specific details regarding their date and location remaining undisclosed. For instance, the dataset does not include the following news report about a meeting between the Colombian government and the FARC as an example of a secret meeting:

Members of the Peace Commission had said that the Commission and leaders of guerrilla groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the 19th April Movement (M-19), would meet next week, at a time and place which had been determined but which would be kept *secret*, according to Emisoras Caracol Network (Bogota). The public would be informed about the meeting only after it had been held and journalists would not be permitted to attend. ("Colombian peace efforts," 1984)

Despite the fact that the public is unaware of the time and location of the aforementioned meeting, it is not categorized as a secret meeting in this study since its existence was publicized prior to the event. The authorities maintained secrecy regarding the date and location of the meeting for security reasons. The Colombian government's secret negotiations with the FARC, starting in September 2012 in Havana, Cuba, which lasted until negotiators declared a final agreement on August 24, 2016, are excluded since the government made the process public before the secret meetings. Nonetheless, what is incorporated into the dataset with respect to FARC and Colombia is that the secret contacts took place in Cuba from 24 February 2012 until the government's announcement date of 28 August 2012. The same applies to the talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia. On June 10, 2014, the president disclosed that the negotiations were ongoing and would proceed in secret, making the negotiations known to the public on this date. Therefore, the subsequent secret meetings are not included in the dataset. Prior to the announcement date, the dataset contains information about 95 secret contacts with the ELN commencing from 1982.

Scholars often use the terms back-channel communication or negotiation to denote the discreet communication between the respective parties. Pruitt (2008, p. 37) defines back-channel communication as "a secret communication between the leadership of opposing groups (including organizations and nations) that is designed to foster settlement of a conflict between them." Similar to Pruitt (2008), Wanis-St. John (2011) uses the term back-channel negotiations and defines it as "secret, official negotiations among the parties to a dispute that supplement or replace open, existing front channel negotiations" (p. 4). His definition covers secret negotiations that supplement or replace ongoing open negotiations; therefore, he excludes secret negotiations without any open negotiations. He explores the peace process between Israel and the PLO, which simultaneously included open and back-channel negotiations.

Pruitt (2006) and Wanis-St. John (2011) have also contributed to the development of a typology for back-channel negotiations. Following Pruitt's classification, back-channel negotiations can be categorized into two types: direct and indirect. Direct back-channel negotiations encompass communication between parties that occurs without the presence of intermediaries. Conversely, indirect back-channel negotiations necessitate the inclusion of at least one intermediary within the communication chain. Wanis-St. John (2011) expands upon Pruitt's (2006) typology of back-channel negotiations, incorporating the consideration of both open and secret negotiations. Wanis-St. John (2011, p. 14) delineates five distinct types of back-channel negotiations: (a) secret pre-negotiations, either direct or through a third party, aimed at assessing the feasibility of negotiations; (b) direct secret negotiations in the absence of concurrent open activities; (c) mediated secret negotiations without parallel open activities; (d) intermittent and sequential utilization of open and secret negotiation channels, either direct or via a third party; and (e) secret negotiations conducted concurrently with open negotiations, involving direct communication, third-party mediation, or both. This typology extends Pruitt's (2006) framework by accounting for the presence of open negotiations and the various communication modalities inherent in back-channel negotiations. In the present study, the term "secret contact" is utilized to encompass the concept of back-channel negotiation described in existing scholarly literature while offering a broader perspective that covers a more extensive range of cases involving covert negotiations.

It is also worth noting that secret contacts differ from Track II diplomacy in key ways. Track II involves informal efforts by non-state actors, such as academics, experts, or civil society groups, to foster dialogue and explore conflict solutions outside official channels (Fisher, 1997; Montville, 1993). In contrast, secret contacts are initiated by government representatives or authorized intermediaries and are conducted covertly, not publicly.

3.1. Dataset

I compiled a panel dataset on secret contacts between 56 randomly selected NAGs and their target states to test the hypothesis from 1970 to 2015. The unit of analysis is the dyad-year, with one observation per year for each dyad (e.g., the UK government and PIRA). I rely on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) dyadic dataset to identify the universe of dyads (Pettersson et al., 2019). The pre-negotiation dataset by Doyle and Hegele (2021), which relies on the *Yearbook of Peace Processes* (1997–present), is the only dataset closely aligned with this study. However, the *Yearbook's* lack of transparency regarding data sources, acknowledged by Doyle and Hegele themselves, raises concerns about its reliability. The dataset focuses solely on secret talks before official negotiations and is limited to 2005–2015, excluding insights into later negotiation phases or long-term trends. Given these constraints, a new dataset was necessary to comprehensively explore secret contacts, incident counts, and ceasefire declarations.

3.1.1. Why Does This Study Focus on Dyads of Democratic States and Nonstate Armed Groups?

Democratic governments often encounter significant difficulties in publicly acknowledging their involvement in negotiations with rebel groups, especially when these groups persist in perpetrating acts of violence that result in the loss of innocent lives. In November 1993, John Major declared his strong aversion to engaging in talks with the Provisional IRA and Mr. Adams. Unknown to the public, he secretly corresponded with Martin McGuinness simultaneously. In March 1993, while this confidential communication was ongoing, the IRA carried out a devastating bombing, killing two innocent children in Warrington. Had Major's secret talks

with the IRA been exposed, there would have been overwhelming pressure to halt them immediately and call for his resignation after the attack. This, then, could have made it nearly impossible to persuade the IRA to declare the crucial ceasefire in 1994 (Powell, 2014). As Spector (1998, p. 44) pointed out earlier, in circumstances where the enemy is “villainized,” informal talks give a chance to the leaders to villainize and negotiate at the same time. The incumbents may continue their rhetoric of never talking to the antagonists in public while discussing terms of a possible agreement with them in secret. Case studies indicate that secret negotiations have become increasingly common in democratic states as a preliminary step to official talks (Cohen, 1997; Fisher, 1989; Gewurz, 2000; Pantev, 2000; Schiff, 2008; Stein, 1989a, 1989b; Tomlin, 1989; Zartman, 1989), as a parallel discussion to official talks (Wanis-St. John, 2006), or as a backup when official talks fail (Borger & Dehghan, 2013; Mohammed & Hafezi, 2013). This study focuses on democracies precisely because secrecy in diplomatic negotiations apparently contradicts the norm of transparency that democracies typically uphold. While it would not be surprising to see autocratic governments engaging in secret negotiations, the intriguing aspect is that despite their commitment to transparency, democracies participate in such discreet engagements. This enigmatic puzzle forms the basis for the investigation into the outcomes of secret negotiations between democratic states and rebel groups, with a particular emphasis on understanding the factors that contribute to variations in negotiation outcomes.

Research indicates that democracies exhibit a slower and less lethal response in the use of force compared to non-democracies (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995; Gartner & Segura, 1998; Gartner et al., 1997; Russett, 1993). They also tend to engage in longer internal wars and do not achieve victory through repression (Arreguín-Toft, 2005; Caverley, 2010; Colaresi & Carey, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2009; Gleditsch et al., 2009; Karol & Miguel, 2007; Merom, 2003).

One key factor that sets democracies apart from other types of governments in handling war and crisis is the influence of public opinion. Scholars have suggested that public opinion plays a significant role in shaping democratic decision-making during conflicts (Baum & Potter, 2015; Fearon, 1994; Gelpi, 2017). In contrast, autocracies may employ indiscriminate violence against rebel groups and often rely on repression to achieve victory (Davenport & Armstrong, 2004). The case of Argentina’s “Dirty War” exemplifies a repressive regime under military dictatorship, where leftist armed groups such as the Montoneros and the ERP were targeted, leading to widespread human rights abuses and forced exile. However, during Argentina’s brief period as a democracy in the 1970s, it was the police force, not the military, that primarily focused on maintaining security and combating armed groups. In a democracy, the level of repression witnessed during Argentina’s “Dirty War” would be highly unlikely and contradictory to democratic principles. Democracies are characterized by institutions that uphold human rights, establish checks and balances on state power, and prioritize peaceful conflict resolution. Moreover, democratic leaders are often constrained by the need to mobilize public support for decisions related to national security, which discourages conflicts resulting in civilian casualties and high political costs (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995).

3.1.2. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the total number of incidents caused by rebel groups. This study uses the Terrorism in Armed Conflict (TAC) dataset (Fortna et al., 2022), which links rebel organizations from the UCDP/PRIO dataset to events recorded in the Global Terrorism Database for the period 1970–2016 (START, 2016). The analysis focuses on the total count of incidents from the TAC dataset. The focus on terrorist

attacks in this study is deliberate, as these attacks typically have an immediate political purpose and serve to communicate strategic messages about the rebels' intentions (Crenshaw, 2011). These acts are especially significant because they are often designed to shape public perception and influence political outcomes, making them highly responsive to the trust and credibility dynamics generated by covert negotiations. By examining terrorist incidents, the study captures a specific form of violence that is directly shaped by the signals sent during secret diplomatic exchanges, which are not always present in other forms of conflict.

3.1.3. Independent Variable

I created a binary variable based on whether a secret contact included a high-level representative from the government side. High-level representatives refer to the president, prime minister, minister, and military personnel. Based on the analysis of 56 cases, I identified a pattern in which governments first send intelligence officers to meet with rebel groups to lay the groundwork for the eventual attendance of government officials. These initial meetings, which served as a preparatory stage and involved only intelligence officers, were not included in the analysis. Instead, I focused on meetings where government officials participated.

3.1.4. Control Variables

The analysis controls for several factors influencing rebel capacity for violence, including territorial conflict (Pettersson et al., 2019); political wing, ethnonationalist categorization, and external support (San-Akca, 2016); centralized command (Cunningham et al., 2013); democracy score (Coppedge, 2023); mediation (DeRouen et al., 2011), ceasefire declaration, and its lagged value (Clayton et al., 2022). The ceasefire datasets start coding in 1989; therefore, for the dyads where conflict began before 1989, I collected information based on the criteria outlined in the ceasefire dataset's codebook. In territorial conflicts, reaching a compromise becomes more challenging, and rebel groups with territorial claims may be more prone to violent attacks (Mitchell, 1999; Zartman, 1989). When rebel groups have territorial claims, governments might adopt a more cautious approach when selecting representatives for secret negotiations. The heightened potential for violent actions from rebel groups with territorial claims could lead governments to prioritize representatives with a certain authority level. Additionally, considering the insights of Lax and Sebenius (1986), if belligerents have a history of intense and highly contentious conflicts, they are likely to seek detachment from ongoing clandestine discussions. The existence of a political party also creates an opportunity for democratic states, in case of a leak of secret contacts, to defend themselves by stating they never talked to the NAG but to an officially recognized political party. Given these dynamics, it becomes important to consider the influence of a rebel group's political wing on the selection of representatives by a government. It is also crucial to control whether a rebel group had a clear centralized command chain structure, as it could have affected their commitment to a ceasefire. A centralized command structure tends to provide greater coherence, coordination, and control over the group's actions, making it potentially more conducive to keeping promises given in the secret talks. The presence of mediation in a given year is another important factor that might affect the rebels' violence level.

3.2. Statistical Model

I used a fixed-effect Poisson regression model, which is well-suited for panel data analysis when the dependent variable involves count data (the negative binomial regression model, which only supports conditional fixed effects, was not applied). Panel data involves observing the same entities over multiple periods. Poisson regression can accommodate time-varying covariates and time-fixed effects to control for time-specific and entity-specific influences. I conducted a Hausman test to compare fixed and random effects, and the outcome recommended using fixed effects.

One potential concern in investigating the relationship between secret contact (with or without a high-level representative) and the count of incidents is the possibility that secret contact might be influenced by, or occur concurrently with, changes in the incident count. This temporal relationship raises apprehensions about endogeneity, where the direction of causality becomes unclear. To address this concern, I incorporated the lagged variable of the incident count in the analysis. By introducing the lagged incident count, the goal was to account for the time sequence between secret contact and the count of incidents.

3.3. Data Sources

The data for this article has been meticulously gathered from a wide range of sources, including books, book chapters, scholarly articles, declassified materials, investigative journalism studies, personal memoirs of participants, and interviews conducted by academic experts specializing in the subject. The source of each secret contact has been carefully recorded and cited in the dataset for transparency purposes.

4. Results and Analysis

This section presents the findings from the Poisson regression models assessing the impact of high-level government representatives in secret negotiations on the likelihood of violent incidents perpetrated by rebel groups. The subsequent analysis tests the hypothesis that secret contacts are more likely to decrease rebel violence when high-level government representatives are involved. By including high-level government representatives in the secret contact process, it is anticipated that the government can establish stronger trust and credibility, which may lead to more positive outcomes in reducing rebel violence.

Table 1 displays the results for two models, estimating the number of incidents as the dependent variable. Model (1) provides the baseline results, while Model (2) includes additional controls to ensure robustness.

The findings indicate that the presence of high-level government representatives in secret negotiations significantly reduces rebel violence. In Model (1), the expected number of incidents decreases by approximately 17.6% when a high-level representative is involved, while in Model (2), this reduction increases to 22.5% after accounting for additional controls. These results highlight the critical role of credibility and trust-building in conflict resolution. The presence of senior negotiators likely signals a strong governmental commitment, fostering a more constructive bargaining environment and encouraging rebel groups to reduce violence. Conversely, negotiations conducted by lower-level representatives may lack the authority and credibility necessary to establish trust, leading to continued violent activity. By controlling for the autocorrelation in violence (number of Incidents $_{t-1}$), the models ensure that the observed reduction in

Table 1. Poisson regression results of the number of incidents by rebel groups.

	Model (1)	Model (2)
Variables	Incidents	Incidents
Number of incidents $t-1$	0.00866*** (0.000112)	0.00802*** (0.000114)
High-level representative	-0.193*** (0.0213)	-0.256*** (0.0220)
Ceasefire		-0.0572*** (0.0185)
Ceasefire $t-1$		0.0728*** (0.0188)
Incompatibility		0.0292 (0.103)
External support		0.685*** (0.0655)
Ethnonational		-0.116 (0.159)
Central command		0.420 (0.342)
Democracy score		1.716*** (0.0731)
Mediation		-0.145*** (0.0229)
Observations	1,226	1,112
Number of dyads	56	56

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

rebel incidents is not simply due to pre-existing trends in violence. Even after accounting for this persistence, the effect of high-level representatives remains strongly negative and statistically significant. To ensure robustness, I re-ran the analysis with two alternative specifications: one using only the lagged dependent variable and the other using only fixed effects, confirming the statistical significance of high-level representatives at the 1% level and ruling out pre-existing trends or specification issues.

The analysis indicates that the declaration of a ceasefire significantly impacts rebel violence, implying that ceasefires during the current timeframe correlate with a reduction in rebel activities. Conversely, the lagged ceasefire variable unexpectedly correlates positively with rebel violence. This may suggest that temporary tactical pauses or ceasefires could provoke an increase in violence shortly after their conclusion, as parties might utilize the pause to reorganize or plan for subsequent confrontations. This observation suggests that ceasefires may not consistently offer enduring resolutions and could lead to a resurgence of hostilities once the ceasefire period ends. As expected, external support is highly significant and positively associated with rebel violence. This result underscores the role of external actors in prolonging and intensifying conflicts, as support from foreign states or transnational networks provides rebel groups with the resources necessary to sustain violence. This finding is consistent with existing research that highlights the destabilizing effect of external sponsorship on conflict resolution (Aydin & Regan, 2012; Cunningham, 2010; Heger & Salehyan, 2007). One of the most critical factors influencing the level of rebel violence could be the presence of mediation efforts in a

given year. Despite including mediation as a control variable, the effect of high-level representatives remains negative, statistically significant, and substantial.

These findings support the hypothesis that government representatives are crucial in reducing rebel violence, as high-level negotiators enhance credibility and commitment in secret negotiations. Several limitations should be noted for this study. First, the dataset is constrained to secret contacts between democratic governments and rebel groups from 1970 to 2015. While this scope captures a wide range of cases, it excludes non-democratic contexts, limiting the generalizability of the findings to autocracies or hybrid regimes. The focus on democracies reflects the unique tension between transparency and secrecy but may overlook dynamics present in other political systems. However, this should not deter scholars from studying secrecy as a critical aspect of conflict resolution, as it offers unique insights into the informal and often decisive mechanisms that drive peace processes. Future research should explore whether high-level representation functions as a costly signal in non-democratic settings. This study uses terrorist incidents as the main outcome variable. Considering other types of violent attacks will broaden the explanation's scope and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of secret negotiations depends on their confidentiality and the credibility of the government representatives involved. The findings reveal that high-level representatives serve as costly signals of commitment, reducing rebel violence, while low-level representatives fuel distrust and prolong conflict. These results highlight the critical role of representative selection in shaping the success of covert diplomacy. The analysis further underscores why rebels often perceive low-level representatives as a strategic deception rather than a genuine commitment to cooperation. When governments use deniable representatives, rebels frequently suspect ulterior motives, such as efforts to weaken their unity, incite internal divisions, or gather intelligence against them. This distrust undermines the negotiation process, leading to continued hostilities. Conversely, high-level representatives bring authority and decision-making power to negotiations, reinforcing credibility and fostering cooperation. Their involvement signals that the government is invested in resolving the problem, increasing the likelihood of violence reduction.

Participation in secret negotiations is also inherently risky for rebel leaders. Public exposure of their involvement can lead to internal power struggles, fractionalization, and targeted assassinations, further diminishing trust in government intentions. Despite these risks, the presence of high-ranking officials can counterbalance rebel skepticism, signaling that negotiations are more than just tactical maneuvers. These findings reinforce the importance of strategic representative selection in overcoming barriers to cooperation.

While appointing high-level representatives enhances credibility, governments must balance other strategic considerations, including domestic political constraints, exposure risks, and the conflict's evolving demands. Future research should explore how these dynamics vary across different conflict settings and whether high-level engagement fosters short-term de-escalation and long-term cooperation. In particular, extending this study to non-democratic settings would provide valuable insights into whether authoritarian regimes employ similar strategic considerations in selecting negotiators and how their approaches influence rebel commitment and negotiation outcomes. Understanding these differences could enhance broader conflict resolution theories and the role of secret negotiations in diverse political contexts. As secret negotiations

continue to shape modern conflict resolution strategies, understanding the role of credibility in backchannel diplomacy remains more critical than ever.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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ARTICLE

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Colonial and Post-Colonial War Legitimization and Peace Process Efficacy: The Cases of Angola and Mozambique

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Abstract

The paradox of war's legitimacy has long fueled debate over what constitutes a just cause. This article examines the evolving interpretation of just war through the lens of Africa's 20th-century decolonization. It examines how struggles for national sovereignty raised questions about the legitimacy of newly formed governments and their ideologies, as well as the efficacy of peace processes facilitated by international bodies amid ongoing interference from former colonial powers in a state-centric, ideologically divided world order. This article draws on the case studies of Mozambique and Angola to explore the complexities of legitimization. These countries were selected for two reasons: First, both countries share a recent history shaped by their (de)colonization struggle against the Portuguese. Second, parallels emerge in their post-colonial power struggles and the peace processes that followed. Ultimately, this comparison intends to explain how the protagonists legitimized their struggles and assess the effectiveness of the United Nations' approach to these conflicts. The differing outcomes in these cases highlight the importance of context-specific approaches and the critical role of adaptable international support. This exploratory study relies on qualitative methods, drawing data from archival sources, particularly official documents from the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity, and parties involved in the conflicts. The study also employs discourse analysis to examine the narratives developed by various protagonists in their quest to legitimize warfare and articulate grievances during negotiations.

Keywords

Angola; legitimization of war; Mozambique; peace processes; post-colonialism; United Nations

1. Introduction

Despite decades of peacebuilding efforts, conflicts previously considered “resolved” often resurface, exposing the fragile nature of post-conflict legitimacy. In post-colonial states like Angola and Mozambique, legitimacy remains a contested process, shaped by colonial legacies, liberation struggles, and Cold War geopolitics. This study examines how different actors, namely colonial powers, insurgents, and post-independence governments, have contested and redefined legitimacy in Angola and Mozambique, influencing their peace processes and governance outcomes.

Classical war theories, particularly those influenced by von Clausewitz (1993), traditionally frame conflict within a state-centered trinity: (a) the interdependence of the army and the people, (b) war as a function of strength and will, and (c) the primacy of policy in determining military strategy (Kitzen, 2012). However, modern insurgencies and post-colonial conflicts challenge this framework, demonstrating that legitimacy struggles often dictate outcomes more than battlefield victories.

Twentieth-century wars of decolonization were not just military struggles but also battles over legitimacy. As Cold War rivalries turned colonial uprisings into proxy conflicts, Western powers institutionalized peace processes as counterinsurgency tools (Kiras, 2016). Thinkers like Thompson, Galula, and Kitson understood that force alone could not secure victory. General Templer’s “winning hearts and minds” doctrine demonstrated that allegiance, not firepower, dictated outcomes (Egnell, 2010, p. 283). Peace processes thus became not only settlements, but instruments of political engineering.

Globalization has only deepened the fractures in war-to-peace transitions. It has amplified grievances, fueled power struggles, and entrenched divisions. Yet, the underlying problem persists: The “conflict trap” cycle of weak institutions, elite dominance, and mistrust ensures that war mutates rather than ends (Egnell, 2010). In such environments, legitimacy is not merely desirable—it is existential.

Portugal’s refusal to cede autonomy ensured that decolonization in Angola and Mozambique would unfold through war, not negotiation. Without a phased transition, legitimacy was not inherited but rather constructed from the wreckage of conflict, rendering post-independence crises inevitable. Thus, the decolonization processes in Angola and Mozambique offer valuable case studies for examining the interplay between colonial legacies, legitimacy struggles, and peacebuilding in post-conflict governance.

Additionally, both Angola and Mozambique became battlegrounds for Cold War geopolitics, reinforcing their internal divisions. Angola saw Cuban and Soviet support for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola; MPLA), while the US, South Africa, and China backed the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola; UNITA), entrenching the political and military fragmentation. Similarly, in Mozambique, the socialist governance of the Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique; FRELIMO) faced direct opposition from the Mozambican National Resistance (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana; RENAMO), which received support first from Rhodesia and later from apartheid South Africa. These geopolitical rivalries not only shaped the legitimacy claims of governing parties but also dictated the design and effectiveness of peace processes.

The comparison between Angola and Mozambique is particularly valuable for understanding how external interventions, historical grievances, and competing legitimacy narratives shape post-conflict state-building. Unlike other post-colonial contexts where negotiated transitions facilitated continuity, these two cases demonstrate the consequences of abrupt ruptures, militarized state-building, and externally influenced peace settlements. This makes them critical for broader discussions on the efficacy of peace processes in post-colonial states, illustrating how legitimacy struggles persist long after war formally ends. This study explores these issues by systematically analyzing how legitimacy has been framed, contested, and institutionalized during colonial rule, the independence struggles, and post-independence peace processes in Angola and Mozambique.

1.1. Research Focus and Contribution

While existing research on post-colonial African conflicts has largely focused on structural weaknesses of African states or external interventions shaping their post-independence trajectories, legitimacy as a dynamic and contested process remains underexplored. Much of the current scholarship treats legitimacy as a fixed, legalistic concept, overlooking its fluidity and strategic use by different actors. Moreover, peace processes are often studied through the lens of diplomatic negotiations or institutional reforms, rather than through the deeper, ongoing struggles over legitimacy that shape long-term governance. This study fills this gap by examining how legitimacy functioned as a political tool in both war and peace processes in Angola and Mozambique. The research also interrogates the effectiveness of peace processes beyond the cessation of hostilities, assessing whether they addressed the root causes of conflict, facilitated sustainable governance, and reshaped legitimacy narratives.

This study engages legitimacy theory by drawing on Weber's typology (traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational legitimacy), liberal peace theory, and post-colonial state-building debates. Given the abrupt transitions from colonial rule to independence in Angola and Mozambique, these theoretical perspectives help analyze how legitimacy was constructed amid war, political upheaval, and external interventions. These cases allow for a critical examination of whether Western-centric models of state legitimacy apply in post-colonial governance or require adaptation to local political contexts. By situating Angola and Mozambique within these broader debates, this study contributes to an evolving understanding of legitimacy beyond legal-institutional frameworks.

This article defines legitimacy as the constructed, contested, and negotiated belief that an actor or institution has the right to govern (Hurd, n.d.; Weber, 1968). Rather than treating it as a fixed legal category, legitimacy is understood here as a dynamic resource mobilized by both state and non-state actors through claims to authority, service provision, historical narratives, and external recognition. The term peace process is used not only to describe formal and informal negotiations or ceasefires, but also the broader set of political, institutional, and discursive mechanisms aimed at transitioning from conflict to post-war governance (Richmond & Franks, 2009). Finally, elite survival refers to both domestic and international strategies employed by ruling actors to maintain political control, often prioritizing regime continuity, access to resources, and international legitimacy over democratic inclusion (Bayart, 2000).

Thus, the study is guided by the following central research question: How have colonial powers, liberation movements, and post-independence governments in Angola and Mozambique contested and redefined

legitimacy, and how have these contestations shaped governance outcomes and the success of peace processes? The study is guided by the sub questions below:

1. How did liberation movements construct and sustain legitimacy from resistance to governance?
2. How did post-independence governments assert legitimacy amid Cold War rivalries and internal opposition?
3. Did peace processes redefine legitimacy, or reinforce elite control?

By engaging with these questions, this study moves beyond descriptive historical accounts and evaluates not only the formal peace agreements but also the broader socio-political transformations they attempted to bring about.

1.2. Methodological Approach

This study employs a comparative case study design, analyzing Angola and Mozambique as two post-colonial states with shared colonial legacies but divergent post-independence trajectories. This approach enables an examination of both structural factors (colonial policies, international interventions) and agency-driven factors (legitimacy strategies of political actors) shaping peacebuilding outcomes.

Given the complexity of post-colonial transitions, qualitative methods are used:

- Historical analysis: Traces the evolution of legitimacy from colonial rule to post-independence governance, drawing from archival records, official documents, and secondary sources.
- Critical discourse analysis: Examines how political actors framed legitimacy in speeches, peace agreements, and diplomatic discourse, identifying patterns in justification strategies, delegitimization of opposition, and appeals to international recognition.
- Process tracing: Maps key events, turning points, and external interventions that shaped legitimacy struggles in Angola and Mozambique, focusing on shifts in governance strategies and peace process outcomes.

1.2.1. Data Sources and Analytical Framework

The study relies on both primary and secondary sources to ensure comprehensive, evidence-based analysis. Primary sources were selected based on their direct relevance to legitimacy framing (e.g., political speeches, peace agreements, and United Nations [UN] reports), while secondary sources were chosen for their scholarly engagement with state-building and peace processes in Africa. Data collection focused on documents explicitly discussing legitimacy, governance strategies, and peace negotiations to ensure alignment with the study's research questions.

1.2.2. Analytical Dimensions

The study engages in temporal analysis, assessing how legitimization strategies and peace process efficacy evolved over time, and emphasizes that legitimacy can stem from both state and non-state actors. It also assesses peace outcomes and the impact of global dynamics like the Cold War, questioning whether missions

fostered lasting peace or elite dominance. The combined historical, discursive, and process-based analysis frames legitimacy as a dynamic process in post-conflict governance.

2. The Theoretical Challenge of Legitimacy

Hurd (n.d.) defines legitimacy as “the belief that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern.” However, who determines legitimacy, on what basis, and through which mechanisms? These questions become even more complex in post-colonial states, where multiple legitimacy claims, rooted in historical grievances, ideological struggles, and foreign interventions, often compete. This article approaches legitimacy as a political resource that is constructed, contested, and instrumentalized by different actors, drawing on Max Weber’s typology of authority, Pierre Englebert’s concept of historical legitimacy, and Jean-François Bayart’s theory of extraversion and elite preservation.

Weber (1968) identifies three ideal types of legitimacy: rational-legal authority, based on formal institutions and legal frameworks; traditional authority, rooted in historical customs and inherited power structures; and charismatic authority, which relies on the personal influence of a leader. Western governance models typically emphasize rational-legal legitimacy as the normative foundation of state authority, assuming that well-functioning institutions will naturally generate political stability. But post-colonial states often exhibit hybrid structures, where multiple sources of legitimacy like charisma, tradition, historical grievances, nationalist movements, and military strength compete for dominance. While Weber’s typology remains foundational, its application to post-colonial governance reveals important limitations.

Englebert (2000) deepens this analysis by arguing that most post-colonial African states suffer from a fundamental legitimacy deficit, which he terms a lack of “historical legitimacy.” Their institutions are often artificial inheritances from colonial administration, unmoored from native political traditions and practices. As a result, many of these states struggle to convert legal authority into actual political legitimacy, especially in peripheral regions, leading to recurring governance crises and insurgent challenges. Lemke (2003) echoes this diagnosis by showing how post-colonial states inherit weak statehood: They possess formal sovereignty but lack the institutional depth or territorial control to exercise legitimate authority beyond major cities.

Therefore, the legitimacy of the state is fragile, and alternative actors such as insurgent movements, warlords, or communal authorities step in to fill the vacuum. These actors may not derive their claims to rule from constitutions or elections, but rather from their capacity to mobilize historical memory, provide essential services, position themselves as defenders of the people, or through coercion, patronage, and territorial control. In this sense, insurgent legitimacy does not operate within the boundaries of legal rationality but instead draws on symbolic and functional dimensions, resistance narratives, localized governance, and external alliances. However, insurgencies are not monolithic, nor are they always aligned with the populations they claim to represent. This complexity challenges Western counterinsurgency doctrines, which tend to treat insurgencies as either illegitimate spoilers or revolutionary actors.

Bayart (2000) pushes this critique further by showing how many post-colonial insurgent and state-based regimes are not primarily oriented toward democratic legitimacy or institutional accountability. Rather, they operate through what he calls “extraversion,” a strategy in which elites maintain power by mobilizing external resources, forging international alliances, and embedding themselves in patron–client networks.

In such systems, legitimacy is often detached from popular participation and instead hinges on elite preservation, foreign support, and control over state rents. This has direct implications for peacebuilding: Even when peace agreements are reached, they often do not restructure power or reform governance but simply entrench existing elite arrangements. Lewis (2020) notes that attempts to integrate former insurgents into formal state structures frequently fail, precisely because dominant elites resist reforms that could undermine their control. The peace process, in this view, becomes an extension of the wartime political order rather than a transformative moment.

Smith and Jones (2015) argue that “the paradox is that all war is unique, yet all doctrine is, in theory, fixed” (p. 36). Peace agreements assume a linear progression from conflict to institutional stability, but in practice, they often reinforce the very dynamics that produced war in the first place. Richmond and Franks (2009) document how, in Angola and Mozambique, peacebuilding efforts reinforced the dominance of ruling parties rather than opening space for inclusive governance or structural reform. These cases demonstrate how fragile post-conflict legitimacy can be when it is shaped more by elite continuity and external validation than by genuine societal consensus.

These theoretical frameworks challenge state-centric models of legitimacy. While Weber provides a typology to classify the types of authority invoked, Englebert explains post-colonial institutional fragility, and Bayart reveals elite survival strategies. Applied to Angola and Mozambique, these frameworks show how the different actors have reshaped legitimacy across different phases of conflict and peacebuilding, redefining the concept from merely a normative ideal, to a terrain of struggle, a product of history, and a strategy for survival.

2.1. The Political Challenge

The central academic critique of Western interventions is that their conceptions of war and governance fundamentally undermine peace processes, as insurgencies are ultimately rooted in contested authority. Legitimacy, in turn, is a subjective construct shaped by context-specific values. Rooted in liberal peace theory, the Western normative approach does not acknowledge traditional forms of legitimacy and thus finds resistance (Egnell, 2010). Using the example of Somalia, Ucko (2013) shows that despite being a “failed state,” anarchy has not succeeded as communities are self-organized. This perspective is significant in that it acknowledges the agency of local populations, countering the Western tendency to portray them primarily as passive victims. Legitimizing peace processes encounters challenges at both operational and moral levels, as interventions may be perceived as neo-imperialism, self-serving stabilization efforts, or outright foreign influence, rather than genuine conflict resolution (Kilcullen, 2012).

Moreover, the challenge of maintaining prestige is not solely internal; external actors overseeing peace processes often operate within democratic political systems. These systems are shaped by re-election cycles, rendering peace operations subject to shifting political will. As a result, there is often a preference for quick solutions—an approach that undermines coherence in warfare (Marston, 2008).

2.2. The Operational Challenge

Peace processes must balance mediation with security enforcement (Kilcullen, 2012). Military actions must deter insurgents without alienating civilians—a delicate balance made more difficult when peace requires

including violent actors in negotiations (Vick et al., 2006, pp. 27–52). Eikenberry (2013, p. 61) poses critical questions: “Protect the population from whom and against what?...What about criminal narco-traffickers, venal local police chiefs, or predatory government officials?” Insurgents often reject peace talks when they perceive a threat to their power (Kilcullen, 2012).

Furthermore, peace operations often fail due to a poor understanding of insurgencies’ socio-cultural environments (Berdal, 2016). Targeting poverty alone does not end violence, especially when the root causes involve governance failures or ethnic and religious tensions. Regular interaction with civilians fosters trust and helps troops understand local dynamics (Ucko, 2013). Local partnerships enhance legitimacy and support information gathering, and since insurgencies rely on popular backing, the strategy must be bottom-up (Kitzen, 2012). Funding must also address local needs without fostering dependency, especially given budget rigidity and unpredictable events (Ucko, 2013).

2.3. Peace Processes

Today, peacebuilding emphasizes *positive peace*—a concept that goes beyond merely ending violence (negative peace) to include social justice, equality, and structures that promote well-being and cooperation (Galtung, 1969). The UN leads these efforts primarily through multidimensional peacekeeping operations (PKOs), which support political transitions, protect civilians, disarm combatants, promote human rights, and restore the rule of law (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2008).

However, these missions face significant legitimacy and operational challenges. Political rivalries, especially among the UN Security Council’s Permanent Five, and the absence of a standing UN force, despite being envisioned in Article 43 of the Charter, limit their effectiveness (Roberts, 2008). Member states often prioritize national credit and blur distinctions between UN and non-UN missions, further complicating deployments (Bellamy & Williams, 2009; Koops, 2009).

Structural issues, such as the UN Security Council’s veto power and limited collaboration with regional organizations, exacerbate perceptions of neo-colonialism and overload the UN, weakening local and regional responses (Gray, 2008). Ad hoc deployment by voluntary contributors also undermines mission effectiveness, with some operations lasting decades despite the Capstone Doctrine’s assertion of their temporary nature (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2008).

Failures in rapid deployment and conflict prevention, as seen in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Somalia, have damaged the UN’s credibility (Bellamy & Williams, 2009). Since *An Agenda for Peace* (Boutros-Ghali, 1992), PKOs have expanded their scope to include human security, responsibility to protect (R2P), and civilian protection (Baldwin, 1997), but this has overstretched their capabilities (Bove et al., 2022).

The absence of clear mandates and the burden of overly broad expectations has undermined military personnel’s role, causing confusion, reduced legitimacy, and hampered intelligence gathering (Ponsaer, 2001). Moreover, legal requirements like Status-of-Forces Agreements can delay deployment and reduce perceived neutrality, turning PKO personnel into “law officers” rather than peace enforcers (Bove et al., 2022).

Contemporary conflicts, often driven by non-state actors, further challenge the state-based model of PKOs and raise issues around local ownership, economic dependencies, and environmental impacts (Gledhill et al., 2021).

There is growing consensus that peacekeeping must prioritize local contexts. PKOs should be understood not merely as violence management but as processes fostering long-term structural change. Emphasizing grassroots perspectives and local agency is crucial for building legitimate and sustainable peace.

3. Case Studies

Peace processes entail different dynamics that have mutated over time. Mozambique and Angola illustrate this evolution while also highlighting the importance of tailored, context-specific approaches to peacebuilding.

3.1. *Angola and Mozambique: The Same Struggle?*

For almost five centuries, Mozambique (1492–1975) and Angola (1482–1975) were Portuguese colonies. The colonial administration was characterized by policies of forced labour, cultural suppression, and economic exploitation, which, combined with the momentum of the international liberation movement, spurred national movements seeking to free their countries from Portuguese rule (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004). Nevertheless, the national liberation movements were not solely focused on ending colonial rule. An internal struggle for a unique national representation arose in which different actors, although sharing the same goal, would compete to be the only legitimate representatives of their nations (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004).

Angola and Mozambique achieved independence from Portugal in 1975 after protracted wars of national liberation and the Carnation Revolution (Revolução dos Cravos) on the colonial mainland. In Mozambique, FRELIMO positioned itself as the legitimate representative of the Mozambican people, advocating for national liberation and social justice (Phiri & Macheve, 2014). Similarly, in Angola, the MPLA aimed to gain domestic and international legitimacy by leading the fight against Portuguese colonization (Muto & Saraiva, 2020). In both cases, the liberation movements were rooted in anti-colonialist and initially communist ideologies, but their transitions to peace and governance produced different outcomes.

Mozambique's war for independence began in 1964, led by FRELIMO. After a decade of conflict, the Lusaka Accords were signed on September 7, 1974, between FRELIMO and the Portuguese government, granting Mozambique the right to self-determination. Independence was officially declared on June 25, 1975—FRELIMO's 13th anniversary (Vines, 1996). FRELIMO established itself as the ruling party but encountered resistance from RENAMO, an insurgent group initially supported by apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia. RENAMO's dissent emerged in response to FRELIMO's authoritarianism and neglect of rural areas, seeking legitimization through the representation of the marginalized and subjugated voices. On the other hand, FRELIMO saw itself as the protector of national sovereignty and the socialist revolution (Vines, 1996).

The civil war lasted from 1977–1992, leading to the Rome General Peace Accords. The mutual exhaustion—both economic and human—created an unsustainable stalemate, which in turn fostered a willingness to engage in dialogue. The Catholic Church, principally the Community of Sant'Egidio, played a crucial role in

the mediation of peace talks as it legitimized the negotiations. Nevertheless, it was the inclusiveness of the dialogue—particularly the involvement of civil society organizations—that led to successful peace negotiations (Weinstein, 2007). The success of the Accords lies not only in their ability to end the civil war, but also in their establishment of a framework for political pluralism through the incorporation of RENAMO into the political process (Hume, 1994). This reflects the broader definition of peace process used in this article, not just as a settlement mechanism, but as a space for negotiated legitimacy and power reconfiguration.

Angola's transition history was the opposite, enduring a civil war until 2002 (Malaquias, 1996). The war for independence started in 1961, with the MPLA, UNITA, and the FNLA (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola; National Front for the Liberation of Angola) as the main nationalist movements. Due to the mass exile of its members, the FNLA lost its relevance during the conflict. Negotiations with Portugal concluded with the Alvor Agreement (January 15, 1975), setting the terms for Angola's transition to independence. However, the agreement failed to establish a stable power-sharing arrangement, leading to immediate conflict (Nalley, 2008).

The civil war, which officially began on November 11, 1975, persisted for decades, largely shaped by external support and control over resources. While the death of Jonas Savimbi, founder and leader of UNITA, in 2002 is often seen as the turning point that ended the conflict, this view oversimplifies the war's conclusion. As Ganesan and Vines (2004) highlight, UN-backed sanctions had already weakened UNITA by restricting its access to arms and illicit diamond revenues. Additionally, the MPLA had gained military dominance, and the loss of Cold War-era foreign backers further constrained UNITA's ability to continue fighting. The war's end was thus not solely a result of Savimbi's death but also of broader structural factors that made sustained conflict untenable. This underscores how legitimacy in post-conflict transitions is shaped not just by leadership changes but also by economic and geopolitical dynamics.

While the civil war was ostensibly ideological, it was in reality a proxy conflict shaped by Cold War dynamics (Paul et al., 2013). The incentive for the external powers centered on the country's wealth—primarily its diamonds, controlled by UNITA, and its oil, controlled by the MPLA (Malaquias, 1996). During the 1980s, the first international peace negotiation took place—the New York Accords. Signed by Angola, South Africa, and Cuba on December 22, 1988, the Accords removed Cuba's troops from the battlefield, which had been since 1975, permitting the decrease of tensions between the superpowers in Angola and keeping negotiations open (Paul et al., 2013). Nevertheless, except for Cuba, the Accords failed to forbid foreign interventions and foster the creation of a coalition government and transitional rules, which would have avoided the “winner takes it all” result (Messiant, 2004).

The military stalemate and external pressures, exacerbated by the end of the Cold War, led to the Bicesse Accords in 1991, which aimed to settle the civil war. The agreement outlined a transition to multiparty democracy and provisions for demobilization, mediated by a Troika: Portugal, the US, and the USSR (Marcum, 1995). However, its implementation was flawed. In the 1992 elections, José Eduardo dos Santos won 49.56% of the vote, narrowly missing an outright victory, which triggered a planned presidential run-off. However, the run-off never took place as the country descended back into war, with UNITA rejecting the results and renewed violence breaking out. Meanwhile, both the MPLA and UNITA continued exploiting Angola's natural resources to fund their military efforts, further escalating the conflict. The end of the

Cold War also saw the retreat of superpower involvement, shifting the war's dynamics as external backers reduced their direct influence (Paul et al., 2013).

The critical error of the Bicesse Accords was not postponing the elections, as was done in Mozambique. The political and military conditions had not been met, and the MPLA victory heightened tensions. Contrary to the perception of a stalemate, UNITA held the upper hand militarily until well into 1994, controlling significant territories and resources (Messiant, 2004). However, international dynamics began shifting against UNITA. The election of Bill Clinton in November 1992 brought a change in US policy, reducing previous tacit support for Savimbi. At the same time, the humanitarian crisis worsened, prompting intensified lobbying efforts by the UN. The MPLA leveraged this momentum to secure international recognition, leading to a series of UN sanctions against UNITA between 1993 and 1997. These included a ban on military equipment and petroleum products (Resolution 864), travel restrictions on UNITA officials (Resolution 1127), the freezing of UNITA bank accounts, and a prohibition on the trade of illegal diamonds (Resolution 1173; Paulo, 2004).

UNITA's stalemate ended when it rejected the US-backed Abidjan Protocol, prompting the US to recognize the MPLA as the legitimate government and support UN sanctions. This decision was also driven by the discovery of offshore oil reserves under the MPLA's control (Messiant, 2004). The new conditions led to the Lusaka Protocol in 1994. To overcome the shortcomings of the Bicesse Accords, the Protocol established a new ceasefire agreement, along with a revised demobilization framework, a second round of presidential elections, and the integration of UNITA into the new Government of Unity and National Reconciliation (Messiant, 2004). However, this Government, officially formed in 1997, was run exclusively by the MPLA. The Protocol failed, once again, due to the parties' unwillingness to disarm and the lack of adequate international enforcement mechanisms (Kopiński, 2018). Furthermore, it did not include the "triple zero clause"—present in Bicesse—which prohibited the re-armament of both parties. The "peace for diamonds" proposal, which envisioned the sharing of said commodities, also collapsed due to UNITA's refusal to cede control of the diamond mines for legal revenues due to its mistrust of the MPLA (Paul et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, the main catalyst for the continuation of the civil war was labelling UNITA's rebellion as illegitimate and, thus, the only faction expected to disarm and demilitarize. This shift in the legitimacy narrative, favoring the MPLA, illustrates how legitimacy operates not as a neutral legal status but as a politically constructed tool shaped by international alignment and elite strategy. This ended the symmetry between the parties and created disparities in the obligations and rights of the belligerents, increasing discontent (Messiant, 2004). The failure of the Protocol was internationally recognized, but the blame was put solely on UNITA for not disarming. The international community's alienation of UNITA ultimately bolstered the MPLA's ambitions, culminating in the launch of the "war for peace" at the end of 1998, spurred by UN Security Council's Resolution 1173 sanctioning UNITA's diamond trade (Messiant, 2004).

The eventual peace agreement, the Luena Memorandum of Understanding, was signed on April 4, 2002, after the official military defeat of UNITA and the assassination of its leader, Jonas Savimbi, by the Counterinsurgency (COIN) forces of the US, Brazil, and Israel. The peace process was significantly shaped by the imposition of international sanctions and the MPLA's eventual military supremacy (Kopiński, 2018). The Luena Memorandum of Understanding reaffirmed the principles of the Lusaka Protocol but, most importantly, was led by the Angolans through the Angolan Armed Forces (*Forças Armadas Angolanas*) and UNITA (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004).

Overall, the Angolan and Mozambican trajectories reveal that peace processes are deeply embedded in struggles over legitimacy, not just between factions but across competing local, national, and international narratives. As these cases demonstrate, legitimacy was not merely derived from formal peace agreements or institutional reforms but was actively produced through claims to historical justice, elite bargaining, and geopolitical alignment. This affirms the study's core argument that legitimacy must be understood as a dynamic and contested resource, shaped by the legacy of colonial rule (Englebert), strategically instrumentalized by post-independence elites (Bayart), and filtered through external frameworks like liberal peacebuilding. The contrast between Mozambique's negotiated pluralism and Angola's militarized consolidation illustrates how different configurations of legitimacy claims, whether inclusive or exclusionary, deeply influence the effectiveness, sustainability, and local resonance of peace processes.

3.2. New Country, New Identity: The War for Legitimization

Legitimization depends on both local and international recognition. A government acknowledged internationally but lacking domestic support, or vice versa, faces legitimacy challenges. The legacy of colonial borders drawn at the 1885 Berlin Conference, which ignored Africa's ethnic and tribal realities, has complicated national identity formation on the continent. Post-independence and the struggle for dominance among ethnic groups often led to civil war, as factions sought to define the national identity in their own image (Heath, 2010).

In Mozambique, figures like Archbishop Jaime Pedro Gonçalves served as crucial catalysts for peace by facilitating dialogue between rival groups. His neutrality and moral authority legitimized his role, fostering communication beyond entrenched divisions (Bartoli et al., 2010). This "Italian formula" of peacebuilding, facilitated by Sant'Egidio, introduced a conflict resolution model that relied on grassroots movements alongside external assurances (Bussotti, 2021). While it succeeded in ending violence, it resulted in a state of "negative peace" characterized by exclusion rather than reconciliation (Bussotti, 2021). The failure to adequately address decentralization, a key demand by RENAMO, exemplifies the incomplete nature of the legitimization process (Muto & Saraiva, 2020). RENAMO's demands were rooted in a sense of marginalization from the FRELIMO-led government (Muto & Saraiva, 2020), but RENAMO's political strategy was shaped by its historical evolution.

Initially, RENAMO was tightly controlled by Rhodesia and later by apartheid South Africa until 1984, when it began operating with greater autonomy. Unlike conventional insurgencies seeking outright power, RENAMO primarily aimed to maintain a strategic stalemate, inflict damage on the government, and extract concessions through elite bargaining rather than directly threatening FRELIMO's dominance. This dynamic shaped the post-war political order, where FRELIMO maintained its control by institutionalizing a "managed democracy." This system superficially upheld democratic principles, such as elections, to create a façade of legitimacy while functioning as a de facto authoritarian regime (Phiri & Macheve, 2014). This aligns with the definition of elite survival employed in this study, where legitimacy is instrumentalized to sustain power rather than foster inclusive governance. Although this system allowed for a degree of political competition, it failed to address exclusion and inequality, raising concerns about long-term legitimacy. Many RENAMO fighters were former FRELIMO members, showing how internal fractures fueled ongoing violence and identity struggles (Bartoli et al., 2010).

Angola followed a parallel path. The 1975 Alvor Accord lacked a viable transition framework, resulting in military zones controlled by the MPLA and UNITA. These zones became platforms for elite-driven identity construction, polarizing the population into “UNITA people” and “MPLA people” (Pearce, 2015). Each group employed symbolic state-building strategies to demonstrate capacity and earn legitimacy at home and abroad (Paul et al., 2013; Pearce, 2015). Both sought to monopolize national identity and presented themselves as the sole liberators of Angola. This exclusionary narrative, combined with deep animosity, repeatedly undermined peace negotiations (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004).

3.3. The Role of the UN and the International Community

International actors were central to both countries’ peace processes. The UN played a key role in mediation and peacebuilding and was largely perceived as a neutral actor facilitating the implementation of settlements (Malaquias, 1996). Nevertheless, the use of international legitimacy to consolidate power often encounters resistance, as it may be perceived as externally imposed rather than organically developed—as was the case of the MPLA (Dodge, 2012). This suggests that in resource-rich post-conflict states, external actors often reinforce elite dominance rather than fostering inclusive governance structures. International involvement also becomes an instrument for securing external legitimacy and a source of authority for claiming national legitimacy.

In Mozambique, the UN’s ONUMOZ (Operação das Nações Unidas em Moçambique; United Nations Operations in Mozambique) mission (1992–1994) was instrumental in implementing the 1992 General Peace Agreement, overseeing ceasefires, elections, and reconstruction (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). The UN continued to support peacebuilding through programs such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, and the World Food Programme (Nhamaze & Moyo, 2022). Bilateral donors, however, played a decisive role by directly supporting democratic development. They funded political party participation, including RENAMO’s transformation into a legitimate electoral contender. Trust funds were established to support all parties equally, helping legitimize the peace process (Manning & Malbrough, 2010).

In Angola, UN involvement was more fragmented and less effective. Multiple missions—from UNAVEM I (United Nations Angola Verification Mission I) to the United Nations Mission in Angola (UNMA) were deployed, but faced weak mandates, low compliance, and dwindling international interest (Kopiński, 2018). These limitations, combined with the entrenched interests of the warring parties, hindered the UN’s impact.

These dynamics reinforce the study’s central argument that legitimacy in post-conflict settings is not a normative end-state to be achieved, but a historically situated and politically contested process. As both Angola and Mozambique demonstrate, identity formation, international recognition, and elite strategies intersect to produce hybrid forms of legitimacy that do not always reflect inclusive or participatory governance. Whether through RENAMO’s strategic bargaining, the MPLA’s monopolization of national identity, or the UN’s uneven engagement, legitimacy emerged not from broad-based consensus but from the successful consolidation of authority, often aligned with international expectations or geopolitical interests. This supports the theoretical claim that post-colonial legitimacy must be understood as a terrain of negotiation, deeply shaped by colonial legacies (Englebert), elite preservation strategies (Bayart), and the limitations of liberal peace frameworks that prioritize formal institutions over grassroots legitimacy.

3.4. Discursive Construction of Legitimacy: A Critical Discourse Analysis

To further unpack how legitimacy was constructed and contested in Angola and Mozambique, this section employs critical discourse analysis to examine the rhetoric of key domestic leaders and international actors. Discourse is understood here not merely as reflection but as a performative mechanism through which power, authority, and legitimacy are claimed, challenged, and institutionalized (Fairclough, 1995). By analyzing political speeches and evolving UN language, this section highlights how discourse functioned as a strategic resource within post-conflict state-building.

Samora Machel's 1975 independence speech exemplifies the use of revolutionary rhetoric to consolidate legitimacy. By framing Mozambique as "a State born of our people's struggle for freedom and independence," Machel anchored FRELIMO's authority in a narrative of historical resistance (Machel, 1975). His denouncement of colonialism as a "leech" and "python" positioned FRELIMO as the moral antithesis to Portuguese oppression, while his appeal to unity—"We do not know tribes...we know only Mozambicans" (Machel, 1975)—constructed a national identity that delegitimized division and opposition. This aligns with critical discourse analysis's emphasis on how discourse constructs social reality and legitimates political orders (van Dijk, 2006).

Agostinho Neto's 1976 UN address similarly framed the MPLA as the authentic voice of the Angolans by aligning Angola's anti-colonial struggle with broader anti-imperialist and pan-African movements. His reference to FRELIMO and the MPLA as "authentic African national liberation movements" served to delegitimize rival factions like UNITA, casting them as counter-revolutionary (Neto, 1976). Neto's invocation of solidarity and Marxist internationalism reinforced the MPLA's authority through global moral alignment.

In both countries, the UN's discourse also evolved. Initially framed as neutral and technical, the UN's rhetoric toward UNITA shifted significantly after its rejection of the 1992 election results. Secretary-General's Special Representative to Angola Margaret Anstee's description of UNITA as seeking power "at any cost" marked a transition from neutral observation to active delegitimization (Anstee, 1996). Sanctions, framed not just as legal measures but as moral judgments, were accompanied by discourse that increasingly labeled UNITA as a spoiler, not a legitimate actor. This evolution reflects how international discourse functions not only as policy but as a legitimacy-producing mechanism (Richmond, 2011).

These examples demonstrate that discourse was not ancillary but central to the construction, erosion, and reordering of legitimacy. Through symbolic framing, historical appeals, and moral binaries, both domestic leaders and international actors employed language to claim authority, delegitimize opponents, and shape post-conflict political orders.

3.5. Disparities in the Cases

Mozambique followed a "foreign aid-driven model," whilst Angola adopted a "petrostate model" (Pérez Niño & Le Billion, 2013). Aside from the donors, there are several differences between these approaches. Regarding autonomy, Angola enjoys greater maneuverability due to its control over the oil rent. Concerning effectiveness, foreign aid undermines the quality of political institutions as they lack autonomy, although both models tend to have low institutional quality (Pérez Niño & Le Billion, 2013).

In comparing the two countries, international involvement in Mozambique's peace process was more robust and coordinated, particularly from bilateral donors and the UN. In fact, Mozambique's reliance on foreign aid-driven peacebuilding resembles post-conflict Sierra Leone and Liberia, where external donors played a central role in funding institutions and reconstruction. However, long-term stability remains uncertain, as donor-driven governance often leads to dependency rather than self-sufficiency (Paris, 2004). Aid inevitably influences the balance of power within the recipient country, creating an environment where donors are reluctant to acknowledge the negative impacts on peace and legitimacy (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). In Mozambique, due to the lack of central coordination, donors assumed the role of the state (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). This dynamic creates a sense of donor ownership.

The interplay between the bilateral donors and the UN was crucial for legitimizing the peace process. A combination of regular meetings, support from UNDP electoral experts with experience in Angola, and extensive briefings allowed for advanced coordination and a comprehensive analysis of the situation (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). For instance, the Group for Democracy Aid (GAD)—a group of bilateral donors focused on democratic initiatives—acted as the facilitator for bilateral donors, enabling the exchange of information among them. This communication network reassured RENAMO's leadership and reduced tensions between RENAMO and the government (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). Over time, these consistent meetings forged a sense of institutional identity, solidifying the GAD's position as the leading donor group in electoral assistance (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). The GAD gained legitimacy through this approach, effectively influencing ONUMOZ, FRELIMO, and RENAMO. Nevertheless, other factors such as the absence of strategic natural resources and the lessons learned from Angola cannot be undervalued in the success of Mozambique's democratic process (Manning & Malbrough, 2010).

Conversely, Angola's international intervention did not achieve the same level of compromise as in Mozambique. A key example lies in the differences in UN involvement between the Bicesse Accords in Angola and the General Peace Agreement in Mozambique. UNAVEM I, established before the end of the Cold War, comprised 70 military observers and 20 civilian officials, successfully overseeing the withdrawal of Cuban troops as stipulated in the Tripartite Agreement. UNAVEM II was later deployed with 350 unarmed military observers, 90 police observers (later increased to 126), and 100 electoral observers (later increased to 400), tasked with supervising the implementation of the Bicesse Accords.

Although UNAVEM II lacked strong enforcement mechanisms, the UN played a more active role in the electoral process than is generally acknowledged. In December 1991, the Angolan government formally requested UN technical assistance for election preparation, voter registration, and monitoring. An agreement was signed in January 1992, leading to the deployment of UN electoral observers throughout the process until its completion in the fall of 1992. However, despite this involvement, failure to ensure compliance with key provisions of the Bicesse Accords, particularly regarding disarmament and political integration, ultimately undermined the peace process (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004).

Angola's experience mirrors South Sudan, where oil wealth allowed ruling elites to consolidate power rather than fostering inclusive governance (de Waal, 2014). This highlights a broader trend in resource-rich post-conflict states, where economic structures shape the success or failure of peace transitions (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). Angola's peace processes were initially less successful due to insufficient international enforcement (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004). Peace was eventually achieved more through military victory than comprehensive peacebuilding efforts (Kopiński, 2018).

Moreover, Angola faced a more competitive environment for attracting international assistance. Some scholars, such as Malaquias (1996), suggest that the post-Cold War international order positioned the UN as the quasi-sole peacekeeper and peacebuilder. The scarcity of international resources and interest thus created a “competition” between countries torn by internal conflict, making Angola less of a priority (Malaquias, 1996). This could explain why, in contrast to other contemporary UN missions such as the UN Transition Assistance Group in Namibia, UNAMEV did not organize the elections (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004).

Conversely, the 1992 General Peace Agreement in Mozambique saw more effective UN involvement through ONUMOZ. Lessons from Angola’s challenges in disarmament and political integration were applied in Mozambique. The experiences in Angola highlighted the need for sustained international engagement, enforcement mechanisms, and comprehensive support for political and social reconstruction (Manning & Malbrough, 2010). The relative success of ONUMOZ provided a model for later peacekeeping missions, demonstrating the value of context-specific strategies, sustained international engagement, and local ownership in peace processes in addressing both immediate security concerns and long-term development needs (Bartoli et al., 2010).

3.6. The New Global Order and the Evolution of UN Missions

UN PKOs have evolved alongside global political shifts, particularly after the Cold War. This evolution is evident in the missions deployed in Angola and Mozambique. During the Cold War, UN missions were limited to ceasefire monitoring and border control, avoiding internal political engagement. The Bicesse Accords in Angola exemplify this minimal scope, where they aimed for a political transition but lacked mechanisms for disarmament and integration, ultimately reigniting conflict (Meijer & Birmingham, 2004). National elections were largely considered sovereign matters, with limited exceptions such as Namibia (Malaquias, 1996).

Post-Cold War, the *Agenda for Peace* (Boutros-Ghali, 1992) redefined UN engagement to include diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction (Muto & Saraiva, 2020). The limitations of UNAVEM in Angola showed that peace efforts were undermined by a lack of local legitimacy and an overreliance on elite-driven governance structures (Grare & Maley, 2011). Thus, UN mandates were bound to match the realities of the civilians by being adaptive and context-specific (Bartoli et al., 2010). This shift is evident in ONUMOZ, which incorporated a broad range of activities from disarmament to supporting democratic elections, in contrast to UNAVEM II, which had a mandate of verification and monitoring (Manning & Malbrough, 2010).

Despite this new vision, UNAVEM III (1995) failed to embody the shift, offering limited capacity to address root causes like elite power struggles (Paulo, 2004). MONUA (United Nations Observer Mission in Angola), which followed, suffered from reduced resources and legitimacy. Later missions—UNOA (United Nations Office in Angola) and UNMA—repeated these shortcomings, with insufficient personnel and weak mandates. Ultimately, the UN could only endorse the Luena Memorandum of Understanding, having lost the trust of the parties involved (Paulo, 2004).

Moreover, the contrasts between Mozambique’s donor-driven governance model and Angola’s petrostate logic illustrate how economic structures and international engagement patterns fundamentally reshape the

legitimacy landscape in post-conflict states. These cases affirm that legitimacy is not simply a product of institutional design or international endorsement but emerges through negotiated relations of power, authority, and historical continuity. The countries' divergent outcomes demonstrate how peace processes serve as arenas where legitimacy is not only claimed but instrumentalized, supporting Bayart's theory of elite extraversion and Englebert's critique of institutional disjuncture. Furthermore, the evolution of UN peacekeeping mandates from minimal ceasefire monitoring to multidimensional state-building reflects a growing, though inconsistent, recognition that legitimacy cannot be imposed externally but must be cultivated through locally resonant, historically informed, and politically inclusive frameworks.

3.7. Post-Conflict: All That Glitters Is not Gold

Long-term peace and legitimacy are best measured by a country's post-conflict trajectory. In this regard, Angola and Mozambique diverged significantly. Angola, with a 2023 GDP of \$84.82 billion, dwarfs Mozambique's \$20.95 billion (World Bank, 2023). Angola remains dependent on oil, producing 1.55 million barrels daily in 2021. Yet, it imports 80% of its refined oil, exposing its economy to volatility and persistent poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, n.d.).

Mozambique, by contrast, is capitalizing on liquefied natural gas investments, since its agriculture sector, key for employment, has not recovered from the Covid-19 shock (World Bank, 2024a). In both countries, informality dominates, with 80% of the workforce in informal employment (World Bank, 2024b). In terms of human development, Angola's Human Development Index (HDI) stood at 0.591 in 2022, with a life expectancy of 61.9 years, 12.2 expected years of schooling, and 5.8 years of actual schooling. Mozambique's HDI was lower at 0.461, with a life expectancy of 59.6 years and only 3.9 years of schooling (UNDP, 2022).

Both countries struggle with governance, human rights, and deep-rooted grievances. Angola's group grievance score rose from 7.8 (2020) to 8.6 (2024), while Mozambique's jumped from 5.3 to 7.5 over the same period (Fund for Peace, n.d.). On human rights and the rule of law, Angola has held steady score of 6.4 since 2020, whereas Mozambique worsened from 5.3 to 6.9 (Fund for Peace, n.d.).

3.8. Mozambique: A Myth of Successful Peacebuilding?

While Mozambique's peace process is often cited as a success, its long-term stability faces challenges, illustrating how power-sharing peace agreements can entrench elite dominance and limit political competition (Chivvis, 2019). Additionally, Mozambique's insurgency in Cabo Delgado mirrors the situation in Colombia, where FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, in English Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) dissidents resumed armed activities due to economic grievances and governance vacuums (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2020). These cases highlight the risks of peace processes that fail to address underlying socio-economic inequalities. Internally, the centralization of power in the hands of the president has created structural challenges (Bussotti, 2021) as it erodes institutional checks and balances (Phiri & Macheve, 2014).

The October 2024 general elections further underscored these issues. Official results declared FRELIMO's candidate, Daniel Chapo, as president-elect with 65.17% of the vote. However, opposition parties, notably

PODEMOS (Partido Otimista pelo Desenvolvimento de Moçambique, in English Optimist Party for the Development of Mozambique) led by Venâncio Mondlane, disputed these results, alleging electoral fraud and presenting parallel counts suggesting Mondlane had secured 53% of the vote. These allegations led to widespread protests, during which security forces reportedly killed at least 11 people and injured dozens using live ammunition and tear gas (“Mozambique: Security force crackdown kills,” 2024). Despite these disputes, Mozambique’s Constitutional Council confirmed FRELIMO’s victory in December 2024, further intensifying public unrest (Lawal, 2024).

Moreover, although external donors were vital in reviving civil society, contributing over 70% of funding, their influence often shaped domestic policies and undermined local ownership (Phiri & Macheve, 2014). Mozambique’s initial democratic success, reflected in an 87% voter turnout in 1994, has since faded; participation dropped to 40% by 2004, reflecting growing public disillusionment with a system perceived as corrupt. This disenchantment was met with state violence, notably during the 2000 and 2005 protests, exposing a governance model focused more on control than inclusion.

The rise of non-Western actors like China, along with major resource discoveries, shifted international priorities from promoting democracy to securing economic interests (Sambo, 2023). This realignment, combined with the leadership shift from Joaquim Chissano to a more authoritarian Armando Guebuza, further eroded democratic norms. Afrobarometer’s (2025) 2021 survey reflects this decline, with fewer than half of Mozambicans expressing support for democracy (Sambo, 2023). Compounding these issues is the ongoing insurgency in Cabo Delgado, which exposes not only severe security concerns but also the limits of militarized responses to legitimacy crises (Phiri & Macheve, 2014). While international support has bolstered counterinsurgency operations, socio-economic inequalities and historic grievances remain unaddressed (Sambo, 2023). This suggests that although grassroots-driven peace efforts initially proved effective, they lacked the structural resilience to endure.

Ultimately, Mozambique’s peace process remains a work in progress. Achieving lasting legitimacy will require not only enhanced security but a renewed commitment to democratic principles, inclusive governance, and meaningful public engagement.

3.9. Angola: The Volatility of Oil Revenues

Angola continues to struggle with corruption and deep economic inequality. As one of the least diversified economies (UNDP, 2023), it depends heavily on oil, which constitutes 97% of exports and 75% of government revenue (Kopiński, 2018). This overreliance creates revenue volatility that undermines long-term planning, further complicated by substantial debts to China, Angola’s main oil client.

Angola’s oil dependency originated during the civil war, when the MPLA used oil-backed loans to finance its fight against UNITA. By 2002, debt had reached \$10 billion, constraining further borrowing. However, oil revenues enabled the regime’s survival and consolidation of power (Pérez Niño & Le Billion, 2013). This aligns with Acemoglu’s 2005 concept of a weak state, where elites invest in public goods only when it benefits their private interests.

Corruption, paired with the destruction of vital infrastructure during the war, such as one-third of bridges, 70% of railways, and three major ports, has stalled recovery. Post-war reconstruction has followed the “Angolan model”: oil-for-infrastructure deals marked by inefficiency and corruption (Pérez Niño & Le Billion, 2013).

Humanitarian aid was redirected toward development by 2006, but investments disproportionately benefited the capital Luanda, leaving rural regions neglected and exacerbating regional inequality (Kopiński, 2018).

Angola thus remains locked in a state of “negative peace.” To ensure lasting stability, it must reduce oil dependence, combat corruption, and promote inclusive development through equitable investment and infrastructure renewal. Without these reforms, the risks of deepening inequality and renewed instability persist.

4. Conclusion

The establishment and sustainability of legitimacy in post-conflict governance depend on a complex interplay between political settlements, economic structures, and external interventions. The cases of Angola and Mozambique demonstrate that while local and international actors play a crucial role in the peacebuilding process, legitimacy is not guaranteed by the mere cessation of conflict. Instead, it requires long-term, inclusive governance mechanisms that address structural inequalities and economic dependencies. This underscores that peace must be understood not as a definitive outcome but as a continuing process of legitimization that is negotiated over time and across multiple levels of society.

In Angola, military victory and resource wealth enabled the MPLA to consolidate power, reinforcing a centralized and exclusionary governance model. Although international actors, particularly the UN, facilitated elections, these mechanisms did not foster an inclusive peace process but instead became a tool for political survival, contributing to the resumption of conflict. The MPLA’s success in diplomatic and military consolidation, particularly in co-opting former UNITA allies, ensured both domestic dominance and external legitimacy. However, Angola’s continued reliance on resource-driven governance has entrenched elite control, limiting broader political participation. This case highlights the risks of equating state authority with legitimacy, particularly when political settlements are driven by military asymmetry rather than societal consensus.

In contrast, Mozambique pursued a more inclusive peace process, learning from the Angolan experience. The negotiated settlement integrated former combatants into political institutions, ensuring a degree of stability. However, despite its initial inclusivity, Mozambique remained reliant on external donors, leading to governance challenges tied to economic dependence rather than domestic consolidation. While the country avoided Angola’s direct militarization of governance, it did not escape the constraints of negative peace, a fragile stability that has not prevented later insurgencies, particularly in Cabo Delgado. This illustrates how formal inclusivity, if not supported by structural transformation and economic empowerment, may still produce legitimacy deficits that re-emerge in new forms of unrest.

The study also challenges conventional Weberian interpretations of legitimacy, which often equate stability with institutionalization. Instead, these cases align with constructivist and post-colonial approaches, which emphasize that legitimacy is continuously negotiated between state actors, local populations, and

international stakeholders. Furthermore, the findings challenge liberal peace theory, particularly its assumption that externally imposed governance models can be universally applied without adequate adaptation to local sociopolitical contexts, historical grievances, and economic asymmetries (Richmond, 2011). This calls for a paradigmatic shift in peacebuilding, away from technocratic institution-building and toward more participatory, historically informed, and locally grounded legitimacy-building processes.

In addressing the research question, the study demonstrates that legitimacy in post-conflict governance is contingent upon three interrelated factors: (a) the nature of the political settlement—whether legitimacy is achieved through military dominance (Angola) or negotiated inclusion (Mozambique); (b) the role of economic resources—how natural wealth strengthens elite power (Angola) or fuels external dependency (Mozambique); and (3) the extent of international intervention—whether external actors promote inclusive governance or reinforce existing power structures. These findings offer a framework for assessing post-conflict legitimacy more generally: Legitimacy is strongest when political authority is derived from inclusive settlements, economic power is balanced with accountability, and international involvement enables rather than substitutes domestic agency.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Angola and Mozambique, offering critical insights for ongoing peacebuilding efforts in states such as South Sudan, Libya, and Colombia. These cases highlight the risks of elite-driven settlements, economic inequalities, and externally imposed governance models. As international actors continue to engage in post-conflict state-building, these findings underscore the need to prioritize local agency, economic diversification, and governance adaptability to prevent the recurrence of conflict. They also caution against treating legitimacy as a fixed endpoint; instead, legitimacy must be seen as a fluid and pluralistic process, shaped by continuous negotiation among competing actors and influenced by broader geopolitical, economic, and societal pressures.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that durable peace is not merely the product of institutional design, but of legitimacy—earned through political inclusion, economic justice, and responsive governance structures. Future peacebuilding efforts must move beyond top-down institutional engineering and prioritize bottom-up legitimacy-building mechanisms that ensure meaningful political participation, economic opportunity, and long-term stability in post-conflict states. Only through this broader understanding of legitimacy as evolving, negotiated, and locally grounded, can post-conflict societies build the foundation for sustainable peace and resilient governance.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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When Violence Becomes Visible: The Bundeswehr's Struggle for Legitimacy in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The Bundeswehr's deployment in Afghanistan under the International Security Assistance Force mission exposed significant challenges in how democratic states legitimize military actions, particularly within a society that harbors widespread skepticism towards the use of military force. A striking feature of the German government's approach to the Afghanistan conflict was its reluctance to label the mission as a “war,” reflecting deeper anxieties about how violence is communicated to the public. This reluctance underscores the difficulty democratic states face in maintaining legitimacy over their monopoly on violence, especially when soldiers are killed in action. This article applies a neo-institutionalist framework to analyze the dynamic interplay between politics, the military, and the public in the context of Germany's contribution to the International Security Assistance Force mission. It argues that the core issue was not the war itself, but the state's struggle to reconcile military violence with the expectations of a pacified society. The disconnect between formal military operations and public perception became apparent when media coverage of casualties broke the illusion of a distant, non-violent mission. This highlights the broader governance challenge democracies face in sustaining public support for military actions that conflict with societal values. Ultimately, this article explores the implications for political communication, questioning how democratic states balance transparency, public expectations, and the need for strategic narratives during military interventions.

Keywords

Afghanistan; Bundeswehr; civil-military relations; International Security Assistance Force mission; legitimacy of military force; political communication

1. Introduction

Germany's post-heroic self-image has shaped its civil-military relations in a way that fundamentally complicates the role of the Bundeswehr in contemporary military operations. Following its devastating military defeat in 1945, there was little public interest in heroes in Germany, as the country had already had far too many between 1933 and 1945 (Bröckling, 2020, p. 111). According to Münkler, the war in Europe—especially its tragic perception and ultimate loss—led to the emergence of a society in which the concepts of sacrifice and honor had disappeared. Consequently, such societies are “fundamentally oriented toward avoiding or at least minimizing their own casualties” (Münkler, 2017, p. 204, translation by the author).

What Shaw (1991) described as a post-military society for most modern Western states is particularly applicable to Germany after 1990. With the end of the Cold War, the military gradually disappeared from public view, reducing the number of contact points between civil society and the armed forces (Lepsius, 1997, p. 369; von Hagen & Biehl, 2023, pp. 53–54). However, this leaves Germany in a fundamental dilemma. The two core principles of German foreign policy, “never again” and “never alone,” require integration into the Western military alliance on the one hand, while on the other, Germany's post-heroic culture of restraint remains deeply embedded in a strong preference for civilian solutions (Biehl, 2015, p. 98).

While German soldiers have participated in international interventions, their involvement in combat situations—where they must kill and risk being killed—stands in stark contrast to this prevailing societal perception of the military. In this context, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployment in Afghanistan challenged both the political establishment and German society, particularly as the mission transitioned from stabilization efforts to active combat engagements. This study investigates how the visibility of military violence during the ISAF mission shaped political communication in Germany. The core research question of this study is: How did the visibility of violence during the ISAF mission in Germany shape political communication, and what does this reveal about the challenges of legitimizing military deployments in a post-heroic society? Visibility is understood not as a mere empirical condition but as an institutional expectation: military operations must not only conform to societal norms but do so visibly and symbolically.

To answer this question, this study examines how the public and political discourse surrounding military violence evolved in response to two key events: the 2009 airstrike in Kunduz and the 2010 Good Friday Battle (Karfreitagsgefecht). This selection is particularly pertinent because these incidents saw the highest number of casualties among German soldiers (Good Friday Battle) and the most significant civilian deaths caused by German military action (Kunduz) after World War II. These cases were extensively covered in the media, remain topics of debate, and left a lasting impact on the Bundeswehr as an institution. Rather than offering new empirical findings about these events, this study uses them as a lens to explore how military violence challenges the institutional and symbolic frameworks that shape the Bundeswehr's legitimacy. It thus deliberately refrains from making an empirical contribution in the narrow sense and instead offers an interpretive, theory-driven analysis of the visibility of violence as a communicative challenge. While the Bundeswehr also contributed to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, this mission played a comparatively minor role in the public debate about military violence. German involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom primarily included special forces and naval operations and remained largely outside the public eye.

Recent political efforts have sought to assess Germany's military engagements with a focus on their strategic effectiveness and decision-making processes. The final report of the *Enquete-Commission* (Deutscher Bundestag, 2025) and the *Parliamentary Inquiry Report* (Deutscher Bundestag, 2011) both emphasize the need for concrete "lessons learned" from past interventions, particularly regarding operational efficiency and political decision-making structures. While these inquiries provide valuable insights into institutional processes, they largely bypass a crucial dimension of military deployments: the visibility of violence and its impact on public discourse. This study, in contrast, shifts the focus from strategic effectiveness to the problematization of violence as a communicative challenge. Rather than asking how military engagements can be made more effective, this study interrogates how the exposure of military violence disrupts the fragile consensus surrounding the Bundeswehr's role in German democracy.

The central argument is twofold. First, as long as military operations remain framed within the discourse of stabilization and humanitarian assistance, they do not fundamentally challenge the democratic self-image. However, when combat and casualties enter the public sphere, this fragile consensus begins to unravel. Second, democratic legitimacy requires the armed forces to be acknowledged not merely as symbolic instruments of security policy but as integral components of the state's monopoly on violence—including its warfighting dimensions. The study demonstrates that the core paradox of civil-military relations in Germany is that the Bundeswehr's legitimacy within the democratic system is ensured precisely through the absence of its foundational function (violence).

Methodologically, this study employs a neo-institutional approach explicitly addressing the problem of military violence. It focuses on the shifting and often contradictory expectations between political actors, civil society, and the military. By applying a neo-institutional framework, the study highlights the Bundeswehr's role as an institution that derives its legitimacy within German democracy paradoxically through the absence of its core function—violence. This paradox underscores the persistent tension in German civil-military relations and sheds light on the communicative challenges associated with making military violence visible without undermining the legitimacy of military operations.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the specific visual and communicative dimensions of military violence. While previous research has addressed the political communication of military missions, this study foregrounds the impact of violent imagery and its role in shaping narratives about the ISAF mission in Germany. Furthermore, by leveraging a neo-institutional perspective, it conceptualizes military violence not merely as an operational necessity but as a crucial, if paradoxical, element of the Bundeswehr's institutional legitimacy. This approach reveals that the challenge of political legitimacy for military deployments is not simply about securing abstract societal approval but about navigating the specific communicative difficulties associated with exposing the reality of military violence while maintaining public and political support.

2. The Afghanistan Mission and the Role of the Bundeswehr

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 marked a turning point in international politics. In response, the UN took action to address the political and security implications of the attacks. A central element of these efforts was the Petersberg Conference in December 2001, where four Afghan delegations convened. The goal was to fill the emerging power vacuum as quickly as possible through the so-called Petersberg Process, thereby laying the foundation for democratic elections in Afghanistan (Abu-Warda, 2024, p. 318). The Bonn Agreement, signed

on December 5, 2001, established the framework for the planned democratic reconstruction of Afghanistan (Berenguer López, 2024a, p. 89). While the pragmatic approach of the agreement is sometimes praised in retrospect (Barfield, 2004, p. 290), contemporary critiques of the Bonn Conference dominate. Specifically, the notion that the (re)construction of an Afghan nation-state could be legitimized solely through the creation of democratic institutions is widely challenged, as it predetermined the fundamental programmatic approach of the subsequent intervention without defining a realistically achievable goal (Berenguer López, 2024a, p. 103).

For the first time in its history, NATO invoked Article 5, declaring collective defense. The German government supported the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, aimed at combating international terrorism. As part of this, the first German Kommando Spezialkräfte (in English, special forces units) were deployed to Afghanistan in late 2001. The first “official” German officers arrived in Kabul on January 1, 2002. The Bundeswehr was tasked with contributing to the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. ISAF was initially envisioned as an international protection force under a UN mandate, designed to prevent future internal Afghan conflicts. It was only in 2003 that ISAF officially became a NATO-led mission, expanding its scope and operational framework. As part of this mission, Germany assumed responsibility for Afghan police training (Neitzel, 2020, p. 488). From the outset, the German government adopted a significantly more restrained approach than the US, which was often perceived as an occupying force. Instead, the Bundeswehr portrayed itself as a partner and helper (Neitzel, 2020, p. 490). In October 2003, the Bundeswehr took over the US military camp in Kunduz to avoid direct combat with the Taliban in the southern regions. At this point, Germany was the third-largest troop-contributing nation, behind the US and the UK. Given the local conditions, it was virtually impossible for the Bundeswehr to establish democratic structures, and its soldiers frequently faced acute threats from Taliban suicide bombers.

When allied forces called for greater German involvement in the embattled south in 2006, the Bundeswehr suffered its first casualties in subsequent operations on June 28. In response, German forces increasingly withdrew and fortified themselves within their bases (Neitzel, 2020, p. 498). On May 19, 2007, three German soldiers were killed in a suicide attack at the Kunduz market, and the Kunduz field camp had been under regular rocket attacks since the beginning of the year (Neitzel, 2020, p. 504). After continued skirmishes with the Taliban, the Faizabad field camp was closed in October 2012, OP North in August 2013, and shortly thereafter, the Kunduz field camp as well. Beginning in 2015, Bundeswehr soldiers were stationed in Afghanistan as part of the Resolute Support Mission, though they no longer directly participated in combat operations (Neitzel, 2020, p. 531).

From the outset, the ISAF mission was highly unpopular in Berlin, as German officials feared entanglement in a full-scale war. Germany interpreted the Rules of Engagement differently from its allies, prioritizing the avoidance of direct military engagement by the Bundeswehr. While the US largely operated unilaterally and viewed military force as an appropriate tool (Bald, 2005, p. 168), the German government repeatedly emphasized that the Bundeswehr was not entering a war (“Wir gehen nicht,” 2002, p. 8). Although only Die Linke (The Left Party) fundamentally opposed Bundeswehr involvement, all other parties represented in the Bundestag called for German military restraint. German soldiers were not to be placed in situations where they would have to use force (Jungbauer, 2010, pp. 104–105). Germany’s Afghanistan policy followed the tradition of its civilian power approach, which, due to the absence of a national military strategy, gradually aligned with the political strategies of dominant allied partners (von Krause, 2011, pp. 281–282). The inspector general of the Bundeswehr, Wolfgang Schneiderhan, also sought to uphold the illusion of a

peacekeeping operation (Neitzel, 2020, p. 505) to prevent further deterioration of the already unpopular mission's public image.

A genuine political adaptation to the brutal realities of the mission only occurred between 2008 and 2009 (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 193), although Berlin still refused to acknowledge counterinsurgency as a strategic framework (Schreer, 2010, p. 106). Despite the deaths of 59 Bundeswehr soldiers throughout the mission (Bornecke, 2024, p. 1), successive German governments neither opted for a complete withdrawal nor a full-fledged engagement (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 194). Criticism of the mission became particularly pronounced after the peak years of combat between 2007 and 2009 when it became evident that military objectives never fully aligned with the politically stated goals. The fundamentally military-skeptical to pacifist orientation of German policy was incompatible with the realities of Afghanistan (von Krause, 2011, p. 284). However, Germany was not alone in its strategic struggles. Neither the Bush administration nor the Obama administration managed to develop a coherent strategy for transitioning from a military intervention to an anti-terrorism campaign and later to state-building efforts (Berenguer López, 2024b, p. 146). Conflicts among NATO partners, arising from their differing national priorities and strategic interests, prevented a cohesive and unified approach to military operations, thereby complicating efforts to achieve a coordinated strategy (Auerswald & Saideman, 2014).

3. Theoretical Framework: Institutional Logics and Performed Legitimacy

The post-heroic stance of German society is not only reflected in its skepticism toward military force but also shapes the institutional dynamics between politics, the military, and the civilian public. This interplay can be analyzed through the neo-institutionalist approach, which examines the mutual expectations and frictions among these actors. The foundation of neo-institutionalism, as conceptualized by Meyer and Rowan (2009), is the idea that organizations should be understood as a specific type of institution (Aretz, 2022). Organizations exist within an environment that imposes specific expectations upon them (Gibel et al., 2022, pp. 139–140). Consequently, neo-institutionalism primarily investigates the societal embeddedness of organizations, or in other words, the extent to which organizations are integrated into a sociocultural environment and the implications of this integration (Koch & Schemmann, 2009, p. 21; Sandhu, 2015).

Although there is no unified definition of the term institution in the various strands of neo-institutionalism (Schemmann, 2009; Senge, 2011), one core assumption remains consistent: Institutions are socially constructed programs or rule systems (Colomy, 1998, p. 266) that exist independently of individual social actors, represent societal guiding principles, and influence social behavior (Koch & Schemmann, 2009, p. 22). Institutions, as socially constructed norms, regulate the behavior of organizations. In this sense, organizations emerge based on their promise of functionality: they seem to solve societal problems and thereby contribute to societal stability. Conversely, this also means that specific demands from the environment are directed toward organizations, with the expectation that they will respond and adapt accordingly (Koch, 2009, p. 111).

Meyer and Rowan (2009, p. 31) distinguish between an internally directed action structure (what is actually done within an organization) and an externally oriented formal structure (how the organization presents itself to the outside world). Over time, organizations tend to become increasingly similar in their formal structure, as they align with societal expectations and with other comparable organizations (Sandhu, 2012, p. 77). This

phenomenon is known as isomorphism, which describes the convergence of organizational structures through normative, mimetic, or coercive processes, as theorized by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 150). Isomorphism helps organizations gain legitimacy by conforming to the expectations and standards set by their social and institutional environment. As a result, society shapes organizations “in a patterned...almost deterministically interpretable manner” (Koch, 2009, pp. 118–119, translation by the author).

Interestingly, organizations are not primarily goal-oriented and efficient structures that optimize resources to achieve their objectives in a rational, division-of-labor approach. Instead, they are an inevitable consequence and reflection of their societal environment. Their primary objective is to ensure their survival, which they achieve by building legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 2009, p. 43). Organizations align themselves with societal expectations (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1167). Their societal legitimacy is essential for their survival, as they would lose their reason for existence without the trust of their environment (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1162). This legitimation process is initiated through public discourse, where the central societal “justification orders, institutional logics, and thematic fields” (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1161, translation by the author) of organizations are negotiated. Thus, legitimacy is not an objective entity but rather a continuous process of attribution. As Koch (2009, p. 126, translation by the author) explains: “Organizations adapt to cultural meaning patterns that are perceived as legitimate, because these patterns themselves are considered legitimate, thereby transferring their legitimacy onto the organizations.” Organizations, therefore, exist in a constant state of learning and adaptation (Vollmer, 1996).

Militaries operate as subsystems within society (Mannitz, 2012, p. 6), with a distinct organizational purpose: the application of collective force (Koepp, 2021, p. 96; Kümmel & Klein, 2002). This creates a gap between civilian and military spheres (Kümmel, 2003, pp. 65–66; von Bredow, 2007, p. 96), as the military’s hierarchical and command-based structure is complemented by informal group formations that foster cohesion, often rooted in camaraderie and “tribal cultures” (Neitzel, 2020, p. 19). The military’s primary organizational goal—preparing for and conducting war—sets it apart from civilian institutions (Janowitz & Little, 1965, p. 29; Roghmann & Ziegler, 1977, p. 142), resulting in a distinct military culture that remains largely invisible to civil society except during publicly visible military training or wartime (Soeters, 2007, p. 269).

In democratic states, armed forces face greater legitimation pressures than civilian institutions, as they are subject to continuous evaluation and democratic control (Sandhu, 2014, p. 1161). The principle of the primacy of politics, ensuring that military power serves political interests rather than the reverse, is central to this control (von Clausewitz, 1980). However, democracies must balance military oversight with the need to maintain operational effectiveness and prevent military interference in politics (Kuehn, 2007, pp. 161–162). The question of how to ensure democratic control remains contentious in military sociology, with Huntington (1957, p. 83) advocating for a professionalized, distinct military, while Janowitz and Little (1965, p. 23) call for closer integration with political institutions and self-regulation. Yet, both approaches fail to fully resolve the tension between politics, civil society, and the military (von Hagen & Biehl, 2023, p. 50), leaving the challenge of military legitimation in democracies unresolved.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear why the Bundeswehr, as an organization, faces specific legitimacy challenges in a post-heroic environment—especially when it becomes visible as an institution of state violence (Kühl, 2018). After 1990, much of the German population was relieved that the military had largely disappeared

from public view, and even within the military itself, there was little desire to remain a contentious issue for a military-critical society at the proclaimed end of history (Fukuyama, 2006). With few exceptions, such as the Bosnia and Kosovo deployments, the Bundeswehr remained at the margins of public debate, as its relative invisibility aligned with societal and political expectations.

The ceremonial conformity with environmental expectations (Sandhu, 2012, p. 81) manifested in the progressive withdrawal of the armed forces from the public sphere and discourse: to be legitimate, the Bundeswehr had to become as invisible as possible. However, as a state institution, the Bundeswehr still needed to maintain some degree of visibility to justify its continued existence. Over time, it learned that its legitimacy was less likely to be questioned if the civilian aspects of its organization—such as rescue and humanitarian aid—became the primary elements of its formal structure and were actively communicated to the civilian public. These institutional arrangements created a legitimacy framework in which military action had to be rendered both normatively appropriate and symbolically acceptable.

4. The Bundeswehr at War

The theoretical and institutional tensions within civil-military relations become particularly pronounced in democratic states when military force becomes visible. For years, the Bundeswehr legitimized its role as an armed force primarily through its engagement in humanitarian missions and stabilization efforts. However, two specific events during the ISAF mission brought the realities of military deployment into sharp public focus. In particular, the 2009 airstrike ordered by Colonel Georg Klein and the 2010 Good Friday Battle marked turning points in the public perception of Germany's Afghanistan mission (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 209; Tomforde, 2024, p. 195). While German media had already reported increasingly negatively on the mission since 2006, mainly due to the escalation of violence and casualties (Jungbauer, 2010, pp. 111–114), images of war dominated the media from 2008 onward as the Taliban regained strength (Mader, 2016, pp. 166–168).

Media coverage played a significant role in shaping public and political acceptance of the mission, even if its influence was not directly measurable (Fiebig, 2012, p. 202). Although public opinion toward the Bundeswehr remained predominantly positive between 1999 and 2021 (Steinbrecher, 2023, pp. 275–276), there was a clear empirical correlation between media reporting, the extent of German military engagement, and public opinion: the more visibly the Bundeswehr engaged in military operations in Afghanistan, the more the public rejected the mission (Lagassé & Mello, 2018, p. 151; von Krause, 2011, p. 282). At the same time, increased exposure to images of violence influenced political attitudes, resulting in growing operational restrictions on the Bundeswehr (Jungbauer, 2010, p. 107).

Between April and September 2009, firefights between insurgents and the Bundeswehr intensified in Kunduz, making gunfire and life-threatening situations a daily reality for German soldiers (Neitzel, 2020, p. 519). On the evening of September 3, 2009, the Provincial Reconstruction Team Kunduz, commanded by Colonel Georg Klein, received intelligence reports that two fuel tankers had been hijacked—surveillance images showed people siphoning fuel. The danger posed by the tankers was particularly concerning, as just days earlier, a fuel truck bombing in Kandahar had killed 47 people (Neitzel, 2020, p. 519). Under pressure from his troops and based on intelligence suggesting that Taliban fighters had gathered near the tankers, Klein ordered an airstrike under the cover of night, executed by two F-15 fighter jets. The precision strike

destroyed both tankers, with the pilots reporting 56 killed and 14 fleeing the scene (Neitzel, 2020, p. 520). To this day, the exact number of casualties remains disputed, but it is undisputed that children and teenagers were among the dead (Heck, 2023, p. 3).

While the governor of Kunduz, Mohammed Omar, reacted positively to the decisive action of the German forces, the commander of the ISAF mission, General McChrystal, who had previously called for a more aggressive German approach, publicly condemned the strike as a serious mistake and launched a full-scale media campaign against the attack (Matern, 2009). In Germany, media coverage was overwhelmingly negative, and political pressure escalated to the point where Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung was forced to resign. The airstrike led to a parliamentary inquiry and a criminal investigation against Colonel Klein (Heck, 2023, p. 3; Neitzel, 2020, p. 521).

Images of the burned-out fuel trucks quickly circulated in the media, accompanied by accusations against Klein, who was labeled a murderer and war criminal and called to answer for an alleged massacre (Heck, 2023, p. 20). The public reaction was one of shock, driven by the media portrayal of the event, leading to the realization that as of September 4, 2009, the Bundeswehr was no longer engaged in peacekeeping but active warfare in Afghanistan (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 209). The commitment to the transatlantic alliance, which had already weakened in public opinion before 2009, nearly disappeared in the aftermath of the strike (Mader, 2016, p. 182). By this point, most of the German public had completely withdrawn support for the Bundeswehr's presence in Afghanistan (Fiebig, 2012, p. 188).

In addition to the images of the Kunduz airstrike, the Good Friday Battle on April 2, 2010, further reinforced perceptions of escalation within the ISAF mission. In March 2010, Taliban activity increased significantly, and in early April, a German paratrooper company advanced into the contested region of Char Darah. On Good Friday Battle, the Golf Platoon moved forward to clear an access road of improvised explosive devices when they were ambushed by Taliban forces. The firefight lasted for several hours, resulting in three German soldiers killed and seven wounded. The surviving soldiers were extracted by air support, but the battle was considered a defeat, and the loss of three comrades weighed heavily on the troops (Gregis, 2025). The German media reacted with intense coverage and widespread concern (Neitzel, 2020, pp. 527–528).

The Good Friday Battle was widely discussed in the public sphere, with shaky helmet-camera footage of soldiers fighting and vomiting from stress (Neitzel, 2020, p. 532) circulating online. These videos visually confirmed that German soldiers were fighting for their lives in Afghanistan—being wounded or killed in action. Since World War II, German troops had not been involved in such a prolonged battle. The political and public reaction was one of shock and reckoning: “The battle made it clear to a large part of German society that the protection of German interests and solidarity with the Allies could demand the sacrifice of the lives and health of German soldiers” (Tomforde, 2024, p. 195).

The public discourse that followed the Good Friday Battle echoed previous debates on military engagement, with some media questioning whether the Bundeswehr was adequately prepared for combat. In 2006, *Der Spiegel* argued that the Bundeswehr needed to develop a greater willingness to use lethal force (von Hammerstein et al., 2006). However, when confronted with the stark realities of combat through visual evidence, public sentiment did not shift toward greater support for the mission, instead, antimilitarist attitudes were reinforced (Mader, 2016, p. 185).

5. Seeing War: Media Visibility and the Breakdown of Military Legitimacy

This section examines how media representations of violence during the ISAF mission disrupted the institutional legitimacy of the Bundeswehr. Drawing on a neo-institutionalist framework, the analysis focuses on the tension between the military's formal structure—aligned with societal expectations of peacekeeping and humanitarianism—and its operational reality shaped by violence and death.

As Luhmann (2017, pp. 102–103) demonstrates, mass media increase society's susceptibility to irritation by amplifying the complexity of meaning structures through which society exposes itself to self-produced contradictions. Mass media can thus be understood as an institution, as they serve as an interface with other institutions, create a shared space of meaning and experience, and maintain the sphere of public discourse (Sandhu, 2012, pp. 124–125). However, previous analyses of media coverage of the Bundeswehr's mission in Afghanistan often overlook a critical issue: the visibility of military violence. Few publications—such as the work of Stahl and Ignatowitsch (2023)—focus on the actual visual content or examine the relationship between what is depicted and the reactions it provokes.

War images function so effectively because they highlight the scandal that is essential for moralization (Luhmann, 2017, p. 99), while simultaneously creating an experience of evidential immediacy (Luhmann, 2017, p. 102). With television as the medium, the harsh reality of the ISAF mission abruptly entered the comfortable living rooms of Germany in 2009, forcing a response to the suffering of those affected—because violence, once seen, cannot be ignored (Baberowski, 2018, p. 35). From a neo-institutional perspective, it is precisely the media-constructed reality of the mission that shaped public awareness of the deep discrepancy between the formal structure of the armed forces, their operational reality, and the expectations of politics and civil society. This discrepancy reflects what Meyer and Rowan (2009) conceptualized as “decoupling”: while the Bundeswehr formally adhered to institutional scripts of humanitarian engagement, its actual operations revealed informal norms and practices shaped by violence and battlefield logic. These mutual irritations were reinforced and communicatively accelerated by mass media as an institution.

The images from 2009 and 2010 provided glimpses into the frame of reference of war (Neitzel & Welzer, 2020, p. 32), a frame that is not readily compatible with civilian social norms (Neitzel & Welzer, 2020, p. 179). In spaces of violence (Baberowski, 2018), distinct rules apply: formal regulations, which are central to the military in peacetime, often dissolve under battlefield conditions, being replaced by informal rules dictated by the immediate threat of the enemy. Language and expletives evolve alongside an informal normative system that frequently contradicts official military objectives (Rohmann & Ziegler, 1977, p. 172). The media-driven images of war offered a sudden, visceral glimpse into these norms of camaraderie, battlefield logic (Baberowski, 2018, p. 160), irrationalities of war stemming from an ambiguous enemy (Kuchler, 2013, p. 113), and the overwhelming role of violence in soldiers' experiences (Friesendorf, 2018; Tomforde, 2007, p. 211). However, since German society did not experience a direct enemy threat within its borders, and the rules of social communication remained intact despite German soldiers dying in combat, this disruption lacked a clear resolution.

Violence in this context was experienced as “the big other” (Žižek, 2008)—something that could neither be rationalized nor reconciled with domestic societal norms. As a result, the legitimacy of the mission itself came under fundamental scrutiny, as the media vividly demonstrated that violence is an inherent characteristic of

the military (Reichherzer, 2024, p. 171), that it is omnipresent and chaotic (Sofsky, 1996, p. 10), and that it does not conform to the standards of civilized society (Sofsky, 1996, p. 61). Since the German public's support for the mission depended on rationalized assessments of success (Fiebig, 2012, p. 201), but was confronted with the irrational, brutal reality of military operations, Defense Minister Peter Struck's assertion that "Germany's security is being defended at the Hindu Kush" (Jahn, 2012, p. 178) lost credibility. If children are killed in airstrikes in Afghanistan, it becomes clear that this is not about defending national borders or democracy.

Since the Bundeswehr's formal structure had long been framed around the defense of democracy, human rights, and national security, it was now evident that the military, as part of the state's monopoly on violence (Reichherzer, 2024, pp. 172–173; von Bredow, 2007, p. 98), was engaged in war beyond national borders, this created a rupture in the carefully constructed image of the Bundeswehr—an institutional legitimacy narrative that had been deliberately cultivated by political and military actors alike to align the military's role with the normative expectations of a democratic society. This image had been deliberately maintained by the political sphere for decades and actively reinforced by the Bundeswehr itself.

The images of violence from Afghanistan underscore that the application of military force is an intrinsic component of the escalation potential inherent in the state's monopoly on violence. The German government's fundamental stance—that casualties should be avoided at all costs (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 202)—was incompatible with the realities of the Afghanistan mission. By 2008, it had already been observed that the greatest challenge for Germany's ISAF participation lay in the killing of Afghan civilians, as this crossed a critical threshold of public acceptance (Kaim, 2008, p. 615). However, the deaths of German soldiers were equally consequential, as soldier deaths in democratic societies became matters of public concern. Military killing and dying emerge in the context of political decisions that are rooted in democratic processes (Mannitz & Geis, 2011).

This presents a fundamental paradox: on the one hand, military violence is embedded within the structures of democracy, but on the other hand, it conflicts with the post-heroic, demilitarized nature of modern society. In this context, all casualties—whether Afghan civilians or German soldiers—become "the affective consequences of their media presence" (Bröckling, 2018, p. 455, translation by the author). Every fallen soldier appears as a potential disruptor (Bröckling, 2018, p. 455), raising the issue of legitimacy for military organizations in democratic societies. Consequently, it is not merely the direct use of military force that sparks societal and political controversies (Heck, 2023, p. 8), but rather the public visibility of military violence and its consequences. Media magnify, reproduce, and eternalize the reality of death, turning images of fallen soldiers and flag-draped coffins into symbols that not only evoke emotion (Bröckling, 2018, p. 457) but also disrupt the tacit consensus of restraint that had long been shared among civil society, politics, and the armed forces. This tacit agreement was shattered when returning soldiers carried their experiences of violence back into the protected spaces of a largely pacified society (Tomforde, 2007, p. 216).

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, a fundamental paradox of democratic armed forces becomes evident: their legitimacy is based on societal and political acceptance of their formal role as a guarantor of security, rather than on the actual exercise of military force. If the Bundeswehr is perceived as a stabilizing, humanitarian, and peacekeeping organization, its existence remains largely uncontested. However, once its operational reality—the actual application and experience of violence—becomes visible, this fragile consensus begins to erode. This operational reality represents the informal activity structure of the

organization, often deviating from its formal mandates and publicly communicated norms. Thus, the media's representation of military violence not only challenges the legitimacy of specific missions but also disrupts the Bundeswehr's institutional self-conception as a civilly integrated force within a democratic society.

This implies that the military in democratic societies faces increasing pressure to adapt—it must align itself with societal expectations to maintain legitimacy. Such alignment often takes a symbolic form (public commitments to human rights, peacekeeping, and transparency) while operational realities remain unchanged. The strategy of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150) helps institutions retain legitimacy without resolving underlying contradictions. However, this adaptation primarily occurs at the level of the formal structure, for instance, by emphasizing humanitarian missions, committing to transparency, or constructing narratives that rhetorically circumvent the notion of warfare. The Bundeswehr's effort to maintain legitimacy by emphasizing humanitarian narratives reflects an institutional logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1989).

The public visibility of military violence undermines precisely this carefully crafted image, intensifying the institutional friction between politics, society, and the armed forces. This places the Bundeswehr in a structural dilemma: on the one hand, it must remain an effective and combat-capable force, but on the other, it cannot fully display this capability without jeopardizing its societal acceptance. The media's exposure to military violence brings these latent tensions to the surface, transforming them into a central challenge for the institutional legitimacy of armed forces in democratic societies. In this context, the visibility of violence functions as an external shock that pierces the facade of the military's formal structure and compels a symbolic adaptation (Suchman, 1995)—an adaptation that, as the following section will show, was not effectively undertaken.

6. Legitimacy and Public Acceptance: Challenges for Political Communication

The critical failure of political communication lies in the inability to address the public's need for an explanation of the use of force. This failure was closely linked to the long-standing reluctance to acknowledge that the Bundeswehr was not engaged in a peacekeeping mission but in a war. As a result, terms such as casualties, combat deployment, and war were largely avoided in official discourse (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 197). Behind the scenes, the German government sought to reconcile the tension between the escalation of the conflict and its self-image as a civilian power by obscuring the reality of military violence. In doing so, it systematically sanitized the nature of the mission (von Krause, 2011, p. 287), and the distinction between combat and stabilization operations had already proven to be an illusion by 2006 (von Krause, 2011, p. 304).

The assumption that the primary objective was simply to avoid engaging in combat was rooted in both the lack of military expertise among civilian politicians and their limited understanding of how the military operates (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, p. 196). Even though Defense Minister Jung publicly acknowledged in June 2009 that the Bundeswehr was engaged in combat operations, at no point was the strategic rationale for the Afghanistan mission convincingly communicated (Neitzel, 2020, p. 516). Uncertainty over how to explain military violence—and thus the inherent escalation potential of the state's monopoly on force—led to irritation on both the civilian and military sides. Rather than conveying the consequences of overseas deployments (Fiebig, 2012, p. 202), the government, while seeking public support, deepened confusion by concealing the realities of the mission.

The paradoxical demands placed on soldiers (Warburg, 2010, pp. 63–64), who were expected to act as armed social workers but also had to fight and kill, led to a significant loss of trust in political leadership within the military (Neitzel, 2020, p. 551).

Increasingly, soldiers found themselves having to justify their actions in combat, while political leaders in Berlin largely refrained from providing explanations (Bohnert, 2017, pp. 105–106). Furthermore, the military leadership itself largely remained absent from public discourse, failing to establish a bridge function between societal-political debates and the armed forces, and in many cases actively suppressing this much-needed exchange (Neitzel, 2020, p. 553). Although incidents such as the Kunduz airstrike were entirely foreseeable within the logic of warfare (Heck, 2023, pp. 32–33), the shock effect was not merely due to the visual representation of violence. Rather, it was the lack of transparency in political communication that amplified the power of these images and, in turn, further undermined the legitimacy of the armed forces. The fact that in a 2009 survey, only around 20% of Bundeswehr soldiers expressed satisfaction with the public perception of the military (Wanner, 2024, p. 239), and many attributed this perception to negative media coverage (Wanner, 2024, pp. 240–241), highlights the profound failure of political leadership to communicate the realities of military engagement transparently.

The already strained civil-military relations in Germany (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, pp. 198–199) have hindered mutual trust between society and the armed forces, which is particularly vital in democratic states (Kümmel, 2003, pp. 71–72). Many soldiers do not expect public glorification (Pordzik, 2016, p. 227) but rather seek greater societal and political support for their missions (Seiffert, 2012, p. 96). For the Bundeswehr to maintain legitimacy in its specific function as an institution of organized force, a public discourse is necessary in which society, politics, and the military all participate—as this is where the fundamental narratives and legitimacy of the institution are negotiated (Zerfaß & Piwinger, 2014, p. 1179). Disruptions to the Bundeswehr’s formal structure can be minimized if its formal and operational structures are more closely aligned. However, this requires an open acknowledgment from political leadership that the military is not merely a symbolic security institution but an integral part of the state’s monopoly on force, and thus inherently carries the potential for escalation. Only when this reality is institutionally and discursively embedded in political communication can the Bundeswehr and its operations be consistently framed within a coherent legitimacy structure. Otherwise, the use of military force will continue to be perceived as a disruption of societal expectations, leading to recurring crises of acceptance in democratic societies.

The political attempt to recognize the service of soldiers through the Bundeswehr Cross of Honor, the Combat Action Medal (Neitzel, 2020, p. 541; Tomforde, 2024, p. 194), and the establishment of the Bundeswehr Memorial (Tomforde, 2024, p. 193) marked a cautious shift in political culture from 2008 onward. However, this shift was accompanied by ignorance or criticism of unnecessary heroization and excessive warrior culture (Rid & Zapfe, 2013, pp. 207–208). In particular, the Bundeswehr Memorial, inaugurated in 2009, stemmed from Minister Jung’s visit to the ISAF contingent in Kabul in December 2005, where he expressed a desire to create a site of remembrance for fallen German soldiers (Leonhard, 2011, pp. 131–133), ultimately failed as a symbol of meaningful commemoration. Due to its hidden location in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock in Berlin (Mannitz & Geis, 2011), it serves as a weak symbol (Leonhard, 2011, p. 137), reflecting a failure of political remembrance that restricts itself to civilian mourning and prevents broader meaning-making (Leonhard, 2011, p. 138).

Here, an opportunity was missed, an opportunity to communicate to the public the role of the armed forces, the reasons why soldiers die, and what the death of soldiers in combat signifies for the military, politics, and society at large. Political communication about overseas deployments plays a crucial role in determining whether armed forces remain integrated within democratic societies or are perceived as a dysfunctional element. The future legitimacy of the Bundeswehr thus depends not only on measurable operational success but also on an open and honest societal discourse about its role and purpose. If this discourse fails, military violence will remain an anomaly in the public consciousness, and the Bundeswehr will continue to be an institution whose acceptance is repeatedly called into question in times of crisis.

The last Bundeswehr soldiers returned to Germany in early July 2021, where they were met with little fanfare. The Taliban had regained power. In August 2021, German soldiers returned to Afghanistan once more—this time under the command of Colonel Jens Arlt—to evacuate 5,000 people from over 45 nations in just 11 days. Again, dramatic images surfaced of civilians clinging to aircraft and infants being left to their fate. Yet, the evacuation mission was a success. Arlt and his 600 soldiers were the only German troops to be publicly celebrated as heroes. A widely circulated photo of Arlt standing on the airfield, his G36 rifle slung across his chest, quickly became a symbol, elevating him to the status of a democratic military hero (Tomforde, 2024, p. 197).

In September 2021, Arlt was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit, First Class for his outstanding service—a distinction that perfectly aligned with both political and public expectations of the Bundeswehr and its role in Afghanistan:

General Arlt put himself in danger not for our nation but for humanity and at the same time ended the difficult Afghanistan mission with a heroic deed that made us forget all the criticism, fallen and wounded, privations, [and] political and military mistakes. (Tomforde, 2024, p. 198)

This final mission signaled that everything had turned out well after all. The Bundeswehr could leave Afghanistan with its head held high—not as a combat force, but as a humanitarian rescuer. This narrative sought to cautiously mend the cracks that had emerged in the institution’s symbolic façade.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the complex relationship between military force, public perception, and political communication in democratic societies, using the German Bundeswehr’s engagement in Afghanistan as a case study. The analysis has demonstrated that the question of military legitimacy arises primarily when violence becomes visible. As long as soldiers were perceived as peacekeepers and humanitarian actors, they posed no challenge to the self-image of a pacified democratic state. However, when violence—whether in the form of casualties among German soldiers or civilian deaths caused by the Bundeswehr—became publicly visible, the legitimacy of the military mission was fundamentally questioned.

This leads to the first key thesis of this article: in democracies, military legitimacy is primarily contested when violence is made visible. If military operations remain within the framework of stabilization and civil assistance, they do not disrupt public expectations. However, when armed conflict and the use of force come to the forefront, society is forced to confront the contradictions inherent in its relationship with the military.

The second key thesis emphasizes that democracies can only maintain their legitimacy if they accept and communicate their armed forces as an integral part of the state's monopoly on violence, including their warlike implications. The attempt to sustain a rhetoric of peace while engaging in armed conflicts leads to cognitive dissonance, political disillusionment, and weakened trust between society, politics, and the military. Future military interventions and political communication strategies in democracies must therefore bridge the gap between formal military narratives and operational realities. A more honest, transparent, and proactive discourse is needed—one that allows society to engage with the realities of military force rather than react to them in moments of crisis.

A central implication of this study is the need for mutual learning and improved communication between society, the military, and political leadership. Military violence is not an aberration but a fundamental aspect of statehood, even in a democratic framework. War and armed forces are enduring phenomena that will continue to shape societies—including Germany. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has led to a shift in the Bundeswehr's public communication strategy. Its visibility in public discourse and media presence has increased, yet it remains framed within the narrative of peace and defense, rather than warfighting. The so-called *Zeitenwende*, declared by Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 27, 2022, marked a rhetorical and financial shift, yet its practical consequences remain contested. Defense Minister Boris Pistorius' emphasis on *Kriegstüchtigkeit* as a necessary capability for the Bundeswehr has sparked debate, particularly in a political culture that historically avoided direct references to war readiness. Simultaneously, figures such as Inspector General Carsten Breuer and various civilian military experts have become more prominent in media discussions, further signaling a transformation in public discourse.

Despite this shift, Germany's discourse on the military remains detached from the realities of armed conflict. Even the growing political consensus on the Bundeswehr as a chronically underfunded institution—exemplified by the “whatever it takes” stance of the likely future Chancellor Friedrich Merz—does not necessarily translate into a fundamental reassessment of the role of military violence in society. The focus remains on financial and, to some extent, semantic re-armament, rather than on addressing the deeper societal and political implications of military force. Just because debt is incurred for defense spending does not mean that public and political reactions to images of Bundeswehr-inflicted violence in a future conflict would differ significantly from those witnessed in Afghanistan.

A neo-institutional perspective offers a crucial analytical lens for understanding the Bundeswehr's legitimacy crisis in Afghanistan. By distinguishing between an organization's formal structure—the publicly communicated role of the Bundeswehr as a stabilizing and humanitarian force—and its actual operational structure, which involves combat and the use of force, this approach highlights the core tension in democratic military legitimacy. The Bundeswehr's legitimacy depended largely on maintaining a facade aligned with societal expectations of a pacified military force. However, when its active structure—the realities of combat and violence—became publicly visible, this institutional alignment collapsed, triggering public disillusionment and political distancing.

From a neo-institutional perspective, democratic armed forces must continuously adapt to societal norms to maintain their legitimacy. However, Bundeswehr's case illustrates the limits of such adaptation: when political narratives fail to integrate the reality of military force into their institutional framework, moments of crisis—such as the Kunduz airstrike or the Good Friday Battle—lead to intensified legitimacy struggles. This study

thus underscores the importance of aligning formal military narratives with operational realities, as well as the need for a political discourse that does not shy away from acknowledging the full implications of military force.

While this article engages with broader theoretical discussions on democracies and military legitimacy, its primary focus remains on Germany. Due to its historical burdens, unique political culture, and deeply rooted skepticism toward military force, Germany represents a distinct case that cannot be automatically generalized to other democracies. The findings presented here should therefore be understood within this specific national context, rather than as universally applicable conclusions about democratic civil-military relations.

Several questions remain open for further investigation: how can political and military leaders effectively communicate the realities of warfare without alienating democratic societies? How do different democracies handle the visibility of military violence in their public discourse? How can media strategies be optimized to effectively manage the legitimacy of military interventions? Addressing these questions will be crucial for ensuring that democratic societies do not merely tolerate their armed forces in peacetime but accept them as necessary actors in both defense and conflict.

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Collective Narcissism, Left- and Right-Wing Authoritarianisms, and Justification of War

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Abstract

Previous studies found positive relationships between collective narcissism, right-wing authoritarianism, and acceptance of wars; however, they overlooked how these wars are seen as justified. In our study ($N = 448$, Polish community sample), we used a new tool to measure beliefs justifying war, identifying three dimensions: just war (with morally restricted views on reasons and means), unrestricted reasons, and unrestricted means. Using correlational, path, and network analyses, we found that left-wing authoritarianism is related to lower acceptance of just war and higher acceptance of unrestricted means, while secure national identification indicates opposite patterns. Contrary to our expectations, communal national narcissism was linked to lower acceptance of just war. Unexpectedly, even though beliefs justifying war reflect moral principles, they did not vary with religious identification or right-wing authoritarianism. This suggests that being attached to people sharing the same religious affiliation does not necessarily imply adherence to the moral principles that underpin that worldview. This study is the first to demonstrate a disconnect between beliefs justifying war and different forms of ingroup attachment.

Keywords

authoritarianism; collective narcissism; just war; morality; national identification; religious identification

1. Introduction

In psychological research, war is often defined as a large-scale, organized, violent intergroup conflict (Lazar, 2017; Watkins, 2020). War is an extreme case of intergroup conflict, which causes immense suffering and breaks moral rules (Lopez & Johnson, 2020; Walzer, 1977). War justification beliefs have been extensively studied (Lopez & Johnson, 2020; Watkins, 2020). Most studies conducted in political psychology examined general attitudes towards war (Bizumic et al., 2013; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Kowalski et al., 2025), investigated attitudes towards specific conflicts, such as the US–Iraq or Russia–Ukraine war, asked about the use of specific means, such as nuclear weapons (G. Brown & Marinthe, 2024; Crowson, 2009; Gulevich & Osin, 2023; McFarland, 2005), or used vignette-based scenarios (Watkins, 2020). Most of these previous studies focus on selected psychological factors, such as personality or political ideology (Watkins, 2020).

In this article, we study how personal traits relate to why and how people justify war (Coates, 2018; Watkins, 2020). We focus on collective narcissism (CN), that is, a strong and blind attachment to the ingroup (Golec de Zavala, 2024), and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and left-wing authoritarianism (LWA), which are characterized by a strong attachment to the ingroup's ideology, aggression toward those with opposite worldview, and sensitivity to threats toward the ingroup (Altemeyer, 1988; Costello et al., 2022). To examine these relationships, we collected samples in Poland, a stable democracy with historical tendencies toward both types of authoritarianism.

We compare these relations across narcissistic and secure identity (SI), following previous studies on accepting war (e.g., Abou-Ismaïl et al., 2024; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). We focus on national and religious identity because they are essential in explaining intergroup conflicts (Böhm et al., 2020). Lastly, we distinguish between agentic and communal forms of CN because they refer to two main domains of human functioning: efficacy and power (agency) and warmth and morality (communion; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020). Intergroup conflicts are related both to agentic and communal threats (Stephan et al., 2009), whereas the justification of conflict belongs to only the communal domain (Lazar, 2017; Walzer, 1977). Thus, the distinction between agency and communion seems promising in studying beliefs justifying wars to reveal the specific motivation underlying the link between the type of ingroup identification and acceptance of various views on just war.

2. The Concept of Just War

The concept of “just war” was originally addressed from theological and philosophical perspectives (Lazar, 2017; Moseley, 2011; Walzer, 1977). This concept refers both to reasons for going to war and ways in which it is conducted (Walzer, 1977; Watkins, 2020). Just war is defined by the Christian tradition as one declared for right and noble reasons, fought in a way that avoids unnecessary suffering, especially for civilians, and is fought only when other alternative means appear impossible (Lazar, 2017; Walzer, 1977). Therefore, the concept of just war refers to two general moral principles: “*ius ad bellum*” (i.e., legitimized reasons for waging war) and “*ius in bellum*” (i.e., morally justified ways of waging war), which are reflected in international law regulating international conflicts (Lazar, 2017). Such a definition has influenced how the concept of just war is understood in political psychology. Coates (2018) argued that a stronger justification of the reasons behind war leads to lesser restraint in the means used to carry it out. He further argued that a key dilemma in defining “just war” pertains to justification (i.e., morally unrestricted) versus restraint (i.e., morally restricted) reasons

and means. Therefore, from the moral perspective, the concept of just war can take four possible forms (see Figure 1): just (i.e., accepting selected reasons and selected means), holy (i.e., accepting selected reasons and all means), utilitarian (i.e., accepting all reasons and selected means), and dirty (i.e., accepting all reasons and means). Parenthetically, pacifism does not justify any means or reasons. This classification is aligned with actual wars from history (Parker, 2020). Given that a “holy war” assumes violence for moral reasons, which is characteristic of extremism and radicalization (Schmid, 2016), it is unlikely to be found within stable and democratic societies, such as in Poland. Specifically, in the case of Poland, where we collected our sample, we would expect the level of extremism to be low, as suggested by the results of elections and low levels of terrorism in the country (Trading Economics, 2025).

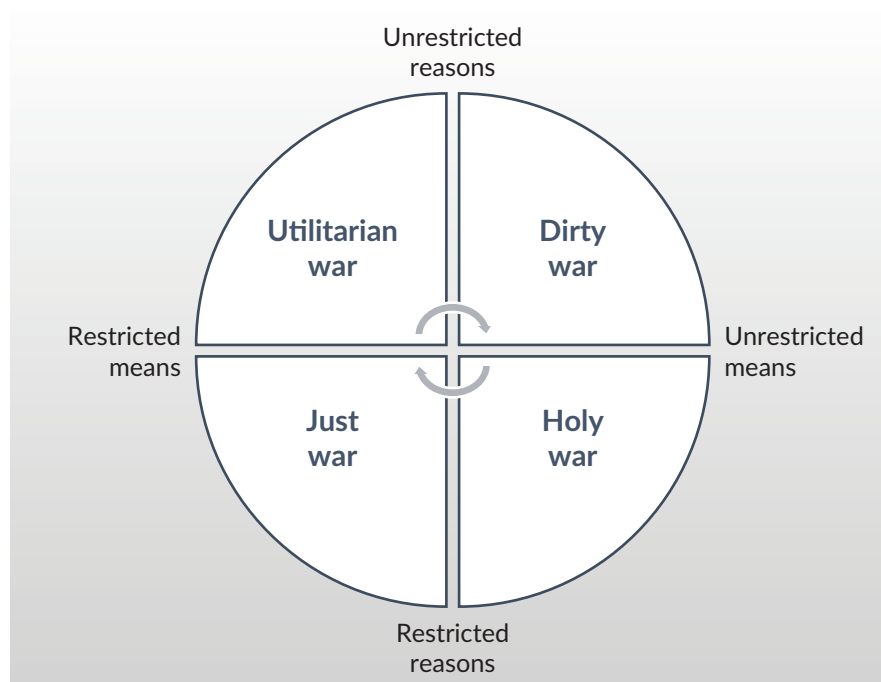


Figure 1. Possible views on just war: Justification of means and reasons. Note: The axes represent the conceptual independence of dimensions.

3. Collective Narcissism and the Views on Just War

In political psychology, the concept of CN was introduced to help explain intergroup conflicts (Golec de Zavala, 2024), including the acceptance of military aggression in intergroup relations (Abou-Ismaïl et al., 2024; G. Brown & Marinthe, 2024; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Žemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021). CN constitutes an emotional investment in the unrealistic belief in the superiority of one’s group and grievance for the perceived lack of recognition of their superiority (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Narcissistic ingroup identity can refer to any group important to the self (Golec de Zavala, 2024), including one’s nation (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) or religious group (Marchlewska et al., 2019). A sizable literature illustrates primarily adverse effects of CN (i.e., national and religious) on intergroup relations, including prejudice, intergroup violence, and support for populist parties (Golec de Zavala, 2024). Collective narcissists, both attached to their own nation and the group sharing their religious worldview, strongly engage in defending the worldview shared by their ingroup (Golec de Zavala, 2024). Nationalistic ideology

and religious fundamentalism are key factors in the acceptance of intergroup aggression (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2005; Doob, 1977; Watkins, 2020), making them crucial in explaining attitudes toward war.

Ingroup identification (both secure and narcissistic) is a crucial factor in explaining intergroup conflict (Stephan et al., 2009). As such, CN (national and religious) is particularly promising in explaining war justification. A strong attachment to the group's interest makes collective narcissists more prepared to accept any actions that support these interests (Bocian et al., 2021); however, little is known about the relationship between CN and more abstract moral judgments (Golec de Zavala, 2024). Therefore, we could expect that CN is positively related to any views supporting the justification of war, while secure identification with one's group should be positively related only to accepting restricted reasons and restricted means of war. Since communal collective narcissists (CCN) are interested in indicating their high moral standards (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021), we expected that the communal forms of CN are related only to a higher acceptance of restricted reasons and means. As long as both national and religious-based ideologies are important in the acceptance of war (Watkins, 2020), it is plausible that we could find a parallel pattern of interrelations across both types of ingroup identifications, in their secure and narcissistic forms.

4. Authoritarianism and the Views of Just War

Beliefs accepting war can be explained by a high level of authoritarianism, understood as a specific political ideology (e.g., Crowson, 2009; Heaven et al., 2006). Most researchers have recognized that authoritarianism is a phenomenon inextricably linked to the far-right ideology, the core of which is traditionalist conservatism. On the other hand, LWA has been called a myth or the “Loch Ness Monster” of political psychology (Altemeyer, 1996). Only a few have attempted to conceptualize and measure LWA (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Conway et al., 2018; Costello et al., 2022). The most fruitful attempt by Costello et al. (2022) has shown LWA as heavily saturated with far-left socio-political progressivism. In that approach, LWA consists of three correlated dimensions: anti-hierarchical aggression, top-down censorship, and anti-conventionalism “that broadly and inexactly reflect authoritarian dominance, authoritarian submission, and morally absolutist and intolerant desires for coercive forms of social organization, respectively” (Costello et al., 2022, p. 38).

The dual-process motivational model (Duckitt & Sibley, 2017) highlights the experience of threat to social order, which deprives people of basic control over their own lives by inducing a sense of danger and uncertainty. In the case of LWA, the evidence for its vulnerability to various forms of threat is much smaller, mainly due to the limited number of studies on this construct. However, Costello et al. (2022), summarizing the similarities and differences between LWA and RWA, placed vulnerability to threat firmly on a similar side for both forms of authoritarianism. They note that LWA systematically predicts neuroticism, suggesting that left-wing authoritarians may be even more sensitive to certain facets of threat and uncertainty than RWA.

Recently, Osborne et al. (2023) have proposed an approach that integrates both constructs. They argue that both RWA and LWA express a dogmatic style of thinking about the social world, submission to strong authorities, and a tendency to punish people who hold different norms and normative beliefs. The submission to authority is accompanied by aggression toward those who violate norms valued by the group, regardless of whether those norms reflect traditional or progressive values. This view is, in fact, very close to the earlier concept of group authoritarianism (Duckitt, 1989; Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005).

Its proponents argue that the very core of authoritarianism is a set of normative but ideology-free attitudes regulating the “correct” intragroup relations. These attitudes include conformity to group norms, uncritical submission to group leaders, and aggression toward ingroup and outgroup members contesting group order.

The essence of authoritarianism, described in the above approach, shows a key reason why both LWA and RWA should likely imply a justification for warfare. Specifically, there is a focus on retaliatory aggression, which stems from sensitivity to threats to group well-being and punitiveness towards “enemies.” Thus, RWA and LWA should be related to CN, as blind attachment to one’s group makes collective narcissists particularly obsessed with ingroup well-being and sensitive toward threats from outgroups (Golec de Zavala, 2024). At the same time, secure identification does not require adopting an authoritarian worldview, as people with secure ingroup attachment do not experience threat from outgroups (Golec de Zavala, 2024).

At first glance, authoritarians should accept beliefs justifying wars more strongly than non-authoritarians. However, authoritarian ideology is certainly not a source of acceptance of warfare free from moral constraints. On the contrary, authoritarians, being attached to the strict view of social and moral order, should justify only the specific actions in warfare that are defensive and non-expansive (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Therefore, within the theoretical framework of acceptable reasons and means of war (Walzer, 1977; Watkins, 2020), both right-wing and left-wing authoritarians should be inclined to accept only those actions and reasons that are morally justified (restricted), i.e., excluding dirty and utilitarian wars. We believe, however, that potential differences between left-wing and right-wing authoritarians may determine the type of moral premises that underlie the ethical acceptability of specific means of warfare.

Both the right-wing and left-wing authoritarian mindsets generate resources of pro-authoritarian ideology in their own way, but ultimately for similar reasons. People with extreme worldviews believe they are morally right. In general, the stronger one’s conviction in their moral superiority is, the less tolerant they are of others’ opinions (Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2012; Haidt, 2012). Moral judgments about what is good or bad are generally absolute and unquestionable. However, the source of the legitimacy of moral norms for people characterized by RWA (far-right traditionalist conservatism) is based on the natural law identified primarily with the will of God and the earthly authorities that embody that law (Altemeyer, 1996). At the same time, the source of the legitimacy of moral norms for people characterized by LWA (far-left socio-political progressivism) is the universalist doctrine of human rights and the fight against manifestations of social injustice (Costello et al., 2022). We believe that because of this fundamental difference in the prerequisites of moral legitimacy, right-wing authoritarians, compared to left-wing authoritarians, may be more likely to accept holy wars (that is, a combination of restricted reasons and unrestricted means), whereas, left-wing authoritarians, compared to right-wing authoritarians, may be much more likely to accept just wars (that is, a combination of restricted reasons and restricted means). Because an authoritarian worldview is motivated by experiencing threat from outgroups, it could explain the link between CN and accepting beliefs justifying wars, but should not explain the analogous link between secure identification and accepting beliefs justifying war.

The link between authoritarianism and CN has been established by numerous studies (for a summary, see Golec de Zavala, 2024). There is rather little known about the extent to which national and religious narcissism could be related to LWA and RWA, yet, given that collective narcissists are sensitive to threats, they are also ready to adopt a worldview protecting and enhancing their preferred perception of reality

(Golec de Zavala, 2024; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). The interplay between national and religious narcissism remains underexplored (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Marchlewska et al., 2019), yet it seems important in the context of justifications of warfare. On the one hand, being strongly attached to one's own nation could result in greater sensitivity to international threats, but it could be positively related to both RWA and LWA. In contrast, being blindly attached to one's religious group could result in a stronger attachment to the religious worldview, which is logically aligned with RWA, as opposed to LWA. Thus, while national and religious narcissists could be authoritarian and accept war as an acceptable resolution of intergroup conflict, there could be a notable difference between these two forms of narcissistic identities.

5. The Current Study

In this article, we explore how selected individual differences relate to beliefs justifying war. CN is particularly relevant to the acceptance of intergroup violence (Golec de Zavala, 2024). Given that intergroup conflicts are driven by a strong attachment to one's group and the fact that most intergroup conflicts are rooted in national and religious issues (Böhm et al., 2020), we focus on religious and national identity—in the form of secure and narcissistic ingroup attachment (Golec de Zavala, 2024)—in relation to the moral justifications of war.

The study is grounded in the agency-communion model of CN (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, et al., 2021; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2024). It offers a distinction between agentic and communal ingroup enhancement, which appears to be particularly relevant for understanding intergroup conflicts and prejudice (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2022). Collective narcissists are prejudiced toward outgroups and willing to accept military interventions (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021); however, only communal narcissists seem to be sensitive to moral issues, which may shape how their acceptance of specific beliefs justifying war manifests.

Yet, there is little known about a kind of narcissistic identification—religious or national—that is relevant for the acceptance of war. To this end, we examine both agentic (ACN) and communal CCN, in conjunction with national and religious identity in Polish society, which is indirectly exposed to the ongoing war in Ukraine (Nowak et al., 2023). The interplay between religious and national identity is special in Poland, a culturally and religiously homogeneous population, with a strong association between being Polish and being Catholic (Boguszewski et al., 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2019; Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, & Sawicki, 2023). Given that collective narcissists accept authoritarian worldviews (which, in turn, is an important risk factor in accepting intergroup prejudice; Golec de Zavala, 2024; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020; Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, & Sawicki, 2023), we focus on both LWA and RWA. Both forms of authoritarianism could be identified in the Polish society (Piotrowski et al., 2023) and could lead to accepting war, albeit only for morally restricted reasons and means. Thus, we aim to test the following hypotheses:

H1: CN is positively related to the justification of war (all reasons and means).

H2: Secure identification is positively related only to the justification of restricted reasons and means.

H3: CCNs are related only to higher acceptance of restricted views on justified reasons and means of war.

H4: ACNs are related to higher acceptance of justification for all reasons and means of war.

H5: RWA is positively related to accepting restricted beliefs on the reasons and means of war.

H6: LWA is positively related to accepting restricted beliefs on the reasons for war.

H7: Only the relationship between CN and accepting beliefs justifying war is mediated by RWA and/or LWA.

Additionally, we test whether the expected pattern of relationships is similar for religious-based and national ingroup attachment (secure and narcissistic).

6. Method

6.1. Participants and Procedure

The data was collected in October 2023 through an Ariadna online panel (www.ariadna.pl) in Polish among current residents of Poland. Participants were rewarded with loyalty points in the research panel system. The total collected sample was $N = 461$. No one failed the attention checks, but we excluded 16 participants who provided identical responses to the 30 items, indicating both justifiability and non-justifiability of war. The final sample size included 448 participants. The final sample was 52% female, with a mean age of 49.9 ($SD = 15.1$); 34% have postsecondary or higher levels of education. In regard to participants' religious affiliation, 79% identified as Catholics, 13% as atheists, 5% as agnostics, and 3% were affiliated with other religious groups. An average political orientation, defined on a 10-point scale from 1 (*definitely left-wing*) to 10 (*definitely right-wing*), was 4.7 ($SD = 2.27$). The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board at the first author's, Magdalena Anna Żemojtel-Piotrowska, institution.

6.2. Measures

The beliefs justifying war scale (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, et al., 2023) is a 22-item scale measuring restricted and unrestricted reasons and means of going to war. The beliefs justifying war used in the scale were based on a classical just war theory (Lazar, 2017; Walzer, 1977). Restricted reasons included defensive war (i.e., defense and responding to attacks). Restricted means are aimed at minimizing human suffering and targeting only military forces, without attacking civilians. The large scope of commonly known but not considered restricted reasons and means were labeled "unrestricted." Items were generated and discussed by our international team, comprised of scholars (social and political psychologists) originating from Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Czechia, and the UK, with the final set of 22 items. The exact wording was then examined by the international team involved in the Beliefs in Just War: Cross-Cultural Studies project. We have decided to use highly specific and contextualized items, reflecting the narrative of war presented in the media, aiming to include such reasons and means that align with current forms of waging war. We used a response scale ranging from 1 = *never can be justified* to 10 = *always could be justified*.

The LWA scale (Costello et al., 2022; Costello & Patrick, 2023; Polish version by Piotrowski et al., 2023) is a 13-item scale measuring LWA, with three subdimensions: anti-egalitarian aggression (four items),

anti-conventionalism (four items), and top-down censorship (five items). A response scale ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The RWA scale (Nießen et al., 2019; Polish version by Lech, 2023) is a nine-item scale measuring three subdimensions of RWA: aggression, submissiveness, and conventionalism (three items per scale). A response scale ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

An eight-item collective narcissism scale (the CNS; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) and a seven-item communal collective narcissism inventory (the CCNI; Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021) serve as a measure of narcissistic identification, following the procedure described in Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, and Sedikides (2021). The former measures agentic collective narcissism (ACN), the latter measures the communal CCN. In both scales, items refer to “my group.” We modified items of these scales to the reference group (“my nation” for national identity and “people of my religion” for religious identity). To maintain consistency across the different kinds of identification, we avoided exact labels (like “Poles” or “Catholics”) to stress ingroup identification.

A four-item SI subscale from collective self-esteem scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), with two reversely-scored items, referred to the importance of the group for the self (e.g., “My X is an important reflection of who I am”; “My X is unimportant to my sense of what kind of a person I am”), where X is a specific group. The scale was administered twice, first with the national and a second time for the religious group.

The question phrasing for items in the ACN religion, CCN religion, and SI religion scales included religious groups when participants indicated they were religious, and agnostic and atheists when the participants indicated identification with those. The resulting indicators were combined across religious, atheistic, and agnostic participants. In all of these scales, the response scale ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. All reliability indices and descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. The full wording of all the scales in both Polish and English is available in the Supplementary Materials.

6.3. Analytical Strategy

In order to test the key measurement model of just war beliefs, we employed confirmatory factor analysis and adjusted the model following suggestions from the standardized loadings magnitude and their *p*-values, as well as modification indices (T. A. Brown, 2015). To model the associations between our key variables, we explored mediation through a path analysis using the R package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012). We used maximum likelihood robust estimation and treated missing values with full maximum likelihood. Following the conventional cutoffs for factor models (Hu & Bentler, 1999), we considered the model to be well-fitted when the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) were greater than 0.9 and when the standardized root mean residual (SRMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were lower than 0.08. We considered a good model fit as $RMSEA < 0.06$ and $CFI < 0.95$.

For mediation analysis, we used composite indices of all the scales because the full structural equation model appeared to be too large for a modest sample size (the number of parameters would be larger than our sample size). Moreover, in light of the recent critique of mediation analyses with cross-sectional data (Rohrer et al.,

2022), in which the directionality of the paths is uncertain, we performed a robustness check, an additional network analysis that does not make causal or directional claims, representing partial correlations across all the variables. Network models were fit using graphical lasso estimation with extended Bayesian information Criterion used to select regularization parameters as implemented in the R package bootnet (Epskamp et al., 2016). In addition, we fitted an item-level network model to overcome potential limitations related to the construction of indices and latent variables (e.g., Borsboom et al., 2021). Such a model allowed for exploring associations between all the items across the scales and to discover whether particular items might have had a differential contribution to the index-level results. The R code and data are openly available in the Open Science Framework directory (<https://osf.io/pz2bk>).

7. Results

7.1. Test of the Theoretical Measurement Model

The theoretical model of beliefs justifying war was based on the notion of war restriction, with a distinction between restricted and unrestricted reasons (*ius ad bellum*) and means (*ius in bello*). The initial measurement followed this distinction and expected four or possibly five factors: restricted reasons, restricted means, unrestricted reasons, and unrestricted means, whereas a potential fifth factor may stem from extremely unrestricted means such as nuclear and chemical weapons (see Figure S1 in the Supplementary Material). Given the wording of the items, we expected a cross-loading for the only reverse-coded item assessing the justifiability of evacuating the wounded, which was hypothesized to load on both the restricted means factor (positively) and the unrestricted means factor (negatively). In addition, we expected residual covariance between justification of the chemical and nuclear weapon use, as well as own and enemy losses. We expected some deviations from this theoretical structure as we used a new measurement instrument and conducted a study in a specific news context.

The theoretical model fit the data marginally ($\chi^2 = 433$, $df = 200$, $p < 0.001$, CFI/TLI = 0.910/0.896, RMSEA = 0.056 [0.049, 0.063], SRMR = 0.072); however, the correlation between restricted means and restricted reasons was overly high ($r = 0.94$) which suggested collapsing these factors into a single restricted (just) war factor. The updated model, therefore, included three factors. In addition, the modification indices strongly suggested a cross-loading from “food requisition” on the restricted war factor. Apparently, in the given Polish socio-political context, this item was interpreted as both a restricted and an unrestricted mean. Such a model was fitted well to the data ($\chi^2 = 390.2$, $df = 202$, $p < 0.001$, CFI/TLI = 0.927/0.917; RMSEA = 0.050 [0.043, 0.058], SRMR = 0.066) with all standardized factor loadings above 0.3 (see Table S1 in the Supplementary Material). Following the results of this analysis, we calculated the composite indices for restricted war, unrestricted means, and unrestricted reasons, with $\alpha = 0.79$, 0.77, and 0.84, respectively. Therefore, we decided to use a three-factor model, which turned out to be better fitted to the data than the four-factor model (see Table S1 in the Supplementary Material).

7.2. Mediation and Network Analyses

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the key variables are listed in Table 1. Network analysis (Figure S2 in the Supplementary Material) showed a complex pattern of interrelations between national and religious identification, both in narcissistic and secure forms. The items tended to cluster

around types of identification (i.e., religious or national) rather than the domain of identification (i.e., agentic or communal). The item-level analysis suggested that these correlations cannot be attributed to the method alone since each scale occupied its own distinct network areas. Moreover, a few high correlations within these clusters (mostly between narcissisms) were not sufficient to override their conceptual differences. Therefore, we distinguished between different forms of CN and, separately, the kinds of secure identification. Also, given the low reliability of the SI scales, we run additional analyses without them. However, the results (Table S5 in the Supplementary Material) indicated a less clear pattern; therefore, we have decided to include secure identifications in the model.

Justification of restricted war was negatively correlated with both the total score of LWA and its subscales, especially with anti-hierarchy and anti-conventionalism. It also negatively correlated with one RWA subscale, namely, submissiveness. The justifiability of the unrestricted reasons did not correlate with most other scales, except for a weak positive association with ACN religion. Finally, the justification of unrestricted means had a small but positive correlation with LWA and a negative correlation with secure identification with one's own nation.

Next, we ran a path analysis with the four kinds of CN, as well as SI indices as predictors, LWA and RWA as mediators, and the three kinds of war justification as outcome variables. The results are listed in Figure 2 and in Table S3 in the Supplementary Material. First of all, the associations between variables are sparse, so we observed only a few direct effects on the war justification indices and only one weak indirect effect tracing from SI religion, through LWA, to the restricted war justifiability. Direct negative effects on restricted war came from LWA ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.001$) and CCN nation ($\beta = -0.27$, $p = 0.002$, the latter kept its significance in a total effect; $\beta = -0.28$, $p = 0.001$), and weak positive effect of SI nation ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.013$; total effect of SI nation, $\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.006$). Thus, restricted war was negatively associated by LWA and CCN, and positively by national SI. In contrast, unrestricted means turned out to have a positive effect on LWA ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.021$) and a negative effect of SI nation ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = 0.017$; total effect, $\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.010$). Therefore, the acceptance of unrestricted means was positively associated with LWA but negatively with secure national identification. Unrestricted reasons did not have a single significant effect in this model.

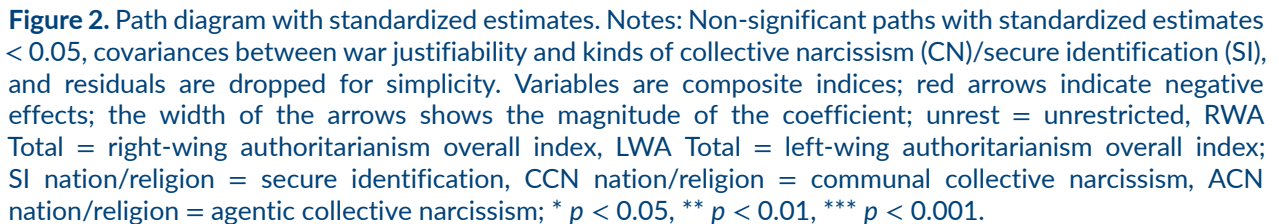
Since path analysis makes multiple assumptions regarding the causal relations and directionality of the variables, which are unverifiable with cross-sectional data, we further explored a network model that does not take that many assumptions and allows for an arbitrary number of "mediators" (it afforded splitting LWA and RWA into subscales). The results presented in Figure 3 are very similar to the path model described above. The war justifiability indices were mostly disconnected from the rest of the variables, except for an LWA-anti-hierarchy which revealed a mid-size positive link with restricted war justification and a weak positive link with unrestricted means. On the other hand, four kinds of CN showed close associations with each other. Expectedly, nation-focused identifications were also closely related to each other and to the two subscales of RWA, due to their focus on nationalistic concerns. Interestingly, the LWA components are barely related to RWA and mostly negatively related to all nation-related identifications.

We ran two additional robustness checks. First, since initially we combined participants affiliated with a religion and those not affiliated into a single sample, which could have resulted in a different meaning of the religion-related constructs (e.g., CCN religion). We repeated the mediation analysis, excluding non-religious participants. The results demonstrated practically the same results (see Table S4 in the Supplementary

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the key variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Restricted	6.85	2.00	0.77										
2. Unrest_reasons	3.80	1.84	0.79	0.32**									
3. Unrest_means	3.15	1.49	0.84	0.24**	0.57**								
4. ACN nation	4.13	1.26	0.92	−0.01	0.09	0.01							
5. CCN nation	4.02	1.43	0.96	−0.07	0.03	−0.00	0.80**						
6. ACN religion	3.84	1.23	0.93	0.02	0.12*	0.04	0.69**	0.60**					
7. CCN religion	3.99	1.42	0.97	0.03	0.08	0.00	0.54**	0.63**	0.77**				
8. SI nation	4.21	1.08	0.51	0.10*	0.01	−0.10*	0.51**	0.46**	0.32**	0.25**			
9. SI religion	3.98	1.15	0.51	0.09	0.06	−0.01	0.27**	0.24**	0.45**	0.45**	0.36**		
10. RWA total	4.31	1.14	0.91	−0.09	0.03	−0.01	0.61**	0.59**	0.47**	0.39**	0.35**	0.19**	
11. LWA total	3.19	0.98	0.87	−0.24**	0.05	0.12*	−0.05	−0.08	−0.02	−0.07	−0.13**	−0.16**	−0.00

Notes: *N* = 448 in all cases; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; U = unrestricted; for statistics of subscales of LWA and RWA, see Table S2 in the Supplementary Material.



of combined LWA in the original model was relatively strong. The third model dealt with the relatively low reliability of secure identification and excluded it from the models. This exclusion's effect on the other coefficients was trivial. None of the models demonstrated high multicollinearity. Finally, we computed Bayes factors for each predictor in each model and found support for the null effects of ACN religion and SI religion, among others.

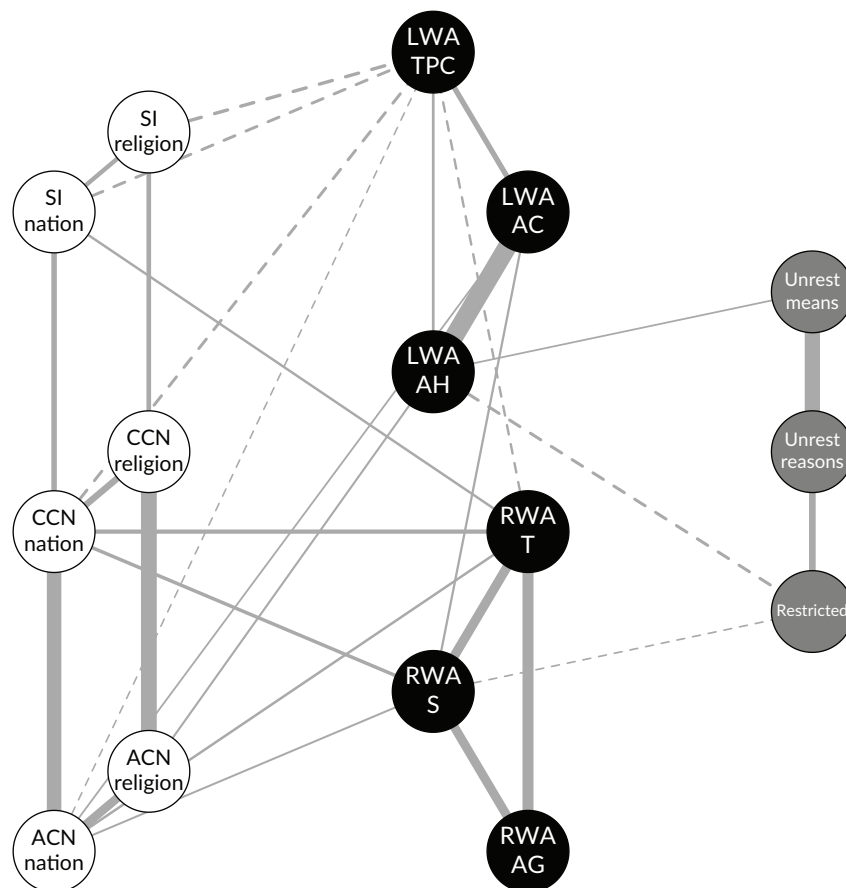


Figure 3. Network model based on partial correlations and estimated with the EBICglasso algorithm. Notes: Solid lines represent positive and dashed ones represent negative partial correlations; the width of the edges reflects their magnitude. Unrest reasons/means = unrestricted reasons/means; RWA_AG = right-wing authoritarian aggression; RWA_S = submission; RWA_T = tradition; LWA_AH = anti-hierarchical aggression; LWA_AC = anti-conventionalism; LWA_TPC = top-down censorship; SI nation/religion = secure identification; CCN nation/religion = communal collective narcissism; ACN nation/religion = agentic collective narcissism.

8. Discussion

In this article, we were interested in explaining how national and religious identification in both narcissistic and secure forms could relate to accepting specific beliefs justifying war. We included various forms of national and religious identification, basing our expectations on the agency-communion model of CN (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021) and referring to the concept of just war (Lazar, 2017; Moseley, 2011; Walzer, 1977; Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, et al., 2023). As intergroup conflicts are rooted in specific political ideologies, we additionally included authoritarianism as a possible mediator of the link between CN and beliefs justifying war, because CN is related to greater sensitivity for

threats toward ingroups (Golec de Zavala, 2024). We considered both LWA and RWA. In addition, we tested associations with national identification, which were thoroughly studied in the context of intergroup conflicts (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Nathanson, 2009), as well as religious identification, which was not (for an exception, see Marchlewska et al., 2019). Therefore, it was not clear to what extent the relationships between religious-, narcissistic-, and secure-identification were similar to those known from research on national narcissistic and secure identifications. We anticipated that religious identification would have a stronger influence on beliefs justifying war than national narcissism or secure identifications.

We have identified a three-dimensional model of beliefs justifying war: classical just war view (composed of morally restricted view on means and reasons), unrestricted reasons, and unrestricted means of war. Thus, the theoretical model generally matched the factor structure in our sample. The classical view of just war as based on self-defensive reasons for waging war and minimizing human suffering was replicated in our data, while unrestricted reasons and unrestricted means, albeit positively related, were separate factors.

8.1. National and Religious Identification

We examined four hypotheses concerning national and religious identifications. First, we expected that CN is positively related to the justification of war (all reasons and means), while secure identification is positively related only to the justification of restricted reasons and means. These hypotheses were in part supported.

Next, secure national identification was positively correlated with the acceptance of just war and negatively related to the acceptance of unrestricted means. CN was unrelated to the justification of war, with a few exceptions, discussed ahead. This indicates that only secure national identification may prevent the justification of violent resolutions of wars in favor of morally restricted means and reasons.

Further, following the agency-communion model of CN, we expected that CCNs are related only to higher acceptance of restricted views on just reasons and means, while ACNs are related to a higher acceptance of justification for all reasons and means of war. These hypotheses were not supported. CCN national was related to lower acceptance of restricted view of war, reflecting classical just war beliefs (Lazar, 2017; Watkins, 2020), yet it was unrelated to accepting unrestricted means and reasons. Given that CCNs present themselves as moral (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021), they are not genuine in their moral decisions. It is congruent with other studies showing such inconsistencies between declarations and actual deeds or more specific attitudes (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2022, 2024). Unlike CCN national, people with secure identification with their nation are ready to accept only restricted views on war and not extreme hostility in warfare.

The pattern of relationships was different for religious identification. Since the morality of waging war is strongly related to religious worldviews (Lazar, 2017; Walzer, 1977), we expected that religious narcissistic and secure identification would be relevant in explaining the acceptance of beliefs justifying war. However, this was not the case. Although agentic religious narcissism was positively correlated with the acceptance of unrestricted reasons, this relationship was not supported by the results of path analyses, where we controlled for shared variance of all identifications.

It is conceivable that attachment to a religious group may work both ways—as a moral compass preventing violence and as a warmonger promoting violence (e.g., the Church blesses soldiers and supports the army). Moreover, religious attachment may belong to a different realm in the Polish context in 2023, where the most salient notion of war currently is nation-centric. It is likely that in the context of a war involving religious enmity (e.g., the Middle East), religious beliefs would be more strongly related to war justifications.

8.2. Authoritarianism

We expected that RWA would be positively related to accepting restricted beliefs on reasons and means, while LWA would be positively related to accepting restricted beliefs on reasons for war. These hypotheses were not supported. RWA was unrelated to any beliefs justifying war, and this pattern was consistent across all types of analyses. LWA was related to lower acceptance of just war beliefs and higher acceptance of unrestricted means.

8.3. Mediation

Lastly, we expected that authoritarianism could explain the link between collective narcissism, secure identification, and beliefs justifying war. Specifically, we expected that the relationship between collective narcissism and beliefs justifying war is mediated by authoritarianism, while the relationship between SI and accepting beliefs justifying war is not mediated by authoritarianism. We have found an expected positive correlation between RWA and all types of identifications, both narcissistic and secure. Secure identifications were also negatively, albeit weakly, related to LWA.

Path analyses supplemented this picture, again, by controlling for shared variance of all forms of identification. We have found only one significant mediation effect, as religious SI was related to higher acceptance of restricted views on war through lower LWA. Thus, our hypothesis about mediation was not supported. Therefore, most of the detected relationships between CN, SI, authoritarianism, and justification of war were direct, so that we observed rather their additive effects than mediations.

More importantly, some of our findings were at odds with previous findings regarding the strong effects of RWA on the acceptance of wars. It is possible these relationships were rather weak for at least two reasons. First, former studies on the relationship between RWA and acceptance of war were focused on specific wars (Crowson, 2009; Heaven et al., 2006); second, the studies were conducted with the focus on specific ingroup identification, namely, national one (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2022; Žemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, Sedikides, Sawicki, et al., 2021). Thus, the threat associated with real conflicts could lead to stronger effects of RWA, which is motivated by ingroup security and sensitivity toward specific threats from outgroups (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). The moral component of beliefs justifying hypothetical war seems to be less related to authoritarian worldviews, particularly in the case of right-wing authoritarian beliefs. Thus, future studies exploring the relationship between authoritarianism and just war beliefs may aim to address these beliefs in the context of specific conflict settings.

Whereas, in the case of the LWA, a stronger relationship appeared for hypothetical moral justifications of war. This may be related to the ideological composition of LWA, and a dogmatic commitment to anti-hierarchical beliefs, with an “any means necessary” approach to creating egalitarianism, regardless of the means required

to achieve this goal. These findings highlight an important, yet underexplored, difference in the construction of authoritarianism, differentiating the right- and left-wing forms.

Specifically, restricted views on war, congruent with classical just war theory, were explained by the joint effects of authoritarianism (both left-wing and right-wing) and secure national identification, as well as the joint effects of secure religious identification and RWA. Both secure identifications were related to higher acceptance of just war beliefs: national ones directly predicted just war beliefs, while the religious SI explained the acceptance of just war beliefs via lower LWA. Such results were congruent with former studies indicating that strong identification with one's nation, even if it is secure and based on a positive view of one's nation, could result in outgroup derogation and accepting war, albeit only if this war is seen as morally restrained (Nathanson, 2009). In our sample, we have found that people with higher levels of secure religious identification were more ready to accept just war beliefs only because they were less ready to accept LWA. Lack of direct relationships between secure identification with a religious group and accepting beliefs justifying war could be obscured by pacifism, lowering acceptance of any reasons and means of waging war, or by the fact that we jointly analyzed people identifying themselves as believers and non-believers. However, we obtained a similar pattern of results with only believers.

Because mediation analyses were based on total scores of LWA and RWA, we supplemented our analyses with network analysis to reveal more complex patterns of relationships between variables. These additional analyses revealed mostly interesting patterns within LWA subdimensions, shedding additional light on mediations based on total scores of LWA and RWA. The negative relationship between LWA and religious identifications could be attributed exclusively to top-down censorship, as this component assumes attacking right-wing ideology (like banning hate speech, for example, against sexual minorities; see Costello et al., 2022). Collective narcissists in Poland are prejudiced toward people questioning social order, like sexual minorities (Lantos et al., 2024; Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2022). In addition, subdimensions of LWA were inconsistently related to RWA, which was not congruent with the US context (Costello et al., 2022).

A possible explanation for these results could be found in the specificity of our sample. Poland is a post-communist country, where left-wing political identification has a different meaning than in the US or other Western democracies (Tavits & Letki, 2009). Thus, LWA could also have a different meaning in the Polish population, where anti-establishment orientation is integrated with attachment to traditional values so that anti-hierarchical aggression is not necessarily the opposite of a strong attachment to national and cultural values (Tavits & Letki, 2009), unlike top-down censorship. Such interpretation is congruent with our item-based network analysis, where a subscale representing top-down censorship is clearly separated from the two remaining subscales, which are positively related to RWA and to each other.

To summarize, our study revealed that specific beliefs justifying war in more abstract terms are rather weakly explained by attachment to one's nation and attachment to one's religious group (in our case, people sharing the same view on religion). Our model was especially ineffective in explaining the acceptance of unrestricted reasons for waging war, probably because they are more context-dependent (Kumove et al., 2025) and are shaped by self-interest (Bocian et al., 2021). Acceptance of unrestricted means, being a representation of direct hostility, was solely explained by higher LWA and lower secure national identification. Thus, LWA outperformed the explanatory power of its right-wing counterpart.

Lastly, results for national narcissism are more straightforward than for religious narcissism and consistent with the agency-communion model of CN (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, & Sedikides, 2021; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2024). CCN national were similar to those with a secure national identity, as they accepted a restricted view of war. However, at the same time, they did not reject unethical means of waging war. Thus, higher CCN does not prevent the acceptance of violent means of conflict resolution; it just limits what might be deemed acceptable. On the other hand, secure identification with one's nation is accompanied only by accepting morally restrained war, without accepting unethical means, replicating Nathanson (2009). Essentially, our study reveals that specific views justifying war are different from the general acceptance of real-life conflicts. Neither identity nor political worldview was strongly associated with the acceptance of any specific view on war in our sample. Yet, albeit the effects found in our study are rather weak, we could point to some notable suggestions for future studies. First, being strongly attached to their nation does not mean they endorse pacifism, but only "reasonable" defense, still limited by respecting moral principles, known as just war (Lazar, 2017; Walzer, 1977). Being blindly attached to the group does not mean the acceptance of any way of waging wars. Collective narcissists are rather indifferent to moral considerations related to why and how war should be waged, even though they are prejudiced, accept wars as a rule, or accept an authoritarian worldview (Golec de Zavala, 2024). Even while presenting as particularly moral and tolerant, it is not reflected in their beliefs justifying war, as they do not reject overt hostility in conflict resolution. Lastly, our findings shed light on the difference between RWA and LWA regarding the justification of war. Probably, right-wings authoritarians are driven by two opposite motivations, outgroup hostility and need for security, which could be destroyed by war. Thus, their view of moral war is unspecified. Left-wing authoritarians, being less attached to the existing social order, are more hostile, and their outgroup hostility is multiplied by rejecting the existing status quo, which makes them more ready to accept beliefs justifying warfare; ultimately, constituting a holy war view, where all means justify the end.

9. Limitations and Further Directions

Our study was conducted at a specific time and on a specific population, so the generality of our findings is limited. Polish society is homogenous, dominated by the Christian faith, with a strong relationship between religious and national identity (Boguszewski et al., 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2019; Żemojtel-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, & Sawicki, 2023), which could affect the interrelations between the various forms of narcissistic and secure identifications (Stopka et al., 2024; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2023; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2024). Although culturally specific, we could still observe the effects of authoritarianism on accepting specific views of just war. Detected relationships were mostly weak. Future studies should differentiate better between abstract and specific attitudes toward wars (Watkins, 2020). Replication of our conceptual model in other cultural contexts is highly recommended. Albeit indirectly affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war, Poland is not exposed to direct military actions (Nowak et al., 2023). Being involved in war could seriously affect not only the levels but also the views of just war (Kumove et al., 2025). The post-communist past could also affect how LWA and RWA were expressed and related to the outcome variables (Costello et al., 2022; Tavits & Letki, 2009). We used abbreviated versions of LWA and secure identifications. The reliability of LWA and its subdimensions was very good, but the scales measuring secure identifications were characterized by low internal consistency. Future studies should employ more reliable measures or potentially use the long-form version of the scales. Low reliability could be explained by both a low number of items but also by the heterogeneous nature of secure identification (Cameron, 2004; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Thus, it is worth exploring whether each component of secure identification is related to the

justification of warfare in a similar way. Despite these limitations, the current study has contributed theoretically and practically to the understanding of moral justifications and support for warfare. First, we have found a notable difference between leftist and rightist authoritarians. Secondly, our findings suggest that only secure identification has importance in accepting specific beliefs supporting violent conflicts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The R code and data are openly available in the Open Science Framework directory (<https://osf.io/pz2bk>).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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The Wartime Justification Trajectory: A Dynamic Approach to Justifying Wars in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article proposes a new framework, the “wartime justification trajectory,” for understanding how military interventions are justified and contested over time. Rather than treating legitimacy as something decided only at the start of a war, the model views it as a shifting process shaped by events on the ground, political rhetoric, and public reaction. The wartime justification trajectory outlines four phases—initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations—that evolve as conflicts progress. Drawing on case studies from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, the article traces how leaders revised their justifications in response to changing conditions and how public support correspondingly rose or fell. The analysis combines discourse analysis with public opinion data to demonstrate that legitimacy is not fixed but rather constantly renegotiated. By highlighting these recurring phases, the study contributes to ongoing debates in international relations and political communication, offering a practical tool for assessing when and why wars lose the support they initially command.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Iraq, just war, norm contestation, public opinion, Ukraine, war legitimacy

1. Introduction

Global media visibility and instantaneous public reactions have become decisive factors in shaping the perceived legitimacy of war in the 21st century. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, confronted states with an unprecedented security challenge. The initial responses—classical military interventions justified as counterterrorism operations—led to protracted conflicts, which in turn provoked intense international debates and contestation over their legitimacy (Crawford, 2003; Maley, 2002). The first quarter

of this century has seen several major wars that illustrate how the justification of war has evolved under the scrutiny of international reactions and public perceptions. This comparative scope encompasses both democratic and authoritarian settings, enabling us to examine whether similar legitimization dynamics prevail across diverse political contexts. It is therefore necessary to adopt new and complex approaches to understand how states and international organisations justify the use of force in contemporary international politics, and especially how these justifications align with evolving standards of global ethics, law, and politics (Popa, 2018). Moreover, advances in digital communication have enabled rapid challenges to official narratives via social media and independent reporting (Baum & Potter, 2008; Maroşan, 2023). In this context, examining the variables that shape public and international perceptions of the legitimacy of military interventions is essential.

The existing literature on just war and humanitarian intervention has largely treated legitimacy as a static concept, assessed chiefly at the outset of a conflict (Chesterman, 2001; Walzer, 2006). Traditional just war theory provides normative criteria—*jus ad bellum* for going to war and *jus in bello* for conduct in war—that dictate whether a war is morally and legally justified. However, these models implicitly assume that if the criteria are met at the start, the war's legitimacy is established once and for all (Walzer, 2006). Similarly, international law analyses of intervention focus on whether there is proper authority or cause at the outset (under the UN Charter or doctrines like the responsibility to protect), reflecting a linear model of legitimacy (Chesterman, 2001; Evans, 2008). For example, Walzer's (2006) just war principles and Chesterman's (2001) standards for humanitarian intervention assess legitimacy at the moment of decision, seldom considering how legitimacy might change as the war unfolds. Rengger (2005) likewise addresses legitimate force mostly through initial judgments based on just war tenets. Developments on the ground, however, reveal that legitimacy is not fixed and can shift during a conflict, depending on factors like civilian casualty rates, changing alliances, or transformations in media narratives (Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016; Kaufmann, 2004). In other words, limiting our focus to the initial justification gives only a partial picture of how a war gains or loses legitimacy over time.

This study addresses two essential questions: How do justifications for war evolve over the life of a conflict and which factors drive shifts in perceptions of legitimacy throughout a conflict's trajectory? To explore these issues, the article proposes a dynamic theoretical model: the wartime justification trajectory (WJT). This model identifies four stages of particular importance: initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations.

By synthesising insights from international relations, political communication, and war studies, the WJT model aims to transcend static approaches and provide a more dynamic means of analysing the legitimacy of contemporary wars. This study contributes to debates on the interplay among conflict, public opinion, and international norms (Berinsky, 2009; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), demonstrating how battlefield events, media discourse, and global governance responses shape perceptions of war legitimacy. The findings yield both theoretical and practical implications, offering decision-makers an analytical framework to assess and anticipate changes in the perceived legitimacy of military interventions over time. The article explains the WJT model and conducts an empirical analysis of three paradigmatic 21st-century wars: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine.

2. Literature and Conceptual Foundations

Making sense of the legitimacy of war in the post–Cold War landscape means moving beyond abstract legal frameworks or neatly packaged moral principles. What is needed is a composite approach, one that not only accounts for legal and ethical norms, but also for the political, social, and discursive mechanisms through which those norms are activated, disputed, and transformed in real time. This section adopts a constructivist lens, treating legitimacy not as a condition granted by pre-existing rules, but as something performed, contested, and renegotiated in the shifting interplay of discourse, institutions, and perception. Within this framework, wartime justification drift appears not as a deviation from legitimacy, but as its dynamic expression—as a form of context-driven normative contestation.

2.1. Norms, Interpretations, and Contestation

Just war theory remains a key reference point in debates over legitimate military intervention, structured classically around the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* dichotomy. However, in today's strategic and discursive environment, these categories rarely function as settled rules. Instead, they serve as floating signifiers, interpretive anchors around which various political and legal actors build divergent claims. As Wiener (2007) argues, contesting a norm does not necessarily mean rejecting it outright; it may mean reactivating different “normative packages” depending on the strategic, institutional, or cultural context. The same clause—“the maintenance of international peace and security” (Charter of the United Nations, 1945, Article 39)—can be used to justify fundamentally different actions, depending on who is speaking and to whom.

This interpretive plasticity is not a flaw in the system—it is a defining feature of how norms work in practice. Müller (2004), for instance, emphasises that norm validity cannot be meaningfully separated from the discursive context in which it is negotiated. His notion of a “two-level discourse” captures this perfectly: norms are simultaneously debated in international and domestic arenas and are shaped by both strategic logic and symbolic-moral references. In this space, contestation is not disruption—it is function. Norms survive not because they are obeyed, but because they can be reframed, reinterpreted, and their legitimacy renewed when challenged.

2.2. Legitimacy as Discursive Performance

Legitimacy is not something states simply possess or lose—it is something they construct, argument by argument, frame by frame. Justifying war is, at its core, a discursive act: a matter of constructing strategic narratives that selectively draw upon legal norms, ethical imperatives, and geopolitical interests. Political leaders do not offer neutral accounts; they craft persuasive stories, invoking familiar rhetorical scripts, such as “the war on terror,” “defending democracy,” or “preventing genocide” (Cap, 2017; Entman, 2004). These framings are not merely communicative; they are constitutive. They ensure that some interventions appear necessary, while others seem unthinkable.

However, these narratives are fragile. They are constantly subject to pushback from the public, the media, international watchdogs, and even internal dissent (Stoica & Voina, 2023). When narrative control slips, legitimacy falters. As Simonsen (2019) and Oddo (2011) show, war justifications must be sustained through time, continuously adjusted in response to criticism, battlefield events, and evolving political stakes.

Legitimacy, then, is not a verdict—it is a moving target, shaped by the performative labour of keeping the war narratively credible. When audiences stop buying the story, the legitimacy it props up starts to unravel.

2.3. The Dynamics and Drift of Wartime Justification

To understand how wartime legitimacy shifts, we need to move away from static models that treat justification as a single, front-loaded moment. Legitimacy is not fixed at the beginning—it evolves. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) theory of the “norm life cycle” captures part of this: norms move through phases of emergence, consolidation, and institutionalisation. However, they also fracture, bend, and morph under pressure. Kaufmann (2004) and Coleman (2017) describe how original war rationales often become untenable as facts on the ground change, prompting governments into justificatory drift—a slow pivot toward new framings meant to preserve support or mitigate backlash.

We have seen this play out in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Initial claims about weapons of mass destruction (WMD), imminent threats, or terrorist networks were gradually swapped out for new appeals: human rights, democratisation, and regional stability. This drift is not always conscious or coordinated. Sometimes it is reactive, improvised, a patchwork of rhetorical survival strategies in the face of growing scepticism. Entman (2004) and Roselle et al. (2014) refer to this as an iterative discourse, a cycle of adaptation, where political elites continually revise the story they are telling in response to media exposure, public opinion, and international censure. Justification, in this view, is less a statement than a narrative metabolism, constantly adjusting, always recalibrating.

2.4. An Analytical Model: The WJT

Bringing these threads together, the study proposes a framework for analysing war legitimacy as a trajectory of justificatory drift—a model that treats norms not as stable reference points, but as mobile elements, circulating through phases of contestation, adaptation, and retrospective judgment. The framework resists any strict division between the normative, the discursive, and the temporal. Instead, it asks how these dimensions interact, how legitimacy is built, strained, and remade through the life of a conflict.

The model unfolds across four loosely ordered but deeply interconnected phases:

Phase 1. Initial justification: the setting of a legal and moral frame (e.g., self-defence and protection of civilians).

Phase 2. Conflict dynamics: shifts in justificatory logic as the conflict evolves and unanticipated pressures mount.

Phase 3. Social reactions: pushback from publics, institutions, or rival actors that force narrative recalibration.

Phase 4. Post-conflict evaluations: retrospective reinterpretation, where the story of legitimacy is rewritten in light of outcomes, revelations, and hindsight.

What this model captures is not simply the presence or absence of legitimacy, but the temporal texture of how it is made and unmade. Legitimacy here is a process, not a predicate. The real work lies in tracing how norms are pulled into battle, how they stretch, split, and sometimes break—only to be stitched back together again in the next cycle. This is legitimacy as lived discourse, not textbook doctrine.

3. Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy in wartime does not arrive fully formed. It is built piecemeal, strategically, often under pressure, and it rarely remains in place. What begins as a confident assertion of rightness tends, over time, to mutate. Justifications stretch, snap, and are patched over or reframed—the story changes. This framework (the WJT) is an attempt to make sense of that drift.

It does not assume coherence. Quite the opposite. It assumes conflict between principles and outcomes, between moral claims and military necessity, between how a war is sold and how it unfolds. It tracks legitimacy not as a binary (legitimate vs. illegitimate), but as a fluctuating condition, shaped by shifting terrain: political, social, strategic, and normative.

We map this trajectory across four phases: initial justification, conflict dynamics, social reactions, and post-conflict evaluations. These are not rigid stages; they blur, repeat, fold back on themselves. The point is not to freeze the timeline—it is to notice the movement.

3.1. Phase 1: Initial Justification

Before the first shot is fired, the groundwork must be laid. War needs a reason, preferably one that sounds righteous. Leaders reach for legal norms (self-defence and humanitarian intervention), moral imperatives (protection and prevention), and strategic logic (threat elimination and regional stability). These justifications do the heavy lifting. They legitimise violence, calm allies, and rally the public. However, they are also high-risk gambits. Once reality sets in, the words spoken at the start do not always hold true.

3.2. Phase 2: Conflict Dynamics

Wars, by nature, defy scripts. What was supposed to be swift becomes stuck: Civilian deaths climb, the enemy adapts, and “surgical strikes” yield chaos. Consequently, the original rationale—so crisp in the beginning—starts to fray. At this point, leaders often recalibrate. They double down, shift emphasis, or swap justifications entirely. What was about “stopping genocide” becomes about “regional stability.” What was defensive becomes preemptive. This is justification drift: the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) remaking of the moral and strategic case, not as a confession of failure, but as a continuity illusion—a sleight of hand to hold the narrative together while the facts change beneath it.

3.3. Phase 3: Social Reactions

Wars do not just happen on the battlefield. They unfold across screens, newspapers, and living rooms. Public opinion matters—sometimes as a constraint, sometimes as a catalyst. In democracies, protests, polling, media

coverage, and elite debates can tilt the balance. Leaders react—shifting tone, narrowing objectives, dangling exit plans. In authoritarian regimes, the tools are different (censorship and control), but the pressure still seeps in. No regime is hermetically sealed. Anger finds ways to surface: through prices, whispers, resignations, or, when things break down, through streets filling faster than the state can empty them.

3.4. Phase 4: Post-Conflict Evaluations

When the dust settles—or at least thins—a new kind of battle begins: the fight over memory. Was the war justified? Did it achieve what it claimed? Was the cost bearable? These are not just academic questions. They shape future doctrine, political careers, and national identity. Committees are formed. Reports are written. Narratives are contested. In democracies, these debates are noisy, partisan, and public. In autocracies, they are quieter but not absent—pushed into margins but never gone. How a war is remembered determines what kind of justifications will be tolerated or rejected the next time.

Legitimacy matters everywhere. In democracies, it is the price of participation. In autocracies, it is the mask of strength. Often it is cloaked as “performance”—prosperity, safety, and pride. However, wars that drag on, cost too much, or humiliate too visibly can puncture even the thickest armour. No regime is immune to losing the story.

This model refuses to treat wartime legitimacy as a given. It sees it as contested terrain, where narrative, necessity, and normativity collide. It draws from just war theory, norm contestation literature (Müller, 2004; Wiener, 2007), and discursive institutionalism, not to deliver moral verdicts, but to map the movement of justification under pressure.

To test this framework, three conflicts are examined: two led by the US in democratic settings, and one by an authoritarian regime. This is not a balanced sample; it is a deliberately uneven one, designed to show how context bends the trajectory. Who tells the story—and who is allowed to question it—shapes what justification can survive.

4. Methodology

This inquiry employs a multimethod research design to chart the temporal trajectory of wartime legitimacy. It fuses hermeneutic scrutiny of elite discourse with longitudinal indicators of mass sentiment. A rhetoric-only lens risks occluding public reception, while a metrics-only lens flattens the linguistic subtlety by which belligerents rationalise violence. To sidestep these blind spots, I integrate close textual analysis of keynote speeches with time-series polling data, mapping the co-evolution of justificatory narratives and popular consent.

Empirically, the design rests on two pillars. First, I curated a corpus of authoritative utterances by principal decision-makers—heads of state, defence ministers, and senior commanders—at pivotal junctures: pre-hostilities mobilisation, phases of escalation or stalemate, episodes of domestic contestation, and terminal moments of withdrawal or proclaimed victory. Exhaustiveness was sacrificed for salience: sampling inflexion points captures those intervals when legitimating claims are most explicitly articulated or recalibrated. Texts were sourced from institutional repositories (e.g., White House, 10 Downing Street, and

Kremlin) and major broadcast addresses; each was coded for argumentative content, framing devices, and diachronic drift.

Second, I assembled a continuous public-opinion series gauging support for each conflict. For the US campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, Gallup and related barometers provide stable timelines of approval, perceived success, and war fatigue indices. In the Russian case, Levada-Center polls were employed, considering the distortions endemic to authoritarian information ecosystems. Where polling proved intermittent or suspect, I triangulated via proxy indicators—such as street mobilisations, social media sentiment mining, and ethnographic vignettes—to approximate legitimacy gradients. Consequently, the Ukraine case privileges elite discourse and external diplomatic feedback more heavily, a caveat flagged in the comparative analysis.

Analytically, the study operationalises a logic of triangulation. Speeches were parsed using a theory-driven codebook rooted in legitimisation scholarship, which tagged recurrent motifs—such as self-defence, humanitarian rescue, civilisational mandate, and historical rectification. Rhetorical tone and strategic frame (limited intervention vs. existential crusade) were likewise annotated. These qualitative traces were synchronised with polling trajectories and key battlefield events, allowing for the detection of inflexion points and lag structures.

Such alignment enables interrogation of causal ordering: Do rhetorical pivots anticipate, accompany, or lag shifts in popular sentiment? Are novel tropes deployed defensively when support erodes, or do leaders double down on ossified narratives despite mounting scepticism? In several instances, revelation shocks—such as civilian casualty scandals and intelligence reversals—coincide with plunges in approval and observable discursive adjustments. While eschewing monocausal claims, the correlation patterns illuminate mechanisms plausibly animating legitimacy dynamics.

The comparative, multi-case design enhances inferential leverage. Applying a uniform analytic template to three wars disentangles cross-case regularities from idiosyncratic noise. Afghanistan and Iraq reveal how democratic executives recalibrate narratives under electoral and media scrutiny, and the Ukraine conflict, prosecuted by an authoritarian power, exposes legitimacy contests under repressive conditions. Throughout, contextual variables—press freedom, coalition breadth, and international normative climate—are foregrounded as intervening filters shaping the WJT.

5. Empirical Analysis

In this section, the WJT model is applied to three of the most significant conflicts of the early 21st century: Afghanistan (2001–2021), Iraq (2003–2011), and Ukraine (2014–present). The fascination of these conflicts is not merely in the size or power they hold over global politics, but because they reveal a range of different decision-making environments and media evaluations. However, the uniqueness of these three wars presents a relevant test case for the model's versatility. Each war had its unique rationale: the US attributed its actions in Afghanistan as a justifiable response to the 9/11 attacks (Maley, 2002), the invasion of Iraq was justified on the grounds of ridding the world of WMD and promoting regime change (Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine was justified as an issue of regional security and ethnic solidarity (Allison, 2014; Toal, 2017).

The evolution of these wars illustrates how the legitimization process varies over time. With Afghanistan, for example, there had been initial robust domestic and international backing, which decayed as the war went on and hopes of a stable result diminished. In Iraq, the initial tale explaining the WMD threat fell apart quickly when evidence of their existence could not be found, forcing leaders to come up with new justifications, such as democratisation, in a bid to restore credibility. Finally, Ukraine is a newer and ongoing case study. Here, the Kremlin leadership presented the war as a protection of ethnic and national interests, but the majority of the international community rejected this first-time justification, leading to a conflict between public support and international criticism.

5.1. Afghanistan (2001–2021)

The four phases of WJT are observable in the war in Afghanistan (2001–2021). The correlation between the US public opinion polls and presidential speeches from this period underscores how the narrative of legitimacy in the Afghan conflict evolved (Berinsky, 2009; Gelpi et al., 2009).

5.1.1. Initial Justification (2001–2002)

Gallup surveys map a precise sequence in American sentiment toward the Afghan campaign (Gallup, n.d.-a). In the first months following September 11, 2001, support was nearly unanimous. Shock and grief, reinforced by presidential claims that the Taliban had given haven to al-Qaeda, left scant room for dissent. Polls conducted in November 2001 and January 2002 found that only about one in twelve respondents—roughly 6–9%—called the operation “a mistake”, a textbook rally-round-the-flag response (Berinsky, 2009). During this opening stage, the Bush administration framed the war strictly as a defensive strike against a regime that harboured terrorists, sidestepping any public discussion of how long US forces might stay or whether Washington meant to rebuild Afghanistan (Crawford, 2003; see Supplementary File, Appendix 1).

5.1.2. Conflict Dynamics (2003–2008)

After 2003, Iraq essentially took over the spotlight in US media and politics, while Afghanistan slipped to the sidelines (Entman, 2004). However, that did not mean the war was winding down. Between 2003 and 2008, reports of renewed Taliban activity began surfacing more regularly, and by 2006 or so, the idea that the insurgency had regrouped was gaining traction. Public opinion also began to shift, though not as sharply as with Iraq (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Gallup data from 2007 suggests that somewhere around 25 to 28% of Americans believed the war in Afghanistan had become a mistake (Gallup, n.d.-a). Still, most supported it or did not oppose it outright. Unlike Iraq, which had turned deeply unpopular by that point, Afghanistan still seemed, to many, like a war that could be justified (Gelpi et al., 2009). Official US rhetoric in this phase continued to invoke the language of counterterrorism and rarely acknowledged an explicit nation-building effort (Crawford, 2013). Notably, because President Bush and other leaders devoted relatively few high-profile speeches solely to Afghanistan during these years, the war’s legitimacy benefited from its low profile; it was seen as a necessary, if secondary, effort that had not yet drawn major controversy (Baum & Potter, 2008).

5.1.3. Social Reactions (2009–2014)

In 2009, as President Obama took office and announced a troop surge in Afghanistan, American attention began shifting again (Berinsky, 2009). By then, the war had dragged on for nearly a decade and was quietly

becoming the most protracted conflict in US history. The public conversation grew louder. Between 2009 and 2014, news coverage focused more on the costs—rising casualty figures, the sheer financial burden, and the visible lack of progress (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Gallup polling around 2010–2011 showed that nearly 40% of Americans thought the war was a mistake (Gallup, n.d.-a). That figure was not yet a majority, but it marked a sharp increase from earlier years. Stories about Afghan government corruption circulated widely. Civilian deaths caused by the US airstrikes made headlines (Crawford, 2013). Even supporters found it harder to answer the fundamental question: what would “winning” look like? By this stage, it was not just about military strategy but whether the public still believed the mission made any sense. The Obama administration’s narrative adjusted somewhat to emphasise national rebuilding and a responsible end to the conflict, but these justifications had diminishing returns (Chandler, 2010). Internationally, NATO allies faced pressure from public opinion, and some contributing countries set timetables for withdrawal (Daalder & Stavridis, 2012).

5.1.4. Post-Conflict Evaluations (2015–2021)

The war’s conclusion and outcomes were scrutinised in the post-conflict evaluations phase (2015–2021; Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016). A significant drawdown of US troops occurred by 2014–2015, transitioning the fight increasingly to Afghan forces and a smaller US/NATO support mission. However, the anticipated stability or clear “victory” did not materialise. The Taliban proved resilient and began regaining territory. US public opinion by the late 2010s had mainly turned pessimistic: polls in 2015–2016 showed most Americans retrospectively labelling the Afghanistan war a failure or not worth the costs (Gallup, n.d.-a). A bipartisan consensus emerged in favour of ending US involvement. When the US finally withdrew its remaining forces in August 2021, it precipitated a final wave of public and international evaluation (Crawford, 2013). Post-conflict assessments—including official reports, media retrospectives, and public debate—questioned whether the initial justifications were fulfilled. Ultimately, the Afghanistan war’s legacy became a cautionary tale of an initially well-legitimised mission that lost its legitimacy over time (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This retrospective judgment has influenced US public and elite scepticism toward future nation-building or counterinsurgency wars, illustrating how the cycle of legitimisation can inform subsequent policy choices (Baum & Groeling, 2009; Berinsky, 2009).

5.2. Iraq (2003–2011)

Through the lens of the WJT model, the Iraq War displays a markedly different pattern from the intervention in Afghanistan. From the beginning, the issue of legitimacy was contested. Unlike the broad consensus that followed the 9/11 attacks, support for the invasion of Iraq—both at home and abroad—was far more divided (Berinsky, 2009). The Bush administration’s case, centred on the existence of WMD, provoked pushback as early as late 2002. Public opinion shifted rapidly throughout the war, particularly between 2003 and 2011. Initial support gave way to growing doubt and then, for many, to outright opposition. These phases unfolded over a much shorter period than in Afghanistan. What stands out in the Iraq case is the persistent politicisation of the war’s rationale: rather than a single, durable moment of legitimisation, legitimacy here was fragile and repeatedly challenged (Kaufmann, 2004).

5.2.1. Initial Justification (2002–2003)

In the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US government's official justifications centred on the threat posed by Iraq's alleged WMD, links to terrorism, and the need for regime change to enforce UN resolutions. From mid-2002 through early 2003, the Bush administration undertook an intense public persuasion campaign (Oddo, 2011). Key presidential speeches and addresses to the UN argued that Saddam Hussein's regime was a grave danger that could not be left unchecked. Initially, this narrative had a substantial impact: Gallup's polls in early March 2003 showed solid American public support for military action, especially if backed by some international coalition (Gallup, n.d.-b).

However, compared to Afghanistan, Iraq's initial legitimacy was more fragile and polarised. While most Americans supported the war at the moment of invasion (around 60–70% approval), there was also a vocal minority opposed, and global public opinion (including large protests worldwide in February 2003) was significantly against the war (Finnemore, 2003). The lack of an explicit UN Security Council authorisation contributed to doubts abroad. In WJT terms, the initial justification phase for Iraq achieved a short-lived domestic legitimacy based on WMD claims, but it lacked the near-universal credibility that Afghanistan's rationale had. This planted seeds for a legitimacy challenge as soon as those claims were questioned (Kaufmann, 2004).

5.2.2. Conflict Dynamics (2004–2006)

After US forces entered Baghdad in April 2003, things began to shift quickly and not in Washington's favour. By late that year and into 2004, it had become increasingly clear that no WMD would be found. This was not just a technical failure, it struck at the core of the justification for the war (Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016). Around the same time, a persistent and organised insurgency began to take shape. US and Iraqi casualties rose, and the early optimism started to fade. Opinion polls captured the turn: Gallup recorded a sharp rise in the number of Americans who said the war had been a mistake—from about a quarter in March 2003 to nearly 50% by mid-2004 (Gallup, n.d.-b). That shift was not only about WMDs.

A cluster of events in 2004 added to public doubt. Abu Ghraib, in particular, changed the tone of media coverage and raised difficult questions about the US presence in Iraq (Baum & Potter, 2008; Berinsky, 2009). The original narrative—that the war would make the world safer—no longer rang true for many. In response, officials began to shift the rationale. The new emphasis was on promoting democracy or removing a dictator (Finnemore, 2003). There was also a turn toward humanitarian language—talk of liberation, freedom, and dignity. These were not entirely new, but they were now front and centre. Still, this reframing arrived too late for many Americans (and abroad). The violence on the ground continued, the costs kept climbing, and by 2006, the situation resembled open sectarian conflict more than anything resembling a stable transition. By then, the war's legitimacy had frayed—if not fully collapsed.

5.2.3. Social Reactions (2007–2009)

By 2007, public opinion on the Iraq War had shifted quite dramatically. The troop “surge” announced by the Bush administration came in January 2007, but the context was already bleak. Republicans had lost the midterms the previous fall due to the war's unpopularity. Polling around this time showed that most Americans

saw the war as a mistake (Gallup, n.d.-b; Gelpi et al., 2009). More and more voices in Congress and the press were calling for a withdrawal plan. The new strategy on the ground may have aimed to stabilise the situation, but political support was eroding at home (Berinsky, 2009). The debate had moved on: people were not just questioning why the war started—they were asking how it would end, or whether it ever could. The media and congressional debates during this time were intensely focused on casualties, war expenditure, and lack of political progress in Iraq. One social reaction was the rise of anti-war advocacy and veteran voices questioning the war's conduct, adding moral weight to public scepticism (Simonsen, 2019).

The international community also largely viewed the war as illegitimate, with the US standing in global surveys falling (Pew Research Center, 2004). Facing these reactions, the US administration's rhetoric attempted to regain support by framing the conflict as part of the broader war on terror (to tap into post-9/11 sentiments) and warning of the chaos that would follow a precipitous withdrawal. However, these justifications had a limited effect on public opinion, which had hardened mainly. The "surge" did lead to improved security on the ground by late 2007 and 2008, and some Americans acknowledged this progress, but it was often seen as too late and at too high a cost. The social reactions phase for Iraq underscored how, once public consent for a war is lost, even tactical improvements or refined justifications struggle to restore legitimacy fully.

5.2.4. Post-Conflict Evaluations (2010–2011)

The conclusion of the Iraq War and its immediate aftermath constitute the post-conflict evaluations phase. The US began drawing down troops after 2008, and the last combat brigades left in December 2011 (Berinsky, 2009). As the war officially ended, Americans and observers worldwide engaged in retrospectively assessing what the conflict had achieved vs. its cost. The prevailing public judgment in the US was predominantly negative (Gallup, n.d.-b). By 2010–2011, surveys found that most Americans labelled the war a mistake or not worth fighting (Gelpi et al., 2009). Bipartisan panels and military experts produced reports critical of pre-war intelligence and planning failures (echoing findings like those of the Iraq study group in 2006 and the Chilcot Inquiry in the UK, published in 2016; Iraq Inquiry & Cabinet Office, 2016). The narrative that solidified was that the Iraq War had been launched on false premises (no WMD, tenuous links to terror groups) and that, while Saddam Hussein's removal ended a dictatorship, it also unleashed instability that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and diverted attention from other security priorities (Finnemore, 2003).

These post-conflict evaluations have had significant implications. Within the US, the "lesson of Iraq" has made the public and many policymakers far more sceptical of intelligence-based justifications for war and of large-scale nation-building efforts (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Internationally, the war's dubious legitimacy weakened US credibility for some years and invigorated debates about the importance of multilateral authorisation for interventions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In essence, Iraq's case illustrates how a war's legitimacy can be definitively lost in hindsight, even if it initially had some support. That hindsight has fed back into the cycle of war legitimisation—future US presidents have explicitly invoked Iraq as a cautionary tale to justify restraint or to emphasise getting proper international backing (Baum & Potter, 2008). The Iraq War's complete WJT model—from contested beginning, through a tumultuous middle, to a broadly negative end verdict—is a paradigmatic example of legitimacy's fragility and the enduring impact of how a war is remembered.

5.3. Ukraine (2014–Present)

Our final case applies the WJT model to the conflict in Ukraine, focusing on Russia's justifications for its military actions and how those justifications have been received domestically and internationally. This case is somewhat unique in that it involves an ongoing war where the primary belligerent (Russia) is an authoritarian state with a controlled media sphere, and the conflict's legitimacy is vehemently rejected by most of the international community (Kaltseis, 2024; Toal, 2017). Nonetheless, the phases of legitimisation are evident in Russia's narrative from the 2014 annexation of Crimea through the large-scale invasion launched in 2022 and beyond.

5.3.1. Initial Justification (2014–2015)

The initial justification phase coincides with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the early stages of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas). In spring 2014, President Vladimir Putin and Russian officials put forth a set of justifications: historical claims (asserting that Crimea was traditionally Russian and correcting a historical "mistake" by reuniting it with Russia), protection of compatriots (framing the action as defending ethnic Russians and Russian speakers from an allegedly nationalist, anti-Russian regime in Kyiv), and resistance to Western encroachment (depicting the change of government in Ukraine as a Western-backed coup and NATO's expansion as a threat; Allison, 2014; Putin, 2014). This multi-pronged rationale was delivered in high-profile addresses, such as Putin's March 18, 2014, speech on Crimea's "reunification." These arguments were compelling initially: Russian public opinion, as measured by the Levada-Center, showed a dramatic surge in patriotic support (Levada-Center, n.d.). Most Russians in 2014 accepted the narrative that reclaiming Crimea was just and necessary. Internationally, however, these justifications did not hold. Western governments and the UN General Assembly condemned the annexation as a violation of international law and Ukraine's sovereignty (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Thus, from the start, we see a split legitimacy: high domestic legitimacy within Russia vs. strong illegitimacy in the view of Western countries and many others. In WJT terms, Russia's initial justification achieved its aim internally, leveraging nationalism and historical sentiment, while failing externally. This set the stage for a contested legitimacy environment moving forward.

5.3.2. Conflict Dynamics (2016–2021)

In the years following 2014, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine simmered at a lower intensity (a de facto frozen conflict in Donbas with periodic flare-ups) until its dramatic escalation in 2022. During roughly 2015–2021, we observed a conflict dynamics phase where Russia's legitimisation narrative had to adjust to ongoing realities (Toal, 2017). Officially, the Kremlin denied direct military involvement in Donbas for much of this period, characterising the forces there as local "separatists" or volunteers. This plausibly deniable posture was a strategy to maintain some legitimacy: Russia could avoid domestic war fatigue and additional international backlash by not overtly waging war (Kaltseis, 2024). However, the conflict dynamics included economic sanctions on Russia, the strain of international isolation on certain fronts, and the Ukrainian government's increasing pivot towards the West (Allison, 2014; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Russian public attention to Donbas was limited, state media kept the issue relatively low-key after 2015, and there was no significant public debate. Polling indicated moderate support for the ethnic brethren narrative and relief that a larger war was avoided (Levada-Center, n.d.).

Meanwhile, in parts of the Donbas under separatist control, Russia framed its role as humanitarian assistance and mediation, again as a way to legitimise involvement without admitting aggression. This phase highlights that in an authoritarian context, controlling the narrative can sustain legitimacy even in a protracted conflict, so long as costs (in lives or economic impact) are manageable and the narrative of stability or righteousness holds (Baum & Potter, 2008). Russia's alignment with certain international partners (like China's tacit support or neutrality, and propaganda targeting sympathetic audiences abroad) also aimed to reinforce a sense of legitimacy or counter Western narratives (Kaltseis, 2024). Still, the unresolved conflict and continuing low-level war did sow seeds of doubt among some Russians (especially those accessing independent information) and certainly hardened Ukraine and the West's view of Russia as an aggressor waiting for another chance (Toal, 2017).

5.3.3. Social Reactions (2022)

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the legitimisation battle moved abruptly into a social reactions phase on a global scale. Putin's speech on February 24, 2022, announced a "special military operation," repeating justifications of denazification of Ukraine's government, protection of Russians in Donbas, and countering NATO's threat (Putin, 2022). These claims, however, triggered immediate and intense reactions. Internationally, the war was met with near-universal condemnation in the UN General Assembly (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017). Western nations and others imposed severe sanctions, and a wave of global public solidarity with Ukraine emerged (Menon & Rumer, 2015). In Russia, the state moved quickly to suppress dissent—-independent media were shut down or restricted, and a new censorship law threatened penalties for spreading "false information" about the war, effectively criminalising calling it a "war" or "invasion" (Kaltseis, 2024). Despite this, within the first weeks and months, there were notable social reactions inside Russia: public protests (albeit quickly repressed), tens of thousands of citizens fleeing the country, and anecdotal signs of shock or disagreement, especially among urban, younger, or better-informed segments (Levada-Center, n.d.). Polling in Russia in the initial months of 2022 showed majority support for the "operation", but analysts cautioned that fear and propaganda likely inflated those figures (Baum & Groeling, 2009).

By contrast, Ukrainian society mobilised in resistance, and Europe experienced the largest refugee flows and humanitarian response in decades, underscoring how utterly illegitimate Russia's war was perceived outside Russian state media narratives. In sum, 2022 presented a stark example of normative backlash: Russia's narratives (e.g., labelling the Ukrainian government "nazis" or claiming defensive motives) were largely rejected abroad and met with unprecedented sanctions and isolation, while domestically, the government fought to maintain legitimacy by tightening its control over information and reframing initial setbacks as Russia fighting not just Ukraine but a united West's aggression (Toal, 2017).

5.3.4. Post-Conflict Evaluations (Ongoing)

As of 2023, the war in Ukraine is still active, and its ultimate resolution remains uncertain, so the post-conflict evaluations phase is ongoing and prospective. Nonetheless, we can observe emerging elements of this phase in how stakeholders are already interpreting the war's outcomes thus far. In Russia, despite official censorship, the significant losses incurred in 2022 and 2023—both human (casualty figures in the tens of thousands) and economic (due to sanctions and isolation)—have led to a slow, partial shift in public

consciousness (Levada-Center, n.d.; Menon & Rumer, 2015). Levada-Center polls in late 2022 indicated that while support for the war remained publicly high, there were growing anxieties about mobilisation and casualties, suggesting that the initial rallying effect was wearing off. In late 2022 and early 2023, the Kremlin adjusted its rhetoric to prepare the public for a “long struggle,” doubling down on existential framing (Russia fighting NATO proxies and defending against Western hegemony; Putin, 2023). However, suppose we treat the formal annexation of four Ukrainian regions in September 2022 and the transition to a drawn-out conflict as an interim endpoint. In that case, we can glean some evaluation: many Russians appeared to accept the narrative that their nation had expanded territory (the annexations) and stood up to the West, but the lack of a clear victory and the imposition of partial mobilisation in September 2022 dented the war’s legitimacy for others (Kaltseis, 2024; Levada-Center, n.d.).

Internationally, Russia’s actions have been roundly deemed a strategic blunder, strengthening NATO, weakening Russia’s economy in the medium term, and branding Russia as an aggressor state (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017; Menon & Rumer, 2015). If the war were to freeze or end under current conditions, the post-conflict global evaluation would likely be that Russia failed to achieve its objectives and that the war was an illegitimate breach of international peace. Any end will be spun within Russia’s official discourse as a victory or necessity. However, cracks are evident (e.g., unusually frank criticism by some nationalist bloggers and Wagner Group’s leader during the conflict, indicating internal contestation of the war’s management; Kaltseis, 2024). In the long run, as information filters out, Russians themselves may reassess the war more critically, much as happened with the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Thus, even though the Ukraine war’s final chapter is not written, WJT’s post-conflict phase reminds us that a reckoning will occur: whether through historical inquiry, public debate, or political change, there will be a determination of what this war meant and whether it can be justified against its outcomes. Early signs suggest this judgment will be harsh, cementing the conflict’s place as a cautionary tale and influencing Russian society and international norms against aggressive war.

6. Discussion

The WJT model provides a framework for tracking the development of war legitimacy over time, shaped by the interaction between official narratives and audience responses. Examining the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, we observe that legitimacy is rarely fixed; it shifts as conditions change, political language evolves, and the public (both domestic and international) reinterprets earlier justifications through the lens of later outcomes.

First, the Initial Justification phase sets the terms of debate but cannot guarantee long-term support. In Afghanistan’s case, the clarity and narrow focus of the self-defence argument after 9/11 initially gave that intervention broad and enduring backing. Iraq was very different: its WMD rationale began to erode almost immediately when the weapons failed to materialise, and once that core claim was discredited, recovering legitimacy proved nearly impossible. These cases illustrate the fragility of initial narratives, particularly when they are based on contested or speculative premises. Russia’s initial justification in Ukraine had strong resonance inside Russia initially. However, it was built on claims that lacked credibility outside of state propaganda, sowing the seeds for a future legitimacy crisis.

Second, the conflict dynamics phase often pushes public opinion and legitimacy in directions the original narrative did not anticipate or control. Long wars, rising casualties, unexpected costs, and mission creep tend to exhaust public patience and trust. Governments usually respond by rearticulating the war's purpose. In Iraq, for example, the Bush administration shifted from WMDs to a narrative of democratisation once the original rationale collapsed. In Afghanistan, US leaders adapted the mission to focus on counterinsurgency and nation-building in response to the protracted conflict. However, such pivots are risky: they can appear opportunistic or incoherent, especially if the shift seems driven by failure rather than principled adaptation. The success of these mid-course adjustments largely depends on the credibility of leadership and the clarity of communication. In the case of Ukraine, conflict dynamics took the form of Russia escalating to total war in 2022, which dramatically altered the legitimacy calculus by imposing far greater costs. The Kremlin then had to adjust from framing a swift operation to framing a prolonged existential fight.

Third, social reactions function as a real-time referendum on the legitimacy of war. Public opinion, media scrutiny, civil society activism, and international criticism all test the credibility of official justifications. In democratic settings, public backlash often forces course corrections—witness how US domestic opposition to the Iraq War led to changes in strategy (the surge) and ultimately a decision to withdraw, or how mounting Afghan war weariness constrained US ambitions. Even in authoritarian regimes like Russia, social and elite pressures impose limits: discontent may be expressed indirectly (through economic worries, quiet elite dissent, or minor protests), but it can build up to significant constraints on what the state can do or claim. No regime is completely insulated from feedback mechanisms. The difference is one of degree and timing: democracies get loud feedback sooner, autocracies often only feel it later and more suddenly. In Russia's case, for instance, cracks in the narrative indicate that while the regime can stifle visible opposition, it must still reckon with the underlying legitimacy of its war among both elites and the public.

Fourth, post-conflict evaluations carry long-term consequences for legitimacy. How a war is remembered can shape a nation's future foreign policy and even its identity. Post-conflict evaluations, whether formal or informal, influence leaders' calculus about new interventions. In the US, the legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan has made policymakers and the public more hesitant about large-scale military engagements. This hesitation is not merely a result of political fatigue; it reflects a learning process about legitimacy: both wars came to be seen as cautionary examples of conflicts launched on shaky premises that ultimately did not pan out. In Russia's case, while the final verdict on the Ukraine war is not yet in, it is hard to imagine that its outcome—whatever that may be—will not heavily colour Russia's future domestic politics and international standing. If Russia is perceived, even internally, to have paid dearly for scant gains, that post-conflict narrative could undermine faith in the current regime or doctrine for years to come. If, conversely, the war is somehow sold as a success despite costs, that narrative will still be contested externally and perhaps revisited internally when political conditions change.

Across these different contexts, one broad insight stands out: truthfulness and alignment with widely shared norms are essential for governments to sustain legitimacy over time. In Afghanistan, the early phase benefited from a strong legal and moral argument. In Iraq, by contrast, the lack of truth (no WMDs) and the lack of broad international authorisation meant that once initial fears subsided, the war's legitimacy plummeted and never recovered. In Ukraine, Russia has tried to frame its aggression in normative terms, but those claims gained little purchase outside its propaganda sphere. Protecting Russian speakers or "denazification" did not carry weight internationally because they did not align with observable realities or prevailing international

norms; thus, Russia's narratives found few takers except those predisposed to its viewpoint. Without external recognition or credible evidence, these justifications struggled and largely failed to legitimise the war in the eyes of the world.

The information environment further moderates legitimacy. In the age of global media, democracies often face a higher bar: they must account for critical media coverage and a pluralistic debate that can quickly highlight inconsistencies or falsehoods in the war narrative. Authoritarian regimes might suppress alternative views and curate the information space, but even they cannot entirely hide the truth indefinitely. The Ukraine war exemplifies this: the Kremlin's portrayal of Ukraine as an existential threat was meant to maintain domestic support, yet as casualties mount and economic strains grow, that narrative encounters increasing scepticism over time. The WJT model reveals that even in controlled environments, legitimacy cannot be manufactured indefinitely—complex realities eventually intrude.

Despite the pronounced differences between democracies at war and autocracies at war, our analysis reveals that the four phases of justification were present in all three cases, indicating the model's broad applicability. However, the intensity and timing of each phase differed by context. In the democratic cases (Afghanistan and Iraq), social reactions were loud and relatively immediate, prompting visible policy and rhetoric shifts within a few years of war onset. In the authoritarian case (Russia's war in Ukraine), the pattern has been one of an initial appearance of stability followed by more abrupt stresses: legitimacy issues were effectively delayed by repression and narrative control, only to manifest in sudden ways (e.g., unexpected public protests and elite fissures like the Wagner mutiny) once the war's costs and duration exceeded expectations. This suggests that while the trajectory model is generalisable, it must be applied with sensitivity to regime type and society. The underlying process (initial claim, evolving reality, audience feedback, and retrospective judgment) remains, but its cadence and outward expression vary.

The WJT model holds some predictive value. By understanding these phases, policymakers and observers might better anticipate inflexion points when legitimacy is likely to erode or when narrative shifts are most needed. If leaders recognise these pressure points, they might attempt timely narrative adjustments or policy changes to address legitimacy deficits. In Afghanistan, signs of war fatigue were visible long before the 2021 collapse—had they been heeded, a different exit strategy might have been formulated earlier. In Iraq, one could argue that had US leaders drastically recalibrated the mission in 2004, perhaps some trust could have been salvaged. In authoritarian regimes, predictive indicators might include behind-the-scenes elite dissent or extraordinary repressive measures. Our model identifies these kinds of pressure points where strategic recalibration is possible and necessary to maintain legitimacy.

7. Conclusions and Implications

The WJT model reveals that the legitimacy of armed conflict is never fixed; it moves, shaped by the shifting logic of war, public sentiment, and retrospective judgment. Initial justifications, no matter how persuasive, do not guarantee durability. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine show how legitimacy must be continually managed. In Afghanistan, the rationale of counterterrorism drew widespread support but wore thin as the war dragged on. Iraq's invasion unravelled almost from the outset, once its stated justification collapsed. Russia's war in Ukraine illustrates yet another path: an ongoing attempt to retroactively reframe the war's purpose to preserve domestic backing as the costs mount.

Legitimacy is a narrative under pressure. Losses, stalemates, and shifting alliances all demand discursive recalibration. Political leaders, caught between battlefield realities and public scrutiny, often shift tone. Propaganda, news coverage, and social media influence how the story is perceived. Ultimately, it is often post-war reflection that solidifies a conflict's moral standing. Afghanistan and Iraq are now broadly seen as mistakes. Ukraine's outcome remains open, but its trajectory suggests that even a forcefully controlled narrative may not withstand historical judgment. The model helps us make sense of these shifts, not to predict them with certainty, but to map how legitimacy is gained, strained, and lost.

Several caveats apply. First, the four-phase model was built through retrospective interpretation. It organises events analytically, but real-life conflicts are less tidy. Phases bleed into each other, and in some cases loop back or compress into short cycles. The model risks oversimplifying that fluidity. It also presumes that actors seek legitimacy and respond to its erosion. That assumption may not hold in all cases.

Second, the analysis here mostly follows the justifications of initiating powers. However, many wars involve multiple narratives—competing states, insurgent groups, and international actors, each with their own claims. A complete application would need to map these in parallel. Ultimately, the model is descriptive, rather than predictive. It shows how justifications shift, but not why some framings hold while others collapse. Future work could draw from political psychology, media studies, or comparative regime analysis to trace these mechanisms. More empirical data—such as social media trends, internal communications, and non-public polling—might enrich what is still a relatively schematic framework.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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A Complex Border: Intractability and the Physical Roots of Discursive Legitimations in Cyprus

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Abstract

The Cypriot conflict is one of the most intractable conflicts of the modern era, and the collapse of complexity among the actors in the conflict—mainly the Republic of Cyprus, North Cyprus, and Turkey—appears to be the main cause of the continued “no war, no peace” state. Subsequent socio-psychological self-organization among these actors then produces conflict-perpetuating feedback loops and dynamics. These dynamics include identity narratives, narratives of “the other,” and narratives of the nature of the conflict, which, at the grassroots level, can legitimize ongoing engagement in the conflict, whereas peace is painted as an undesirable and undeserved/unjust compromise. Given this, there is a lack of root narrative research on the Cypriot case; less still are works connecting intractability in the Cypriot conflict to the border dynamics in Cyprus. Indeed, border studies indicate that borders can function as both symbolic and physical attractors for the conflict, for they may become fonts of past and present traumas and grievances as well as direct obstructions towards building cross-cutting bonds. As such, there is a need to increase our scholarly understanding of how the border between Cypriots affects both the conflict dynamics and, therefore, the success of peace processes within the context of the Cypriot conflict. This article will analyze the socio-political mechanics as well as prevalent narratives regarding the conflict on both sides of Cyprus to locate the dominance and impact of the border and to hypothesize how physical barriers and unaddressed grievances can perpetuate conflict and undermine peace negotiations.

Keywords

borders; conflict resolution; Cyprus; intractability; root narrative theory

1. Introduction

Long-lasting conflicts, most of which spill over beyond any peace process or the end of the dispute's violent phase, require self-legitimation along the moral and political lines. Without such legitimacy widely accepted at least within a conflict-oriented system, the system would be defied, and it would eventually be altered. Given this, legitimation can best be understood through engagement with long-lasting—that is, protracted or intractable—conflicts. One such conflict is the Cypriot conflict. In this article, I will provide a case study focusing on the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot narrative legitimations of intractability and peacebuilding which center the border bisecting the island.

The Cypriot conflict is generally recognized as one of the most intractable conflicts of the modern era and Nicosia, the last divided capital city in the world, is located in the heart of the island of Cyprus. The island's division stems from post-independence intercommunal strife between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots from 1963 to 1974, and then the Greek junta's coup on the island as well as the consequent Turkish military intervention into the conflict in 1974. Turkey has historically deemed the intervention a legitimate peace operation (labeled Happy Peace Operation) but most of the world, including the *de jure* sovereign of the island which is the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), consider the act to be an invasion and subsequent occupation. Regardless of how one interprets the nature of the intervention, the result does not vary: the UN-drawn Green Line which separated Nicosia was extended to the whole island and an unrecognized *de facto* state called the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was formed in 1983, laying claim to about a third of the island. Turkey supports the TRNC economically, diplomatically, and militarily and in effect occupies its *de facto* territories as it maintains a 40,000-strong military presence in the area. The influence of Turkey on the TRNC is beyond dispute, although scholars disagree as to the level of said influence: whether such influence renders the TRNC a puppet state, for example, and how much room for Turkish Cypriot agency remains (Berg & Yüksel, 2023; Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Kolsto, 2006; Kopeček et al., 2016).

It is important to note that this article uses the term *order* to refer to the Buffer Zone in a descriptive manner, i.e., to refer to the fact that one has to cross walls, guardhouses, militarized and demilitarized zones, as well as checkpoints (while showing paperwork), among others, to cross from the RoC to the *de facto* state of TRNC and vice versa, in effect creating a border. However, from an international legal sense and considering the recognized *de jure* sovereignty claims, there is no border, but a ceasefire line (the Green Line) surrounded by a demilitarized Buffer Zone and barriers situated between the two areas of Cyprus that occupy 3% of the island. This zone is administered by the UN through the United Nations Forces in Cyprus. Given that the Buffer Zone provides for an exceptional space *vis-à-vis* international law and international relations, the article uses the term *border* for conceptual clarity; this use should by no means be misconstrued as lending any legitimacy to the Turkish Cypriot claim to statehood.

Turkey's intervention of 1974 has also meant that the island's two communities were completely segregated along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines from 1974 to 2003. In 2003, some gates opened along the Green Line, which have allowed for intercommunal interactions. Nevertheless, such interactions have been relatively limited due to many factors, including whether Greek Cypriots consider cross-border travel through the Green Line as contributing to what they consider to be Turkey's illegal division and occupation of the island's territories. Considering the creation of cross-cutting bonds and trust through positive intercommunal interactions is essential for peacebuilding, a refusal to cross the Green Line can be

considered a widely adopted, conflict-perpetuating approach to coping with the politicized and moralized bordering realities on the ground. This framing of crossing to the other side being tantamount to treachery is but one of the many mechanisms that politically and morally maintain intractability that centers the border. Through a case study that involved a root narrative analysis (RNA) of the discursive legitimations of conflict-oriented and peace-oriented approaches to the Cypriot conflict, this article argues that physical borders act as a symbolically important centerpiece around which to weave narratives in territorial disputes. Understanding and addressing how such often-neglected discursive dimensions that define and delimit vernacular practices in dealing with injustices, division, inherited intergenerational traumas, and addressing these everyday dynamics will prove essential to reducing, if not resolving, conflictuality in Cyprus, which will naturally have broader implications for reducing tensions inherent to the region's geopolitical rivalries and competing interests.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework: Legitimation and Bordering Dynamics in Cyprus

Scholars have come to criticize the application of legitimacy as a concept and especially the application of classical legitimacy theories which center state–citizen relations to conflict and post-conflict settings where the locus, materialities, boundaries, and legitimacy of authority come under question (Backström, 2020; Dagher, 2017; Von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017). Indeed, while cognizant of power asymmetries overall, classical theories of legitimacy require modification before being applied in the highly complex, ever-evolving, dynamic settings of a conflict. Nonetheless, some general points of consensus need be considered. First, internal legitimacy paves the way for effective state-building (Andersen, 2012; Dagher, 2021; Roberts, 2008) as well as effective peacebuilding (Hancock & Mitchell, 2018; Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; Paffenholz, 2015). Achieving internal legitimacy in these settings would likely include nation-building as previously-conflicting groups need to be consolidated under a supra-ethnic, supra-linguistic, supra-religious, and supra-ideological umbrella (Lemay-Hébert, 2009). Indeed, externally-enforced state-building or peacebuilding efforts produce limited positive results such as weak statehood (Barnett & Zürcher, 2009). Second, beyond the legitimacy of state institutions, there is a need to look at performance legitimacy, i.e., how effective is the state or are the peacebuilders in achieving their responsibilities and goals (Berg, 2013; Dagher, 2018). Can the state secure its borders and provide for societal prosperity (Call & Cousens, 2008)? Can peacebuilders actually maintain neutrality and provide a mutually-acceptable resolution (Gippert, 2017; Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2020; Roberts, 2015)? This article will consider both the institutional and performance aspects of political legitimacy as pertinent to the analysis of bordering in Cyprus.

Importantly, moral legitimation appears to largely be absent from empirical studies of unrecognized states. While moral legitimation of each side's positioning (especially as the victim) in conflicts is prevalent (Jankowitz, 2018; On'sha, 2019; Varvin, 2005), moral legitimation is not particularly tackled in conflict settings. This is likely because moral grounds—i.e., perceptions of fairness and justice (Bowers & Robinson, 2012)—is specifically the origin of conflict perpetuation whereas perceptions of moral positioning of parties to the conflict vary greatly both within the in-groups and out-groups as neither group is monolithic. Nonetheless, as morality and moral legitimation narratives have extensively been applied to borders and bordering practices (El Qadim et al., 2021, 2021; Kritzman-Amir & Spijkerboer, 2013; Paasi et al., 2019; Parsons, 2020; Schewel, 2016; Vega, 2018), this article will also consider the relationship among bordering practices, political legitimation, and moral legitimation as an analytical focus.

The previously-identified gap between legitimacy theories and on-the-ground dynamics and realities of conflicts widens further where conflicts involving unrecognized states are concerned, as they inevitably involve a parent and a secessionist state being able to assert at least *de facto* and, in the case of parent states, also *de jure* sovereignty through international law, territorial control, and effective governance of held territories (Bryant, 2014; Hoch & Rudincová, 2015; Owtram, 2011). Given this, for the purposes of this article, I will focus on reviewing how the concept and theories of legitimacy have been applied to conflicts and unrecognized states.

Several works have attempted to apply the concept of legitimacy in cases of conflict involving unrecognized states such as North Cyprus, Abkhazia, and Somaliland, among others (Athanassiou, 2010; Bakke, O'Loughlin, et al., 2014; Berg, 2013; Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Scholars in general agree that parent states (from which unrecognized states secede) default to international customary laws governing territorial change and sovereignty to legitimize territorial claims as well as claims to justice and victim identity while denying the secessionist entity's appeals for recognition (Berg, 2012; Berg & Pegg, 2020). Therefore, parent states prefer focusing on legal legitimization approaches despite customary laws providing only a reference point; that is, there are some international standards provided by the Stimson Doctrine and the Montevideo Convention regarding the parameters for statehood which have often been bent (East Timor) or broken/modified (Kosovo). Indeed, there are no binding agreements on how, when, and under what conditions statehood may be claimed. Nevertheless, such standards are invoked often enough to provide a generally acceptable legitimization strategy and are therefore understandably adopted by the parent states against unilateral secession claims levied extra-legally by unrecognized states. Parent states also employ arguments against separatism, emphasizing unrecognized states' secessionism and grey-area status as threats to the international order as such (J. Harvey & Stansfield, 2011; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2011; Kyris, 2017). Given this rhetoric, they promote a largely conflict-oriented approach of no engagement—even without recognition—with unrecognized states to avoid implied recognition and to render the secessionist entity non-viable and thus engendering its prompt re-absorption (Coggins, 2006; Comai, 2018; Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Ulas, 2017). Some scholars, however, disagree about the degree of threat posed by unrecognized states (J. Harvey & Stansfield, 2011; J. C. Harvey, 2010) which would undermine the degree to which such policies may be legitimized. Overall, we can sum up the legitimacy narratives of the parent state as emphasizing the legitimacy of their territorial claims as externally recognized and as supported by a somewhat ill-defined customary laws, with a supporting narrative of unrecognized states-as-threat. In the case of Cyprus, the international community and UN decisions give legitimacy to the RoC's narrative while delegitimizing Turkish Cypriot claims and reducing their self-narrated independent governance to one of being puppets of the occupying Turkish army.

Scholars of unrecognized states focus mainly on two aspects of legitimacy as pertaining to such states: internal and external legitimacy. Many scholars assert that most unrecognized states are able to cultivate enough of a modicum of internal sovereignty (establishing governance mechanisms and controlling a set territory and set populations) to satisfy the Montevideo criteria (Bakke, Linke, et al., 2014; Bakke, O'Loughlin, et al., 2014; Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Meanwhile, their unilateral secession and subsequent unrecognized by the international community renders them pariah states, isolating them at large from international diplomacy and economic markets with exceptions being Taiwan which is partially recognized and Somaliland which provides access to the Arabian Peninsula for landlocked Ethiopia thus benefiting from the animal husbandry trade (Caspersen, 2012; Ulas, 2017). As such, scholars find that unrecognized states

employ strategies to seek further external recognition, ranging from arguments on fulfilling their roles as proper states to utilizing tourism to seeking alliances (Cloutier & Dembinska, 2021; Hoch & Rudincová, 2015; Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Therefore, we can say that the scholars reviewed above believe unrecognized states not only desire but also perceive a need for obtaining external legitimacy. Especially when their sponsor state and/or their prospective allies are democratic, this pursuit of external legitimacy can lead to more democratic and peace-oriented behavior by the unrecognized state in turn (Kanol, 2014; Kopeček et al., 2016; Ulas, 2017). Some scholars, in reverse, argue that isolation from external influences may in turn promote stronger democratization (Ulas, 2017; Voller, 2015). By all scholars, however, diplomatic legitimacy is considered an ultimate goal and internal legitimacy is seen as necessary to achieve said goal, for if a secessionist government cannot claim to represent the people for whose sake it claims to have been formed, then all routes to legitimacy may close. As I argue in Section 4, however, there is an increasing resistance against the Northern Cypriot institutional politics, but this has not led to a change in the status quo as Turkish Cypriot social movements do not make an impact on Turkey and neither do they get enough international attention or support to make a difference (Ulas, 2021).

This study addresses the following gaps in extant scholarship: What institutional and narrative mechanisms, exactly, have been adopted by either side to the Cypriot conflict to support their claims and to legitimize their commitment to conflict over peacebuilding, as any peacebuilding effort is likely to fail without changes to local, everyday practices and mindsets and that would increase local ownership of the process? In fact, how does either community go about delegitimizing attempts at peacebuilding at local, national, and international levels? This is the gap the present study aims to address. For the purposes of this article, I pursue the hypothesis that the existing *de facto* border between the TRNC and the RoC, with its miles of walls, watchtowers, the United-Nations-Forces-in-Cyprus-administered Buffer Zone, checkpoints, guard posts, etc., coupled with its function as an open-air museum—more on this momentarily—serves as the symbolic center around which Cypriot master narratives about the conflict self-organize, as well as the narrative center through which either side perpetuates what is known as a comfortable, profitable (for elites) frozen conflict (Adamides, 2015; Ciobanu, 2009; King, 2001; Ulas, 2017).

How can international community constructively deal with unrecognized/*de facto* states? One way is to militarily end the secessionist movement, which has often been utilized in cases such as Tamil Eelam or Aceh (Florea, 2014); however, this appears unlikely for Cyprus due to the relative military prowess of the RoC and Turkey as well as the EU's unwillingness to engage in warfare with the latter. Only very few cases of unilateral secession have ended in recognition, mostly when such secession was precipitated by traumatic events such as genocide (e.g., Kosovo and East Timor; Berg & Molder, 2012; Florea, 2014; Martin, 2001). Many secessionist entities meanwhile either have accepted a modicum of autonomy to settle their contentions (e.g., Catalonia) or they continue existing in a grey area of *de facto* governance without external recognition (e.g., North Cyprus, Abkhazia, South Osetia, Transnistria, etc.). The latter group face isolations along economic, diplomatic, and social (e.g., lack of professional sports) lines due to lacking international legitimacy. Taiwan (Republic of China) and Kosovo provide cases of exception here: The former enjoys some official recognition (11 states) as well as widespread social and economic inclusion, whereas the latter was recognized through a paradigm of earned sovereignty which has only officially been applied to Kosovo alone. While some unrecognized states have attempted to make a case for democratic statehood and thus earned sovereignty after Kosovo's secession and independence was widely recognized, this option appears far-fetched as the secession of Kosovo was exceptional and inimitable to begin with (Berg & Molder, 2012).

In the realm of international relations, the issue of dealing with unrecognized states boils down to questions of balances of power/interests, geopolitical calculations, and ultimately, upholding international law. However, as unrecognized states have shown a propensity to persist despite isolations and pressure from the parent state and international community—due, mostly, to patron state support—issues such as migration, smuggling (drugs, historical artifacts, etc.), natural resource management, etc., have emerged which require coordination between international entities, the parent state, and the unrecognized entity. Some scholars have worried that engaging these entities and providing them an economic venue may usher in implied recognition, which would contravene international law. Meanwhile, some scholars and policymakers were concerned with the growing dependence of unrecognized states on their sponsor states, not only diminishing their autonomy but also undermining peacebuilding efforts through the empowerment of shadow negotiators. As such, engagement without recognition (EWR) emerged as a paradigm to allow for any state or international organization, within realms and manners dictated by the parent state, to engage with an unrecognized entity when humanitarian or international security issues become pertinent (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Kyris, 2018). Any such engagement from the EU was theorized to diminish sponsor-dependence while also promoting alignment with Western values in spaces such as North Cyprus, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, among others. EWR has been reified at least within the frame of the EU through the European Court of Human Rights decisions to not contravene international laws or UN Security Council resolutions calling for not recognizing North Cyprus and has been invoked to provide North Cyprus with money for updating infrastructure as well as to help the security forces of RoC and North Cyprus to coordinate and tackle over 1,000 cases of cross-border crimes (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024). Can EWR be invoked to gradually reduce physical borderings and help transform political narratives from conflict-sustaining to peace-oriented ones? Or can EWR even be effectively invoked?

In general, borders and border walls are recognized as the epicenter of borderscapes (Brambilla & Jones, 2020). Borderscapes emphasize the ever-evolving nature of borders and borderings while emphasizing that beyond territorial lines and barriers, borderings involve the creation of a culture that upholds such walls as well as us vs. them dynamics (Konrad & Szary, 2022). They also emphasize that media, educational institutions, and other social establishments self-organize around the idea of a division, naturalizing the disunion. Given this, the narratives prompted by the act of bordering need to be reinforced and reified through discursive practices and by at least the majority of a society, lest the border or bordering practices are forced to change (Iossifova, 2020; Vaughan-Williams & Pisani, 2020). Indeed, the walls are not only normalized but the status quo starts depending on both the idea and the physical aspects of a division—often through the justification of borders engendering security, despite evidence to the contrary from around the world (Fontana, 2022; Gruszczak, 2010). Indeed, evidence suggests that border walls are much more potent as symbols than they are as barriers (Konrad & Szary, 2022; Scott, 2012). Borders are fonts of the traumas of past conflicts in cases such as Cyprus, where abandoned houses full of bullet holes have been left for a slow decay; where murals have been enacted to remind future generations of past grievances and to seek rightful justice; where flags, public arts, etc., are invoked to promote the respective national causes and cultures of both sides; where political theatre plays out (Georgiou, 2019; Kurki, 2020; Madsen, 2022; Ulas, 2022). Given all this, borders are polysemic and their meaning changes according to one's experiences at such borders and their interpretations thereof (Willie, 2024). As such, some approaches emphasize the liminal spaces provided at the borderlands, where narratives, identity, symbols, etc., are much more easily contested per the lack of distance from the traditional Other (Harold, 2019; Konrad & Szary, 2022). All approaches, however, recognize that borderlands produce shared and divergent affects which shape these narratives, as they are mediated through the varying emotions and

interpretations of the border as both a physical barrier and a symbolic, cultural, and even spiritual intermediary actant, in the process of bordering. Again, given the dynamic nature of borders and borderings, these emotions and meanings are subject to change over time. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the emotional roots as well as the overall flow of currently emergent political narratives which are used to legitimize conflict in the case of Cyprus.

3. Methodology

The question of how scholars can effectively study and depict a complex social system, such as a borderscape, has been a constant source of debate within the scholarly community. Within border studies and increasingly within international relations, complexity-oriented methodologies aim to study complex systems from within by focusing on how such systems are embodied by the actors and institutions within and reflected in their vernacular practices and narratives (Willie, 2024). Given this, not only should we examine the systemic underpinnings and actors on bordermaking in Cyprus through a case study featuring narrative analysis, but we must also proceed to connect these higher-level dynamics with grassroots dynamics on the ground by an examination of everyday lives and practices of culture and meaning-making. As such, I have adopted an RNA approach to understand Cypriots' varying conceptions of self, other, and border.

For the purposes of this article's narrative/textual analysis section, I have used secondary data from extant ethnographic research (e.g., Cintio, 2013; Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Papadakis, 2005). From such research featuring interviews, I have distilled socio-political narratives and counternarratives regarding the conflict that feature bordering practices (such as othering/border walls and embargoes/economic isolation, among others) and subsequently analyzed them through an RNA approach (Mutz & Simmons, 2022; Simmons, 2020). I also utilize textual analysis of news pieces, op-eds, etc., to provide further context to these interviews to better interpret their emotional anchors. Root narrative theory categorizes narrative threads into four such anchors: securitarian, egalitarian, libertarian, and dignitarian (Simmons, 2020). As defined by Simmons (2020), securitarian narratives emphasize the need for social and physical guarantees for a good life and paint the narrative's chosen villain as a direct threat to these goals. They also tend to praise the nation-state or other mechanisms that protect "the people" from violent threats. This category is pertinent to the Cypriot conflict as both sides suffer from varying security dilemmas, which I will elaborate on later in the article. Egalitarian narratives concern themselves with the domination of the few/elites over a majority; this narrative may also target any rule of law that is seen to maintain distributive injustices and praise grassroots movements. Libertarian narratives, meanwhile, tend to oppose egalitarian ones as they emphasize individual freedom and rights as protected by the rule of law (e.g., human rights), whereas the narrative villainizes tyrannical abuses of power by established actors or institutions in power. The dignitarian narrative acknowledges that particular subsets of people may face injustices due to perceived or real differences in the group make-up (race, gender, etc.) and villainizes the tyranny of the majority, the victimization of outgroups, and abuses of power over minorities (whether through institutions, culture, or law).

Within this context, I will likewise approach the categorization of the emergent narratives around bordering in Cyprus through these four categories. Of course, narratives may invoke multiple psychological and emotional frames simultaneously; moreover, differing interpretations of what fulfills security and dignity needs may render such narratives peace-oriented as well (e.g., ending a conflict, rather than physical

separation or defeating the other, as central to security). Therefore, I will take into consideration the potential for dual, multiple, or a hierarchy (i.e., one main frame with other supporting frames) of narrative frames. I believe that by uncovering the emotional and psychological anchors of extant narratives and the mechanics invoked therein, we can uncover at least some of the symbolic roots of bordering dynamics around which self-organized and self-sustaining, conflict-oriented feedback loops have emerged. For this purpose, I have reviewed circa 60 videos (direct interviews with locals, local experts, international experts) totaling about seven hours of published raw footage of about 35 interviewees in total. Per RNA principles, I distill the interviewees' main narratives into their components of protagonist, villain/issue, and the injustice central to the narrative. By understanding what narratives are adopted by each interviewee, we can also understand what emotions drive their chosen rhetoric of the border and the conflict: Securitarian narratives are driven by fear, and dignitarian narratives are driven by feelings of injustice, wherein emotions of distrust, disgust, disappointment, and anger can intertwine.

We can then proceed not only with narrative interventions (of which there are many and which are clearly not enough on their own, hence conflict intractability) but also with the work of promoting a transformation of key symbols. In addition, I have conducted an exhaustive review of existing ethnographic studies of Cyprus and will focus on what these studies reveal about the subjective interpretations of the borderings (the border itself, divisions among Cypriots, politics of conflict, etc.) and what such interpretations' implications have the potential to legitimize conflict and/or peace.

4. Case Study

The Cypriot conflict has been ongoing for over five decades since the Turkish military operation (invasion/occupation or peace operation depending on the narrative) of 1974. To sustain such a seemingly stable status quo, many self-sustaining and mutually reinforcing feedback loops need to have been established. Indeed, one can expect that much of regular social institutions and interactions have self-organized around this presumed reality in ways that benefit them. Quite apparent beneficiaries are nationalist parties that score at least 30% of the vote based simply on conflict-perpetuating rhetoric (over any policy), as well as the plunder elite in North Cyprus who have obtained and distributed Greek Cypriot properties as war loot (Bryant & Hatay, 2020; Ulas, 2017, pp. 233–318). Others who play spoiler roles to conflict resolution depend on the space remaining outside of international law—as a grey space—and can include war criminals (including the plunder elite who would otherwise be held to account), smugglers (of both drugs and historical artifacts), and money launderers, among others (Özdemir, 2025). These actors are naturally positioned—whether through enjoying the system's benefits or through choice—to attempt to perpetuate the extant conflict as well as the frozen nature of the dispute. Turkey, meanwhile, is seen as benefiting from the de facto control of Northern Cypriot territories, which Turkey is thought to utilize as a permanent military base as well as an economic investment site for Turkish-owned casino businesses. Additionally, Turkey has transferred a significant amount of Turkish settlers to the island in the post-partition era and has encouraged the change of ownership of highly beneficial industries (tourism and casino tourism) and the privatization of central industries (water, electricity) to Turkish businesses (Alipour & Vughaingmeh, 2010; Haklai & Loizides, 2015; Navaro-Yashin, 2006). Therefore, Turkey is hypothesized to be an attractor for maintaining the status quo of no permanent solution, and if so, would likely spoil peace processes that undermine their military and economic interests (Elcil, 2025; Özdemir, 2025).

It is also important to note that the UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550 of 1983 call for respecting the territorial integrity of the RoC and condemn any secessionist actions. While reinforcing the rule of law on the island, the resolutions further complicate an already complex border. State sovereignty and territorial integrity being attractors unto themselves, they also reduce the menu of choices for how and when people of unrecognized states can be interacted with and what opportunities they may be afforded. Together with the suspension of the *acquis communautaire* in the North by the EU until a political (with emphasis) solution may be reached, these international decisions shape the Cypriot socio-political landscape, creating another attractor that stabilizes the conflict system for better or worse. The exact effect continues to be under dispute by scholars to date.

Importantly, from an emotion/narrative perspective, Cypriots on both sides of the divide suffer heavily from chosen traumas (Volkan, 1998, Chapter 3). Such traumas are based on real grievances. One such grievance is the loss of life on both sides, though Greek Cypriots focus on the Turkish Invasion of 1974, whereas Turkish Cypriots focus on intercommunal violence from 1963 to 1974. Another grievance is of forced displacement and loss of property for Greek Cypriots, and isolations that are seen as unjust for Turkish Cypriots, among others. Indeed, depredation (which created a plunder elite in the North; Ulas, 2021) and deprivation theories may well explain the historical roots of grievances in Cyprus; yet, they fail to account for why such grievances are so prevalent in conflict protraction. However, chosen traumas addressed this gap, where the term chosen here aptly refers to the fact that both communities strategically and rhetorically choose to remember only certain episodes in a certain way that maintains their narratives of *us as victims, they as villains*. Therefore, chosen traumas also help maintain enemy images, cause differentiation and dehumanization, and promote time collapse where historical grievances are felt as freshly as if they were occurring now (Volkan, 1998, Chapters 3–6). This psychological outlook then colors how people perceive/remember the history of the conflict, what they prefer as potential solutions and how they interpret any such solution, and their needs for security and how they may be fulfilled, among others. Most significantly, these differing chosen traumas are seemingly connected to the gulf between the two communities' interpretations of and expectations from an eventual bizonal, bicomunal federation where Greek Cypriots expect a strong central government with no limitations to mobility and living areas as well as no outside military, whereas Turkish Cypriots expect a weak central government, ethnolinguistically separated zones for living, and Turkish guarantees to be continued. These are not simply negotiating positions to be reconciled; clearly, the psychological dimension to this conflict needs to be addressed—hence the intractability of the conflict and its resistance to solely political resolution attempts (Ongel, 2024).

As outlined above, hegemonic politics and narratives thereof are steeped in the maintenance of the status quo and therefore of a cold conflict. Meanwhile, both the RoC and the TRNC naturally also have dissenters within the ranks—those who defy hegemonic discourses by producing counternarratives and those who are attempting to alter the system, the resisters. However, their motivations appear to be more economic than they are about liberation or defiance of extant hegemonies, although, of course, the economic system is tied to and constrained by the political, whereby desires to change economic realities often translates by necessity into a defiance of the political system as a whole (Antonsich, 2013; Ilican, 2013). Furthermore, groups and events such as protests adopting anti-hegemonic counternarratives are ill-attended and do not yet have a widening outreach or impact. Overall, all these actors are dependent on utilizing the border and border walls as an intermediary actant through which to legitimize or defy the status quo, such as with the Occupy Buffer Zone protests where a small group of youth activists occupied buildings left in the UN-administered Buffer

Zone in protest of the island's illegal division; or with references to Cyprus for Cypriots in the latest bout of protests in the North. The question for this case study, then, is: What effects does the border engender as an actant through which the above-mentioned actors—and any others, such as Turkey—establish networks and feedback loops used to (de)legitimize the conflict-oriented status quo, which is often labeled *no war, no peace*?

The main and most apparent function of a hardened, securitized border is physical separation. Having been established in 1964 in a UN response to intercommunal violence, the Green Line that bisected Nicosia then was lengthened to divide the whole island because of Turkey's military intervention of 1974, purportedly to stop a Greek military coup on the island as well as to stem intercommunal violence. Consequently, there was a population exchange between the RoC and North Cyprus, consolidating a virtually complete ethno-religious and linguistic separation. Meanwhile, the TRNC unilaterally declared statehood only in 1983 in contravention of international customary law, citing a failure of peace talks and rendering the island's division semi-permanent. The peace talks, starting from 1964 and lasting to date, have all failed with only a framework agreement underlining the eventual adoption of a bizonal, bicomunal federation—reminiscent of the Belgian model—being reached. In 2003, the gates between the two sides started being opened, allowing for Cypriots and tourists to visit both sides of the island and for Cypriots to work or shop on either side when possible. The RoC also obtained membership in the EU in 2004, right after rejecting the Annan Plan of the UN. The complex feedback loops of the conflict stem mainly from these milestones, lending further complexity to the Cypriot borderscape.

Vis-à-vis the production of hegemonic narratives of the Cypriot borderlands, in the short-term, the physical division and thus the two communities' separation provided an end to conflict and thus safety, which allowed for the securitization of the border, i.e., the idea that the border provided a strong enough barrier against a continuation of the militarized/violent portion of the conflict. This promoted wall-dependence (Çaykent, 2010; Ozcelik, 2013) in the longer term and allowed for the essentialization of the security discourse around the border (Adamides, 2020; Koktsidis, 2024; Loizides, 2015). Simultaneous to the securitization discourse, ethno-nationalist discourses of identity have also emerged. These two narrative systems co-vary to perpetuate the “no war, no peace” dynamic in the RoC. Meanwhile, together with ethno-nationalism, what has emerged in Northern Cyprus is a narrative that fuses securitarian and dignitarian thinking with an emphasis on deserving and therefore needing parity in status with the majority who identify as Greek/Greek-speaking Cypriots, as well as a need to maintain ties with Turkey for security against a potential tyranny of the majority. In the next few paragraphs, I will outline through which mechanisms these narratives emerge and are sustained and how they center around borderings in Cyprus.

The security narrative (intertwined with narratives of identity) revolves around *the Other as threat* as the central mechanic. Otherization was, in the first place, facilitated by the hard border and complete division of the island from 1974 to 2003. On the one hand socio-political narratives in the RoC—reinforced by both media and history education—revolve around the idea that Turkey alone is responsible for the woes of Cyprus and that Turkey is militarily occupying Northern Cyprus which creates the image of a hyper-militarized North (Cyprus Mail, 2016, 2024; “Cyprus’ weapons against Turkey are diplomacy and law,” 2020). This vein of narrative downplays the effects of the intercommunal strife between Turkish and Greek Cypriots on the former, who suffered ghettoization (e.g., mass displacement), extreme poverty, and structural violence through such as debasing policing or disappearances at checkpoints. Furthermore, it externalizes all blame to the chosen *Other*, which, by itself, is a conflict-perpetuating mythos that anchors a victim mentality. Importantly, these physically

reinforced mental borderings position Turkishness as alien and as imposed through conquest because Turkey is cast as a conqueror, which naturally alienates any/all Turkish Cypriots who feel cultural or ethnic kinship with Turkey (even if they mainly identify as Cypriot).

Together, these dynamics legitimize the perpetuation of the conflict in the RoC by promoting two attitudes: no compromise with the Other and an over-perception of threat from the Other, engendering insecurity and creating emotions such as anxiety, anger, confusion, fear, and disgust. The responses towards the Annan Plan provide a good example here of unwillingness to compromise, where many Greek Cypriots responded with questioning why they should make concessions on (even temporary) restrictions to residency, on property return issues (tied to ancestral territoriality), or on Turkey maintaining even a small, symbolic military force on the island (Bucik, 2012; CypriotPeacemaker, n.d.; Pericleous, 2009; “Why did Greek Cypriots reject the Annan Plan,” n.d.). Meanwhile, the Greek Cypriot narratives around border crossings demonstrate the systemic success in priming the polity towards over-perceiving threats as well as the negative implications of the social action of border-crossing. Indeed, many express perceiving danger from the frequent—and wholly intentional on the Northern pseudo-authorities’ part—display of Turkish flags, the image of Atatürk (the founder of modern-day Turkey), and machine gun-toting guards (Papadakis, 2005; Soriano & Yalon, 2017; Webster & Timothy, 2006). For example, Georgiou (2019, p. 97) quotes a song by local artist Ioannidis: “And I saw uprooted people crossing the line/For a cheap whore or for casinos or cigars.” Meanwhile, Cintio (2013, p. 274) argues that the walls in Cyprus “created an illusion of danger that [does] not exist,” while Michael (2009, p. 187) argues that the “separation and threat perception created a bipolar siege mentality” which together undermine intercommunal peacebuilding efforts. They also further express a fear normalizing the occupation of the North, i.e., of inadvertently contributing to an implied recognition of the secessionist entity in the North, being morally opposed to contributing to the economic prosperity of an illegal state, and being outraged at the existence of a border or the requirement by Northern Cyprus for passport checks (AceraSpire8920, 2023; Professor-Levant, 2024). This also goes to demonstrate that the idea of embodied borders is pertinent in Cyprus—People feel their bodies bear the brunt of reifying or defying existing borderings when exerting personal agency regarding their desired location.

The border is perceived as not only illegitimate but also perpetuating an illegitimate division and being a synecdoche of the past suffering, almost like a theater or a museum (Cintio, 2013; Georgiou, 2019). This then orients the Greek Cypriot narrative towards the past, memorializing it, ritualizing it, and bemoaning historical grievances rather than being future-oriented. These attitudes are also naturally conflict-perpetuating and are a result of the borderings derived from the Turkish intervention and then chosen to be emphasized by both the state and the polity. Furthermore, this lack of legitimacy of the border is transferred to anyone who is attempting to cross from North to South without proper papers. While generally not problematic, the issue becomes one of international norms when directed towards asylum-seekers. The RoC has claimed that the Buffer Zone provides for a state of exception where its humanitarian obligations to refugees can be suspended, for they are attempting to infiltrate by coming through an illegal port of entry (i.e., the North). In this vein, the RoC has engaged in refoulements as well as pushbacks, but most starkly, they have caged tens of migrants in the Buffer Zone, which forced the United Nations Forces in Cyprus to set up shanty refugee camps for those stuck in between (Connelly, 2021; Kitsantonis, 2024). Referring back to the hegemonic conflict narrative, the RoC has posited the idea that Turkey is encouraging Muslim migrants to infiltrate the RoC and therefore that migration is a weapon of conflict which should be defended against, thus triggering the fears that anchor the Greek Cypriot

securitarian narrative. Meanwhile, the migrants targeted by the narrative are thus forced to embody the perceived illegitimacy of the border as well as the established conflict narratives that perpetuate the division of the island. Overall, then, the Greek Cypriot narrative is driven mostly by fear.

The hegemonic Northern Cypriot political narrative differs from its RoC counterpart in significant ways. In this vein, the original Cypriot conflict—i.e., the violent phase—was ended in 1974 through the Turkish intervention/invasion. Even the Turkish Cypriots who problematize the Turkish policy of military occupation of Northern Cyprus, exporting settlers to Cyprus, and of increasingly direct interventions into the Turkish Cypriot democratic processes, imagine 1974 as an endpoint. The conflict is argued to have originated in the intercommunal strife of 1963–1974, where the issues were existential; post-1974, the issue transformed into a political one. While some Turkish Cypriots recognize the grievances of the Greek Cypriot community regarding mass violence, displacement, loss of property, etc., of 1974, many justify or at least (have been taught to) perceive such atrocities as being the punishment or the unfortunate result for their community's suffering since 1963. Therefore, their hegemonic narrative revolves around the core theme that Turkish Cypriots are victims who have unjustly been isolated from the international markets/community by the erstwhile villains of their story. Given these dynamics, the Turkish Cypriot hegemonic narrative centers a quest for deserved/promised political parity—despite being the minority in Cyprus, with Greek Cypriots being the majority—and ensuring their political will and survival through Turkish guarantees. The “villain” here, then, is the power imbalance between the majority and minority, which should be adjudicated through Turkish backing and the provision of assurances regarding current and future political status/authority.

The border here is perceived as a legitimate barrier ensuring physical safety and political independence—and thus status parity—against the majority. Turkey's presence as a guarantor is welcomed insofar as providing security, but its interference in local politics and its extractions from the local economy are shunned. Therefore, the lack of a proper border between Turkey and North Cyprus, where the citizens of the former can freely travel to the latter with just their ID cards, is more of an issue than the presence of the walls bisecting the island within the Turkish Cypriot narrative framework. Overall, the Turkish Cypriot hegemonic narrative of politics emphasizes a need for status/power with both the RoC and Turkey. Nonetheless, Turkish Cypriots denote that “our people [are] becoming hopeless about the future. We are forced to live in a closed box. Turkey is the only ‘window’ for us opening to the rest of the world” (Altınay et al., 2002, p. 179), demonstrating that while Turkish Cypriots may prefer some distancing with Turkey for cultural security, their economic and physical security needs are fulfilled by a proximity to Turkey as well. Furthermore, regarding their understanding of current Cypriot society as well as their imagining of the future, they imagine themselves as peers of the Greek Cypriot community rather than an ethno-linguistic minority among a Greek Cypriot majority. The current “president” of North Cyprus, as well as Turkish President Erdogan and his Foreign Minister Cavusoglu have claimed that they refuse the “perception that Turkish Cypriots [are a] minority” (“We disregard perception,” 2021), asserting that the community “has never been a minority” (Guldogan, 2023). This dignitarian approach emphasizing the need for equality, recognition from the other and status/power seems to drive much of Turkish Cypriot imagination of the border, one that gives them, through the status quo, the ability to exercise self-determination (which they believe is legitimate) and which serves as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions from Greek Cypriots regarding the island's future. Overall, then, the dignitarian narrative legitimizes the border much as with the case of the securitarian narrative. Here, then, the emotions that anchor the Turkish Cypriot narrative are those of ambition for powers and status to which they may feel but are not necessarily entitled. Such narratives are clearly also in a direct clash with the Greek Cypriot understanding of the Cypriot communities being

in a majority–minority relationship within a larger Cypriot national ethos and of needing more centralized governance to feel the system is just and secure.

Importantly, Turkish Cypriots are more skeptical about the potential of living together with Greek Cypriots due to the latter's assigned villain role in the former's hegemonic understanding of the division's history, whereas the Greek Cypriot narrative focuses on Turkey as the main villain (Interpeace, 2010). The latter narrative, while promoting more hope about future coexistence, discounts Turkish Cypriot agency as well as their concerns, assuming or at least implying either that such concerns will not matter in a unified Cyprus or that a future government can deal with minority concerns easily. Indeed, Greek Cypriot politicians generally argue that "the people," i.e., Cypriots, can reach a solution as soon as Turkey leaves the island ("Anastasiadis," 2025). However, even the progressive leaders of North Cyprus perceive the Greek Cypriot approach as lacking much-needed empathy for and understanding of Turkish Cypriots' wants/needs and have argued that ignoring internal issues by externalizing all Cypriot problems to Turkey only undermines any peace process ("Akıncı'dan Anastasiadis'e cevap," 2025). Additionally, despite the extent to which Turkey is narratively villainized, the Turkish Cypriots are economically and physically dependent on it, making it inevitable for Turkey to have a role in peacebuilding in Cyprus. As such, the way the relationship between the Cypriots and the Turkish (and thus, Turkish Cypriots who identify with a Turkish ethnicity as well) is defined (i.e., as villains/conquerors or as a key cultural component) will be instrumental to reconcile the different Cypriot narratives. For example, in one recent protest against the Turkish occupation in North Cyprus, students led with chants such as "Turks, you will die on Greek soil" and "Turks, Mongols, murderers" (Cyprus Mail, 2018), the latter chant tying Turkey to the Greek Cypriot narrative of indigenous resistance against constant occupation and pressure from larger outside forces. Can narratives of Greekness and anti-Turkey villanization be reconciled with a narrative of kinship with and dependence on Turkey? This appears unlikely at the moment, but achieving such a feat is clearly necessary for the success of future peacebuilding efforts.

Nonetheless, due to their own narrative orientations to and from the border, Greek and Turkish Cypriots have differing expectations of a potential solution. On the one hand, Greek Cypriots prefer a unitary government, no restrictions on land ownership, and the total withdrawal of Turkey from the island (Interpeace, 2010). Turkish Cypriots, meanwhile, hope for a loose federation, perpetuation of territorial distinctions, and Turkey still providing for their military security (Interpeace, 2010). Most significantly, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots believe the status quo is preferable to the alternatives proposed by the other side (Interpeace, 2010). There are two reasons for these disparities and the resultant conflict-orientation on the island: Firstly, the border stabilizes and normalizes the division of the island, thus legitimizing policies which hold out for a win over any compromise. Secondly, Cypriot borderings have led to otherization whereby there is a lack of trust regarding the goodwill of the other side—Neither polity believes the other would willingly accept their preferred solution (Interpeace, 2010).

5. Analysis and Conclusions

Cyprus provides a country where an internal division has long been normalized and a frozen conflict is perpetuated. Such normalization implies the idea that the division is intractable by nature. These dynamics of bordering have significant implications for the emergent political narratives and machinations in Cyprus.

First, the island's relative calm after its bisection creates an illusion of stability and safety for all parties involved. This perception legitimizes conflict-oriented approaches as both sides expect—and therefore hold out for—an eventual win: a centralized, powerful federation for Greek Cypriots and a looser, less-centralized bizonal federation or even a recognition of secession for Turkish Cypriots. Furthermore, the bordering processes self-legitimize at the same time: If they can provide safety as intended, the border walls can be considered successful regardless of other, unintended consequences. Second, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots feel the weight of embodying the Cypriot borderings (Demetriou, 2016). Therefore, they must reconcile their personal space, narratives, and emotions with their territorial politics. This creates a significant feedback loop: Those adopting the hegemonic narrative should either not cross or they should not necessarily trust the other. Subsequently, cross-cutting bonds are not created or reinforced among a majority of the populations, which leads to a lack of empathy and cooperation. In turn, the absence of these factors legitimizes the initial conflict-oriented decisions and everyday, conflict-perpetuating routines while engendering and legitimizing other conflict-oriented actions. Therefore, the two “states” in Cyprus unsurprisingly utilized Covid-19 and the migration crisis in Cyprus as legitimizing factors for hardening borders when given the chance.

Third, the Cypriot border appears to be the locus of negotiations over temporality. Not only do Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots “remember” the Cypriot conflict's timeline quite differently, but these communities also have differing temporal orientations. Indeed, while Greek Cypriots focus on obtaining redress for grievances located in 1974, Turkish Cypriots' main concerns revolve around the perceived injustices they are currently suffering from. As one interviewee declares, Turkish Cypriots are “like air,” whereas Greek Cypriots are “like stone” (Soriano & Yalon, 2017). This means that their temporal orientations have engendered differing and possibly incompatible attitudes and characteristics vis-à-vis addressing political aims. This chasm between the two communities can then cause the polity to talk across each other, resulting in the perception that they suffer from a lack of intercommunal understanding and empathy, and thus legitimizing conflict-orientation once again. Indeed, it is important to realize that the ways in which the two communities' hegemonic narratives have conceptualized the border and, in so doing, legitimized the conflict are significantly different. The Greek Cypriot narratives reveal fear-driven security concerns, whereas the main Turkish Cypriot narrative is aspirational and dignitarian. Peacebuilding is unlikely to be productive without reconciling these narratives and their legitimation of the division, the status quo, and thus the conflict in Cyprus. Increased EWR efforts in North Cyprus to help better align local values and practices with those of the RoC and the EU and to help empower burgeoning Europeanist or Cypriotist anti-hegemonic groups may be helpful. The impact could be redoubled when coupled with more direct attention paid to promoting positive intercommunal interactions and promoting open dialogue about identities and eventual resolutions outside of civil society organizations, NGOs, and elite-level politics.

Finally, this case study demonstrates the pertinence of discursive narrative framings, emotions, affects, and practices vis-à-vis conflictuality, securitization, and peacebuilding success in the borderlands. Such everyday factors possess significant direct and indirect impacts on geopolitical rivalries as well as their ultimate resolutions. Usually disregarded as “only anthropological” and less important to larger concerns, the “vernacular” and “everyday” have been a blind spot to traditional international relations approaches that focus on matters of geopolitics, diplomacy, and military. However, this article asserts that the blind spot is deadly towards diplomatic and peacebuilding efforts across conflictual borderlands and argues that the separation of everyday matters from elite-level diplomacy is artificial. In future efforts for engaging border

conflicts, diplomats and peacebuilders must pay equal emphasis to the vernacular as to the official politics and negotiations.

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Conflict of Interests

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The Shortcomings of Just War Theories and the Legitimacy of Just Peace

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Abstract

In theory, the just war tradition claims to provide an appropriate standard for distinguishing legitimate military intervention from illegitimate aggression, which reduces the incidence of state and international violence. In practice, however, the concept of just war helps to morally embellish military action and obscure the political interests behind it. The article provides both a moral and political critique of just war theories, without in turn advocating a pacifist ostracism of war or denying the need for a normative justification of wars in terms of political realism. The argument is not that war cannot be justified in individual cases, but rather that the attempt to legitimise war as a general instrument of law and justice fails both in moral philosophy and political theory. As a last resort, war requires a theory of just peace as a supplement in order to present a coherent conception of the justification of war and of peace.

Keywords

just peace; just war; moral uncertainty; pacifism; political realism; political theory; ultima ratio

1. Introduction

There are many arguments to disavow just war theories (cf. Booth, 2000), but few of them are convincing. In this respect, the easiest argument to refute is certainly the classic “is–ought fallacy,” as it is articulated in David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). This fallacy states that it is not possible to claim what should be by descriptive statements about what is and how things are: Even if one were to conclude that, empirically, there has never been (nor will there ever be) a war that fully conforms to the theoretical premises of *bellum iustum*, this would not disprove the possible existence of a moral ideal of a military intervention that political and military decision-makers should strive for in practice. Therefore, statements like “when we romanticise

the idea of the just war, we forget how difficult it is to actually fight one" (Fiala, 2008, p. vii) do not imply a theoretical critique, only a practical one. The same applies to the fact that the just war theory could be instrumentalised to justify "unjust" wars or that every war inevitably leads to unintended collateral damages. Not even a case-by-case application of just war criteria could harm the theory as such. Because none of these objections can invalidate the argument that, in extreme cases, it could mean the lesser evil to go to war (e.g., in the form of a humanitarian intervention), regardless of how decisions have been or will be made in similar situations. A dedicated "just" war could neither be criticised by the fact that most wars are unjust, nor that too few just wars are fought. Moreover, there is no doubt that just war theorists are interested in finding moral (or legal) criteria to legitimise military operations only in exceptional cases in order to avert even greater harm.

However, the main problem with just war theories is the futile endeavour to integrate war into any kind of ethical concept. This is not to say that the debate on the relevant theoretical developments is useless or that, from a poststructuralist perspective, it is merely a "powerful and dangerous illusion that ethics can tame politics (and by implication war)," when in reality it only "enables and enhances war while obscuring that this is the case" (Zehfuss, 2018, pp. 12–14). As long as the regulations of international law on the containment (or, in the best case, the abolition) of war are incomplete in their theoretical systematics and rarely take effect in practice, scholars will not be spared the discussion about whether a war is justified or not. Individual components of the theory of just war also seem quite compatible with a political ethic of right-preserving violence (which is directed against radical pacifism). With regard to this, the standards for determining and punishing war crimes, which can be useful for the further development of international law, should be mentioned (May, 2007). In particular, this includes the *ius post bellum*, which integrates more recent approaches to the theory of just war (Bass, 2004; Evans, 2008; Evans & Stender, 2008; Orend, 2006). There is no question that the punishment of war criminals, the payment of reparations, the reconstruction of infrastructure, and the establishment of legitimate local authorities must be central normative goals after the end of hostilities. Nevertheless, these issues say nothing about the prior justification for war or even the moral obligation to engage in military combat or not. As a result, *ius post bellum* alone cannot be expected to "heal" the just war theory in its entirety.

Based upon these assumptions, the just war theory itself, i.e., the establishment of certain criteria that claim to serve as a general standard for the ethical legitimisation of military force (e.g., Brough, 2007; Evans, 2005; Hensel, 2008), has to be rejected in its systematic form. At the same time, it is important to avoid getting caught up in the aporias of the two (even less convincing) alternatives to just war: pacifism and political realism. As a key reference for this argument, the article will draw on the works of Immanuel Kant in order to deny war a moral impact, which it cannot claim, and to emphasise the advantages of moral uncertainty when it comes to waging war (Section 2). The next step will then demonstrate why the contradictions and negative consequences of any ethical justification of war require the counter-principle of "just peace." This counter-principle is necessary to encompass the *ultima ratio* of military intervention as part of a coherent doctrine that does not misunderstand just peace as a compromise or middle ground between *bellum iustum* and absolute non-violence (Section 3). Finally, with regard to current empirical examples such as the Russia–Ukraine war or the war in the Gaza Strip, the moral uncertainty concerning the legitimacy of warfare is highlighted as the greatest strength of the concept of just peace compared to the tradition of just war (Section 4).

2. A Kantian Critique of Just War Theory Beyond Political Realism and Pacifism

All theories of the just war tradition (e.g., Allhoff, 2013; Brunstetter & O'Driscoll, 2025; Christopher, 1994; Coates, 1997; Dubik, 2016; Elshtain, 2003; Fotion, 2007; Guthrie & Quinlan, 2007; Johnson, 1999; Lazar, 2015; O'Donovan, 2003; Orend, 2006; Patterson, 2007; Ramsey, 2002; Rawls, 1999; Regan, 1996; Walzer, 2000; Zupan, 2004) usually share three premises:

1. War is principally open to moral judgements.
2. There are concrete reasons (*iusta causa*) that justify war from an ethical point of view.
3. War aims and military warfare must be operationalised and limited in such a way that premises 1 and 2 are not reduced to absurdity. On the one hand, this requires the *proportionality* of all military means being used. On the other hand, it requires that the war is waged with a just intention (*recta intentio*; see Burkhardt, 2017) and a reasonable prospect of success (*iustus finis*).

On the surface, these three principles suggest a necessary distinction between the (moral) right to war (*ius ad bellum*) and the right in war (*ius in bello*). Accordingly, it would be conceivable for a war to be started for a just cause, but the means of warfare to violate the principle of justice. The atomic bombs in World War II could serve as a precedent here. From a strategic point of view, the decision to achieve the unconditional surrender of Japan without a disastrous invasion of the main island of Honshu may have been understandable. From a moral point of view, however, the Japanese aggressors should undoubtedly have refrained from an unconditional surrender that could only have been enforced by nuclear means. Conversely, a warring party that allows the force of arms to speak without sufficient moral legitimisation can obviously respect the *ius in bello*, as Walzer (2000, pp. 38–39) attempts to show using the example of General Rommel in North Africa during World War II. On closer inspection, it becomes evident that *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello* are closely interwoven (Canto-Sperber, 2005, pp. 302–346), since unjustly waging a war that is just in principle or, vice versa, justly waging a war that is unjust in principle would turn both wars into unjust wars. Otherwise, one of the two necessary conditions for just wars would already be sufficient. Hence, the logical independence of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello* (cf. Christopher, 1994, p. 96) is suited to undermine the theory of just war (and merely allowing individual components to exist in the aforementioned sense of law-preserving force) instead of affirming its validity as a whole. Attempts to preserve the ethical ideal of just war must therefore accept the indissoluble connection between all relevant components (*ius ad bellum*, *ius in bello*, and *ius post bellum*; Orend, 2006, pp. 48–49).

Only if sufficient capacity is available to achieve the war aims claimed to be just without simultaneously violating the conventions of “just” warfare (e.g., refraining from the use of weapons of mass destruction and not taking unacceptable reprisals against the civilian population), war itself, despite its horrors, would remain what the proponents of *bellum iustum* claim it to be: a moral category. Otherwise, while it would be understandable that there are situations that morally legitimise an act of war, one would have to concede that war without the chance of observing the *ius in bello* cannot be a means of changing the injustice of a situation, let alone of not making everything worse. At this point, it also becomes obvious that further premises and criteria cited by the proponents of *bellum iustum* are only secondary conditions. For example, these premises include that a just war must always be *the ultima ratio* and that *proportionality* to the reason

for war must be maintained, or that a *legitimate authority* exists that can claim the right to wage war (cf. Coates, 1997, pp. 123–126). These secondary conditions are irrelevant, at least at this point in the line of argument presented here, because they are not independent variables. If it can be demonstrated that there is no just war, it is irrelevant who conducts it and whether it is only used proportionately when all other means have been exhausted.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there are relevant differentiations *within* moral philosophy that influence the question about just wars. In this concern, Elshtain (1992, pp. 1–2) rightly pointed out that the theory of just war is an amalgam of deontological (duty-based) ethics and consequentialist (or utilitarian) ethics. This implies that, given the inevitable suffering of civilians in any war, it is not sufficient to describe a war as “just” if it merely achieves its objectives. The end can never justify the means unless deontological premises are completely excluded. The same reason gives rise to numerous paradoxes and dilemmas. Experience shows that morally precarious actions often increase the efficiency of warfare. This could in turn give these actions moral weight, provided they are suitable for ending the war more quickly and with less loss of life. An example of this is the bombing of German cities during World War II, which the Allies used to break the morale of the German civilian population. Moreover, the concentration camps in the Second Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902) or the nuclear strikes against Japan in 1945 were also “efficient” in their own way. Just war theorists therefore like to refer to the utilitarian Henry Sidgwick, who wanted the proportionality of benefit to be taken into account. Nevertheless, the extent to which the efficiency of acts of war must bow to moral imperatives or whether the benefit itself is the decisive yardstick touches on a general problem: the possible discrepancy between the intended *goals* of warfare and the *consequences* that can be observed. During a war, the morally plausible attempt to minimise the number of victims can in fact have the opposite effect, especially when considering the empirical evidence that, in war, the lives (and survival) of *friends* mean something different than the lives of *enemies*. It is worth recalling NATO’s strategy of avoiding ground troops during the Kosovo War (1998/1999) in order to avoid casualties to its own troops and to limit itself to air strikes outside the range of enemy air defences. This was understandable as an objective, but it made it more difficult to capture military targets and increased the probability of collateral damage. Hence, the moral imperative to limit force and “killing in war” (Dill & Shue, 2012) can also be used in an unjust way (Brunstetter, 2021). Consequently, the question of the moral justification of war depends essentially on how one assesses such paradoxes resulting from the clash of deontological and consequentialist ethics.

The ethical reasons that might justify military interventions in accordance with the proponents of just war can be categorised into two groups: those that respond to previous cross-border aggression and those that mark the beginning of international hostilities. Like World War II, the 1991 Iraq War represents a precedent for the first group, because the Allies and the UN fought back against an aggressor. In contrast, the UN’s Assistance Mission in Somalia, like NATO’s Kosovo War (Joyner, 2002), is categorised under the label of “humanitarian intervention,” i.e., as military intervention in the territory of another state with the aim of protecting human rights. The second group of morally justified interventions sometimes includes pre-emptive strikes (Bzostek, 2008), which, like Israel in the Six-Day War, tactically anticipate an imminent attack (Hilger, 2005). Alternately, like the USA in Afghanistan (2001–2021) or Iraq (2003), they aim to prevent terrorist attacks (Elshtain, 2003; Lee, 2007; Smit, 2004; Walzer, 2004) and install democratic structures (Dolan, 2005; Kredel, 2006; O’Driscoll, 2008). According to these two groups of categories, the “morality of defensive war” (Lazar & Fabre, 2014) is not part of just war theories. A well-known aperçu by Carl von Clausewitz argues that every war begins with (self-)defence, but the tradition of just war clearly

focuses on military interventions, which are often undertaken for the purpose of supporting a warring party which was attacked. Consequently, since the emergence of the concept of just war in ancient Rome, it has seldom been used to legitimise self-defence (which is not necessary from a moral-philosophical point of view). Rather, it is often used to initiate acts of war or justify intervention in a war already being waged. The theory of just war therefore deals with situations in which a free, moral decision to go to war is pending, and not with situations in which this decision has been imposed on someone.

As previously outlined, ethical reasons for initiating or intervening in a war can only constitute a sufficient condition for a just war in conjunction with morally legitimate and realisable war aims and relatively restrained warfare in accordance with the *ius in bello*. However, if the just war theory essentially links the “justice” of a war to its limitability, the question arises as to whether this dispenses war from any moral judgement. From the pacifist perspective, it is impossible to differentiate between moral and immoral wars: “Just” war is also war in which people die or are maimed and the desired limitation of warfare is doomed to failure. The cause of war, postulated as just, merely sets an uncontrollable spiral of violence in motion. Pacifists’ scepticism is shared by political realists, albeit for different reasons. Although realists agree with pacifists that warfare prohibits the use of moral categories, they draw the opposite conclusion: War should not be outlawed, but like all politics, it should be freed from moral imperatives and evaluated solely based on strategic standards. Therefore, in order to counter the central objection of pacifists *and* realists, just war theorists would have to be able to prove that, in spite of everything, war has a moral dimension. Accordingly, in *Just and Unjust Wars* (first published in 1977), Michael Walzer aims to reconstruct the moral reality of war as the basis of his just war theory. To do so, he refers to the morally charged vocabulary used in the description of wars to differentiate between “massacres,” “atrocities,” and “aggression” on the one hand and “self-defence,” “peacekeeping,” and “humanitarian intervention” on the other. Here, Walzer exploits the fact that, in reality, these morally charged terms often serve merely as a pretext for other non-moral interests to argue that war itself is by no means beyond moral evaluation. Otherwise, the apparently existing compulsion to ethically justify one’s own actions would not exist (Walzer, 2000, pp. 13–16, 19–20). Furthermore, he insists that everything that happens in war is not the result of an uncontrollable momentum, but of free decisions made by moral individuals. The containment and limitation of the use of weapons necessary for a just war therefore seems achievable in principle (Walzer, 2000, pp. 24–25).

It is certainly original how Michael Walzer concludes from observing moral hypocrisy that ethical categories are not simply suspended during wartime. If morally charged language is intended to gloss over potentially immoral actions in war, this only makes sense as long as the goal of harmony with morality is not fundamentally questioned. Unfortunately, this does not prove Walzer’s point. Of course, the people who bear the responsibility for a military operation remain moral individuals who can ethically reflect on their decisions. But what other choice would they have had if the reality of war could *not be* legitimised morally than to embellish the war or denounce the enemy’s atrocities in order to make their own “reaction” more understandable? And even if actions in war always remain the work of human hands, the moral state of war is in no way comparable to that of peace. Even soldiers who are at war for the sake of a “higher” cause are forced to kill people in order to survive themselves. This makes it hardly plausible to differentiate between combatants on the basis of their moral status in war (Rodin & Shue, 2008). The same insight inspired Immanuel Kant’s timeless statement that “War is evil, in so far as it makes more bad people than it takes away” (Kant, 1992, p. 78). Here, Kant echoes the ancient Greek wisdom that war may be a necessary evil in certain situations but ultimately creates more negative than positive effects. Consequently, it is important to

realise the temporal distance between the existential act of war and the subsequent attempt to justify it morally. In this respect, the theory of *bellum iustum* seeks to excuse in advance the morally precarious acts that are unavoidable in every war and to condemn those collateral damages that seem avoidable in retrospect. However, this does not make war itself a moral category, especially if one recalls the second version of Kant's categorical imperative, according to which human life always exists as an "end in itself" and can never be merely a means to an end (Kant, 2016, pp. 53–54). As a result, the idea of just war has roughly the same status in moral philosophy as the argument that torture methods can be used to extort information that saves the lives of a large number of people. In other words, this idea gets caught up in the cardinal problem of utilitarianism. Walzer's argument is therefore reminiscent of the wishful thinking of scholasticism's ontological proof of God: The real existence of a being (such as God) or an idea (such as justice) is deduced solely from the fact that a concept for it exists. In this case, the concept of just war is a visible sign of the endeavour to translate the events of war into a moral language. At least Walzer concedes that this "God" has a highly ambivalent impact. "War is always hell," he writes, at least for those who are forced to fight and do not pursue their profession as mercenaries (Walzer, 2000, p. 22). The hell of being forced into war, however, is solely the responsibility of the aggressors, whereas the guilt of the "just" defender is a violation of *ius in bello* at best (Walzer, 2000, pp. 25, 28, 31). Unfortunately, this is circular reasoning, since compliance with the law in war presupposes that the old rule *inter arma silent leges* has no validity—i.e., that war denotes a normative-moral category. And this has already been refuted above.

The just war theory therefore actually signifies a kind of *deus ex machina* that provides moral certainty or at least orientation in an ethically muddled situation. The intention to achieve something "just" through war cannot be denied. Anyone who honestly advocates for just war shows a willingness to act according to the moral principle of justice. However, it is more than the fatal probability of an error—perhaps one is looking at manipulated images or judging the situation on the basis of unintentional ethnocentrism—that triggers concerns. The idea that morally honourable goals can be achieved with the help of superior military power is based on a belief that has no empirical basis. There is no war that does not first and foremost mean violence and blood, where people kill and get killed. The cypher of the just war is therefore primarily used to calm one's conscience. In a way, this closes the circle between the classical theological tradition of *bellum iustum* and contemporary theories. Since the moral exceptionalism of war cannot be reconciled with the ethical idea of just war aims, a kind of absolute truth is needed that guarantees the justice of the war effort from a higher level, despite all empirical suffering.

3. Just War Dilemmas and the Counter-Concept of Just Peace

The fact that moral rules are inevitably violated in war is nothing new. Political realists have no problem with this, since for them the arena of politics requires its own "morality." In contrast to this, pacifists rigorously reject war for the same reason. The just war theory, however, finds itself in a dilemma. Its proponents, such as Ramsey (2002, Chapters 6–12), Johnson (1999), Walzer (2000, Part IV), or Elshtain (2003, pp. 46–58) could not avoid acknowledging the moral ambiguity of war, but did not draw the conclusion that this discredited the theory as a whole. Instead, they adhered to just war because, for them, a normative understanding of politics that opposes realism *and* pacifism is inconceivable otherwise (cf. Fisher, 2011). But does a combination of morality and politics really prescribe either a pacifist stance or the integration of just war theory (Orend, 2006, pp. 223–266)? As a matter of fact, the pacifists' and just war theorists' disagreement about the intrinsic moral nature of war concerns the assessment of the respective consequences above all else (Coates, 1997,

p. 115). While pacifists fear that the ethical justification of war increases the probability that it will take place, the proponents of *bellum iustum* accuse pacifists of not eliminating the danger of war with their attitude of refusal, but of gambling away the chance of a moral containment of war. The bottom line is that both “moral” concepts of war accuse the other of playing into the hands of their actual antipode: political realism. In the eyes of just war theorists, this is what pacifists do, as they close themselves off to the moral control of politics, to which power and war are inextricably linked. And pacifists accuse the epigones of just war of doing the same, as they apparently allow themselves to be infiltrated by political realists and betray morality by justifying war.

Both arguments overlook the paradox that war represents in this context. While pacifists believe that war must be rejected with the help of morality, and just war theorists want to legitimise war by moral attitudes, both are right and wrong at the same time. This is because, as was demonstrated in the previous section, war is not a moral category at all. On the other hand, morality suggests that peace which is maintained at all costs can also be morally wrong (Elshtain, 1988). The goal of building a bridge between deontological and utilitarian ethics can therefore only be achieved in a different way: If (moral) ethics demands peace, but (responsible) politics demands war in certain cases, then a normative understanding of politics may not avoid this discrepancy. Instead, from a moral point of view, war robs people of their sleep, and must do so, because otherwise they would no longer be able to boast of having morals. However, political considerations such as security interests, the threat to peace, and/or a massive violation of human rights could nevertheless lead to the legitimisation of warfare. This obvious contradiction is supposed to be seen as an essential advantage of moral uncertainty at this point: Only as long as a moral resistance to war remains constant can a necessary distance to the reality of killing and being killed be maintained. In this respect, it is crucial to understand that the ideal of *bellum iustum* does not continually place the entire war process, the entire war machine, under the important proviso of moral doubt. Only a general refusal to associate war with justice forces all players involved to continually reflect on their decision to wage war. This also applies to the reasons given for going to war, the war aims formulated, the type of warfare, and, if necessary, the option to abandon a military operation, provided that the number of casualties requires this. In other words: Conducting war makes all belligerent parties morally guilty, and it is absolutely consistent with a normative understanding of politics that this guilt should not be glossed over. The normative ideal is and must always be peace. There are merely situations in which peace has already been destroyed, so it may become necessary to fight for peace or other ideals such as freedom and human rights. That said, by rejecting the term “just war,” it is acknowledged that the causes for waging war remain morally uncertain, even if the decision to go to war can be justified subjectively. The conviction that just war theory offers a kind of *objective* standard that morally guides warfare would be counterproductive in any case. This culminates in the point where moral certainty makes the supreme maxim of military operations in any form of normative political understanding impossible: limiting war to the conceivable minimum and avoiding escalations resulting from the arrogance of power. Although this has been the main subject of just war theories since Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, it seems easier to achieve as soon as we abandon the desire for an ethically consistent justification of war. After all, moral defamation of the enemy is ultimately a path that promotes the escalation logic of war (Beck, 1999, p. 987). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that the tradition of just war theories tends to expand rather than restrict the grounds for supposedly legitimate violence (Rengger, 2013). The decision to go to war is easier when moral concerns are ignored. The just war thus represents a figure of thought that one cannot convincingly grasp either in theory or in practice, a *contradictio in adjecto* par excellence. Therefore, moral politics in the 21st century must definitely renounce the seductive standard of a *bellum iustum*.

This moral-philosophical critique of just war theory, which is beyond both strict pacifism and moral-free realism, was already outlined by Kant. Despite general beliefs to the contrary, Kant was not a pacifist. Various passages in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (*Zum Ewigen Frieden*) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (*Metaphysik der Sitten*) suggest a very different pattern of thought. In this respect, it is necessary to emphasise that Kant accepted war as a regular option in international politics up to a certain point. As long as the character of international relations follows the rules of an anarchic state of nature, each state has not only the right to self-defence but even the *ius ad bellum* in order to enforce its claims if they are being violated by the power of other states (Kant, 1997, pp. 467–470). For Kant, war remains a surrogate to decide struggles and conflicts between states and nations unless there is an efficient international law at work. On the other hand, “war” means:

Only the sad recourse in the state of nature (where there is no tribunal which could judge with the force of law) by which each state asserts its right by violence and in which neither party can be adjudged unjust (for that would presuppose a juridical decision); in lieu of such a decision, the issue of the conflict (as if given by a so-called “judgement of God”) decides on which justice lies. (Kant, 1992, pp. 55–56)

Hence, the Kantian perspective on war and peace aims to overcome the sadness of natural anarchy in the international system and to implement international laws in order to make the need for war redundant. Proceeding from this, the term “unjust enemy” (which was declared to be useless in the context of the international state of nature, see Kant, 1997, pp. 473–474) might become a beneficial criterion due to the legal foundation of international relations. However, this does definitely not mean that Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* emphasises a new theory of just war (Orend, 1997) which is supposed to protect human rights, the rule of international law, a global concept of justice, humanitarian interventions, or even the promotion of democracy. In this respect, the Canadian scholar Brian Orend has misinterpreted a few passages from the preliminary articles of the *Perpetual Peace* as prescriptions of a *ius in bello*—for instance, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and the interdiction of a war of extermination (see also Kant, 1997, pp. 470–471)—whereas the main aspects of Kant’s theory of peace are subsumed as parts of a *ius post bellum*. As a result, Orend ignores the successive process Kant assumed to be necessary in order to put the theoretical idea of the perpetual peace into practice. The preliminary articles are not an integral part of Kant’s theory, but only preconditions for the intended legal foundation of international relations. Therefore, in Kant’s view, the mistake of all just war theories will always remain that their reference point is not peace, but war. In contrast to this, he attempted to disavow the general idea that war could be an instrument of law and justice. At best, war is a “sad” surrogate for the lack of international law; at worst, the concept of just war is even (ab)used to disregard applicable international law in the name of a “higher” law. It is therefore no coincidence that there are currently just war approaches that, in the name of the “deep morality of war” (McMahan, 2008), precisely advocate for the systematic violation of international humanitarian law, even though this advocacy was criticised (Shue, 2016) or extended (Waldron, 2016) by other scholars. Moreover, it is significant that Kant appreciated the progress the founders of modern international law—Francisco de Vitoria, Alberico Gentili, Samuel Pufendorf, Hugo Grotius, or Emerich de Vattel—had achieved in opposition to the former just war theories (Kant, 1992, pp. 65–67). While just war theory assumes that international relations are asymmetrical, which undermines the basic requirement of international peace a priori, modern international law at least provides a symmetric relation between states and nations. As Kimminich (1980) pointed out, in the mid-18th century, modern international law replaced the moral argument of just war theory, thereby creating the prerequisites for a legal foundation of the international system. Thereafter, Kant

considered his own task as replacing the tradition of European international “law of war” through a new international and global “law of peace” (Tuck, 1999).

Accordingly, the several attempts to exploit Kant’s theory in favour of a liberal “just war” (Orend, 2006; Shell, 2005; Téson, 1992) must be rejected (Hidalgo, 2012, pp. 178–182; Williams, 2012). Kant’s concept of an “unjust enemy” (“an enemy whose publicly expressed will...[and] reveals a maxim by which, if it were made a universal rule, any condition of peace among nations would be impossible and, instead, a state of nature would be perpetuated,” Kant, 1997, p. 473) means nothing but a *performative* paradox in order to describe the situation in which the international law shows only *formal*, but no *material* differences to the state of nature yet. The unjust enemy is the actor in international relations who prevents the further progress of international law and provokes the reversion to the violent state of nature instead of supporting the transition towards an international law of peace. The appearance of an unjust enemy undermines again the opportunity to make any distinction between just and unjust. That is also the reason why Kant (1997, p. 474) describes the concept of an “unjust enemy” within the international state of nature as a sort of pleonasm. In the state of nature, everything is “unjust” and beyond international law. In contrast, a just enemy would not be an enemy any longer.

Instead of arguing in favour of pacifism or just war, Kant can be counted among the forerunners of a morally and politically ambitious “just peace.” Launched by peace ethics in Germany with a Christian ecumenical background, the concept of just peace has become a guiding principle in recent decades (Hoppe & Werkner, 2016; Sutor, 2004). It claims to provide consistent moral orientation in theory and practice in the area of international relations. Just peace describes a new paradigm of international ethics, which primarily supports the strict priority of international cooperation and civil measures for the prevention of violence and conflict over all options for military intervention. Furthermore, the paradigm encompasses a rich concept of peace beyond the view attributed to Thomas Hobbes that peace is nothing but the absence of war and physical violence. Instead of this, the concept of just peace emphasises the existence of a functioning legal order as a necessary characteristic, quality, and not least consequence of substantial peace, and does not neglect the socio-economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions as preconditions for achieving peaceful situations worthy of the name. In other words, the term “just peace” sets out important conditions for a sustainable peace process by not seeing it as merely the absence of war and violence or as a strict rejection of war. It implies further that even formal states of peace or the renunciation of military intervention can be “unjust” (Hidalgo, 2018).

By regarding Kant as the key figure in the history of ideas for such an ambitious concept of just peace, which combines legal, economic, and political-ethical aspects as interdependent categories, it can also be countered that the idea of just peace encompasses a compromise between the theory of just war and strict pacifism. Taking into account the previous section, it should rather be emphasised that the Kantian position of just peace actually rejects war as a moral category, but allows it in individual cases as a last resort or *ultima ratio* in a morally and legally undetermined situation. Hence, the special aspect of just peace has to do with the fact that this concept can convincingly claim a morally legitimate position beyond pacifism and realism. It is in stark contrast to the just war tradition, which fails to fulfil such a claim by suggesting (and misjudging) war itself as a means of justice. In this respect, the concept of just war tends to confuse a potentially lesser evil with a moral good. Contrary to its own purpose, it becomes more difficult to achieve the morally legitimate goal of allowing war as a last resort in exceptional cases. In contrast, the concept of just peace fosters awareness that the establishment of justice that was hoped for remains highly uncertain if a decision is made in favour

of war or military intervention. This is because war is more convincing to view as a last resort if it cannot be associated with justice. This awareness that military intervention cannot be carried out without moral guilt and therefore does not mean any “moral victory” (Brown, 2017) underscores the harshness and gravity of the decision to be made in relevant situations. However, as will be shown in the concluding section, this position of moral and legal uncertainty which marks the relationship between just peace and war should by no means be confused with a moral duty to wage war under certain conditions.

4. Conclusion: The Advantages of Moral Uncertainty—Some Empirical Cases

The concept of just peace insists that the normative ideal to be striven for must never be war, but only peace. This includes that just peace must not be seen as the aim of “just” wars (Evans, 2008, p. 533), but that war can only be the “price” to be paid for unjust peace (Reed, 2007). Moreover, with its focus on the possible necessity of rights-preserving violence, the concept of just peace acknowledges that any strictly pacifist logic reaches its ethical limits in anarchic, lawless conditions resembling civil war, where the state’s monopoly on violence no longer applies and a systematic violation of human rights is either already occurring or at least imminent. At the same time, by implicitly refusing to speak of the “justice” of war in such exceptional situations, just peace not only concedes that even such extreme cases do not simply legitimise a right to war, but that it is also far more likely that the proportionality of the means to be used will subsequently be maintained than if one were to accept the (inevitable escalation) logic of war, as in the case of a *bellum iustum*.

Just peace therefore retains an inherent ethical uncertainty about the moral justification of military interventions, which just war cancels out performatively. In this respect, the critique of just war that emerges from the concept of just peace goes beyond the notion of “contingent pacifism” (May, 2015). The latter retains a potential justification for war under certain circumstances, arguing that the vast majority of wars are unjust due to the inherent problems and consequences of modern warfare. In contrast, just peace rejects the justice of war even in cases where concrete military intervention undertaken with the aim of law-preserving violence is based on the same criteria (e.g., *iusta causa*, *recta intentio*, *iustus finis*, or legitimate authority) provided for in the tradition of *bellum iustum* (cf. Fabre, 2012). In this context, the power (and violence) of language should not be underestimated. Paradoxically, speaking of a just war seems to be less likely to enforce the stated criteria than can be expected from the concept of just peace and the uncertainty it suggests about the moral justification of war. In this context, the argument of just peace may not be equated with the moral urgency emphasised by the revisionist (or analytical) school of just war theory (e.g., Brown, 2017; Lazar, 2017) to limit specific destructive practices in modern warfare as long as wars are being fought. By continuing to justify humanitarian military interventions and preventive wars to eliminate weapons of mass destruction as just wars (Dill & Shue, 2012; Shue, 2016), the revisionist school also remains trapped in the aporias of the just war tradition.

The difference between these two positions—just peace vs. just war revisionism—can be illustrated by Operation Iron Swords, in which the Israeli military has been seeking to crush the armed wing of the Islamist terrorist organisation Hamas and its allied militant Islamist forces in the Gaza Strip since the end of 2023. Without denying Israel the right to hold those responsible for the horrific terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023 to account, to free all hostages from the hands of the terrorists, and to protect its own population from Hamas using all means permitted under international law, the general refusal of a right to war in this context could help to ensure that the proportionality of the military operation is maintained and that the greatest

possible consideration is given to the Palestinian civilian population. However, this is made more difficult by the mere mention of war, since war in principle means being allowed to exert (counter-)violence in a way that goes far beyond the tolerable level of police action or operations to combat organised crime. Therefore, the war in the Gaza Strip, which, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, resulted in more than 120,000 deaths and injuries (mostly women and children) by June 2024, confirms that war will always remain a boundary concept that is far more suitable for defining time and space, where the application of moral rules comes to an end, than for being open to moral evaluation. Furthermore, the focus on just peace instead of just war—even in its revisionist, limited form—would enable the urgently needed discussion about the extent to which terrorist attacks can be effectively contained by military force (*iustus finis*) and whether the war in the Gaza Strip was actually the *ultima ratio* for an appropriate response to the terrorist attacks by Hamas (which obviously wanted to provoke an overreaction by Israel to legitimise its own political goals).

Consequently, the first major advantage associated with the uncertain moral justification of wars is that the ruthless naming of the moral guilt that every belligerent party inevitably incurs, regardless of its intentions, benefits the principle of the proportionality of war and the prior exhaustion of all alternative means. The second advantage is that the insoluble moral problem of war cannot be addressed by any international legal regulations and, at the same time, remains independent of existing ambiguities and gaps in international law. This means that international law neither replaces moral and normative judgements of the legitimacy of military operations nor makes ethical discussions about war obsolete. Thus, claiming that the Kosovo War in 1999 or the Iraq War in 2003 could not have been “just” (or morally justified) because NATO or the USA were not sufficiently legitimised under international law indicates a misunderstanding of the actual thrust of just war (and just peace) theory to close the gaps in the law of peoples. If someone concludes that the overthrow of a brutal dictator or the ending of a genocide with the help of military intervention is morally permissible or even necessary, then—as already mentioned—the question of *who* is authorised to carry out such a “just” military force can only be regarded as secondary from an ethical point of view. Accordingly, the absence of a UN mandate is not capable of pre-empting the discussion about a (possible) moral justification of war, since in the UN Security Council, morally indifferent interests are often at work that need to be eliminated in the sense of a normative understanding of politics. Shifting one’s own responsibility to a body that is empirically prone to dysfunctionality, such as the Security Council, cannot be the concern of political ethics.

In other words, just because a relevant conflict situation prompts the UN Security Council to pass or refuse a UN resolution that would legitimise a military intervention under international law does not answer or even raise the moral question of war and peace. This was recently demonstrated again in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, when, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022, the UN Security Council remained inactive due to permanent member Russia’s veto power. On 2 March 2022, the 11th emergency special session of the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution ES-11/1, which condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and demanded a full withdrawal of Russian forces and the reversal of the decision to recognise the People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. However, it did not result in a peacekeeping operation legitimised by international law. The moral question raised by the resolution is all the more pressing: Without a (legally or morally secured) unequivocal commitment to support Ukraine, all members of the UN are called upon by Resolution ES-11/1 to answer the ethical question of whether to participate in the war or not for themselves. The moral uncertainty regarding the pros and cons of

intervening in a war means that, from an ethical point of view, the states and political players involved can legitimately arrive at different opinions, either by emphasising Ukraine's right to self-determination and the plight of the Ukrainian civilian population, or by fearing a (nuclear) escalation of the war and preferring not to interfere.

Moreover, recalling Kant's position outlined in the previous section, it can be said that in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, Putin's government's behaviour is strongly reminiscent of the “unjust enemy” in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. By not recognising Ukraine's state sovereignty, the Russian government goes beyond the specific conflict and, as quoted above, undermines the conditions of peace among nations as well as the further progress of international law as such. On the basis of Kant's arguments, other states' solidary intervention in favour of Ukraine, be it through arms deliveries, logistical and financial support, or active military forces, could therefore be justified.

Kant's statements on war and peace are not blind to practical difficulties. For this reason, he accepts military measures, at least temporarily, in cases where the desired global legal and peaceful order is not yet functioning, especially when the sovereignty or monopoly of force of a state has been destroyed. Nevertheless, Kant unambiguously adheres to the ideal of a genuine, ambitious peace as a regulative idea of international relations, which must be gradually approached. For the theory of just peace, this means that in all situations where (state, international, and global) law is suspended, the option of waging war cannot be strictly denied on moral or legal grounds, but remains a political option (Brown, 2013). However, this does not imply that war becomes a means of enforcing law or justice. At best, it represents an emergency solution that leads to lesser evils than refraining from military intervention. Apart from that, theorising about just war is problematic in itself, as it suggests that there are answers to unsolvable ethical dilemmas (Brown, 2017).

This leads to the third and final advantage of the enduring moral uncertainty of war and the corresponding ideal of just peace: Instead of seeing war as a solution to systematic human rights violations, geopolitical aggression, etc., and easily getting caught up in a spiral of violence and counter-violence, the focus is shifted away from the underlying conflict and onto a situation beyond it. This makes it possible, at least in theory, to abandon the logic of revanchism and instead approach a new beginning which hardly seems realistic in the violent, war-torn present. Nevertheless, this is precisely what all empirically successful peace negotiations show in practice: that former enemy parties can find a common peace, even if no one thought this to be possible before. In retrospect, solutions suddenly emerge that seemed unattainable during the conflict itself. This makes it all the more important to think about a political conflict from the end backwards, using the ideal of just peace, instead of using the concept of just war, which loses sight of that end.

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ARTICLE

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Authoritarianism and the Psychology of War: Exploring Personality Traits in the Legitimation of Military Conflict

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between authoritarianism, masculinity-related violence, and generalized war support, drawing upon a population survey conducted in the UK in 2023. The analysis focuses on how authoritarian submission, radicalization, political ideology, and particularly norms of masculinity influence attitudes towards military conflict. Emphasizing the significant role of masculinity-related violence, the research highlights how this factor robustly predicts support for war, underlining the gendered nature of militaristic attitudes and the profound impact of aggressive gender norms on support for military engagements. The findings reveal that authoritarian submission is strongly associated with war support, consistent both with Adorno et al.'s (1950) theory of the authoritarian personality and with psychosocial perspectives which draw on Klein's object relations theory (Dawson, 1994). This study expands upon traditional views by integrating the psychological dimension of sadism as an influential factor in militaristic attitudes. Although not the primary focus, sadism emerges as a nuanced trait that complements aggressive masculinity in predicting war support. Radical political ideologies and right-leaning political alignments also significantly predict increased support for war, underscoring the alignment between conservative ideologies and militaristic attitudes. The study nuances the impact of age and gender, highlighting that men and older individuals are more likely to support war, mediated through these identified psychological and ideological factors. By exploring these complex relationships, the study contributes towards understanding the factors that drive public support for military actions, suggesting that both gender norms and personality traits like sadism play crucial roles in shaping militaristic attitudes.

Keywords

authoritarianism; gender norms; generalized war support; masculinity-related violence; political ideology; psychological predictors of war; radicalization; sadism; social dominance orientation

1. Introduction

In a world increasingly marked by violent conflicts and their escalations, understanding the psychological foundations that underpin the legitimization of war is crucial. Current events, such as the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the recurrent violent confrontations in Gaza, pose significant challenges to the international community. These conflicts are often portrayed as inevitable responses to external threats or national interests, but may actually reflect a more intricate picture where the legitimization of war is a complex process shaped by the interplay of international dynamics, societal relations, cultural narratives, and individual psychological dispositions (Hochschild, 2016).

The role of leaders like Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, groups such as Hamas, and the actions of individual soldiers who commit atrocities all hint at deeper psychological patterns and societal values. Public attitudes towards war, shaped by conspiracy ideologies and exposure to acts of cruelty, further complicate the landscape of decision-making to engage in and continue military conflict. It becomes evident that the decisions leading to war are not merely the effect of the actions or thoughts of a single actor but are deeply embedded in the collective thinking patterns and attitudes of sections of the population (Dawson, 1994; Navot & Goldshmidt, 2025).

While much of the existing literature on war focuses on strategic interests, historical grievances, and geopolitical power struggles, comparatively less attention has been given to the psychological and ideological underpinnings of war support within populations. However, recent research on authoritarianism, social dominance, and rigid masculinity norms suggests that these individual-level dispositions play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward military aggression. Importantly, while attitudes toward war are not equivalent to direct violent behavior, psychological research consistently shows that attitudes influence decision-making, shape political preferences, and can serve as a precursor to action. Understanding the psychological foundations of war support is therefore essential, as widespread militaristic attitudes can create a social climate in which war is more easily justified, accepted, or even demanded.

This article will explore the intricate relationship between individual psychological traits and attitudes towards war. Situated within the tradition of authoritarianism research, we draw on a quantitative survey conducted in the UK, analyzing how authoritarian tendencies and dark personality traits like psychopathy correlate with the endorsement of military actions. Our study is based on survey data, allowing us to systematically assess the extent to which these psychological and ideological orientations predict war support in a democratic society.

Beyond traditional authoritarianism frameworks, we also investigate the role of masculinity-related violence and hierarchical dominance orientations in shaping war support. Specifically, we analyze whether rigid gender norms, social dominance orientation (SDO), and radicalization tendencies contribute independently to militaristic attitudes. Furthermore, we examine the extent to which personality traits such as sadism play a role in legitimizing aggression, potentially extending our understanding of how psychological structures interact with ideological worldviews to justify war.

By integrating these dimensions into a single analytical model, our study provides a systematic, data-driven examination of the psychological factors underpinning war support. Given that our research is based on a large-scale quantitative analysis of survey data, we offer an empirical test of theoretical assumptions that have

often been discussed in qualitative and historical studies but rarely examined with statistical rigor. Importantly, our focus on the UK context highlights that such hierarchical and militaristic worldviews are not confined to autocratic regimes but can also persist in democratic societies. While we hold that other elements are also vital to understanding war support, for example, the circulation of cultural narratives in a society and its subcultures (Hochschild, 2016; Sawicka, 2024), we contend that understanding these dynamics is not only key to explaining contemporary conflicts but also to identifying societal vulnerabilities that could make future conflicts more likely.

The findings may offer policy-relevant insights for democratic societies, particularly in the context of civic education and conflict prevention. By highlighting psychological and ideological dispositions that correlate with public support for war, the study draws attention to often overlooked factors in current approaches to encountering military conflict. Recognizing these latent structures could inform strategies aimed at reducing societal susceptibility to militaristic narratives.

2. State of the Art

Research has consistently shown that psychological dispositions such as authoritarianism and SDO significantly impact attitudes towards conflict and warfare. Studies like those by McFarland (2005) and Blumberg et al. (2017) highlight how these traits predict support for aggressive policies, influenced by heightened threat perceptions and diminished humanitarian concerns. Similarly, Gulevich and Nevruiev (2020) and Gulevich et al. (2023) find that dark personality traits predict strong support for military actions, including violence against civilians.

Lindén et al. (2019) extend this discussion by exploring the role of a latent core of dark traits—comprising Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, SDO, and right-wing authoritarianism—in predicting unethical attitudes and behaviors among peacekeepers. Their findings reveal that this dark core is significantly associated with positive attitudes toward unethical behaviors both within the warzone and within the military organization itself. This relationship underscores the impact of malevolent personality traits on military ethics, suggesting that identifying high-scoring individuals on these traits could help mitigate unethical behaviors in military contexts. Conversely, empathy and prosocial orientations significantly influence attitudes towards peace. Research by Bizumic et al. (2013), Eryilmaz (2014), and Için (2022) shows that higher levels of empathy and prosocial personality traits are linked with a stronger preference for peace and less support for war, highlighting the beneficial impacts of these traits on fostering peace-oriented attitudes.

The impact of personality on foreign policy attitudes is further evidenced in studies by Schoen (2007) and Zhai (2024), which discuss how individual and collective psychological factors such as the big five personality traits, populism, and collective narcissism shape preferences for international cooperation or military engagement.

Finally, ideological and belief systems are crucial in influencing militaristic attitudes. Research by Van Hiel et al. (2020) and Wollast et al. (2024) explores how right-wing ideological attitudes and collective narcissism contribute to aggressive tendencies and support for military actions, emphasizing the role of sociopolitical beliefs in shaping attitudes toward war and peace.

Cultural and national identity also play pivotal roles in shaping war legitimization. Studies by Barnes et al. (2014) and Li et al. (2022) demonstrate how national identity elements like honor and attachment influence responses to national threats and conflict resolution strategies, with strong national identification leading to both defensive and offensive military strategies.

3. Authoritarianism and Related Concepts for Explaining Support for War

This article contributes to the literature by integrating psychological dispositions (e.g., dark traits and empathy), ideological attitudes (e.g., authoritarian submission and social dominance), and authoritarian gender norms—particularly masculinity-related violence—into a unified explanatory model. We aim to assess their relative influence on support for war in a democratic context and to examine how these factors interact. Rather than viewing war support solely through the lens of rational decision-making or geopolitical interests, we emphasize the psychological and ideological mechanisms that shape individuals' attitudes toward military conflict. These include authoritarian tendencies, SDO, conspiracy mentality, dark personality traits, and rigid masculinity norms. The following sections outline the theoretical foundations of our model, which guide the operationalization of constructs and structure our empirical approach. Rather than viewing war support solely through the lens of rational decision-making or geopolitical interests, we emphasize the psychological and ideological mechanisms that drive individuals' attitudes toward military conflict. These perspectives help us understand how deep-seated dispositions—such as authoritarian tendencies, SDO, conspiracy mentality, and dark personality traits—contribute to the justification of war. By systematically integrating these theoretical insights, we establish a clear basis for the operationalization of key constructs in our analysis, ensuring that our empirical approach remains closely aligned with the theoretical foundations.

Public discussions about the causes of war often focus on the reasons cited by the warring parties themselves—historical grievances, geopolitical tensions, cultural or religious differences, and struggles over resources like oil or water. These explanations usually appear rational and serve to legitimize warlike actions, making conflict resolution more difficult since no side sees itself as wrong. Less frequently discussed are the individual or psychological causes of war, such as patterns of thought or character traits that make violence acceptable or even appealing. Rarely do we ask why individuals come to see others as enemies, or how people can accept mass death—or even commit atrocities with enthusiasm—against former neighbors or friends. It's often said that anyone can become a killer under the right conditions. Books like *Lord of the Flies* and Milgram's famous experiment suggest that cruelty can emerge when social constraints break down or authority demands it. But is everyone equally prone to such behavior? Or are certain individuals, due to specific psychological structures, more inclined to support or engage in violence, and when such people gain political power, do they pose a greater threat to humanity's survival?

This latter statement is central to the theory of the authoritarian personality, which focuses on the contemptible character (Adorno et al., 1950; Horkheimer, 1936; Reich, 1933). The theory draws on Freud's concept of the "narcissism of small differences," which describes how neighboring or otherwise similar communities often project aggression onto minor symbolic distinctions in order to stabilize internal cohesion (Freud, 1930). In this framework, displaced hostility toward outgroups becomes a socially functional—albeit destructive—mechanism for identity formation and control.

Building on the concept of the narcissism of small differences, the theory of the authoritarian personality links authoritarianism with anti-democratic views, prejudice, and discrimination. It also explores forms of religiosity that can either support or inhibit fascist, ethnocentric, and anti-Semitic attitudes (Adorno et al., 1950). These attitudes are considered prerequisites for war. The resulting fascism scale measures hostility and cynicism, exemplified by the belief: “There will always be wars and conflicts, people are just like that” (Adorno, 1999, p. 43). Unlike Freud, who emphasized individual psychological issues, Adorno et al. (1950) argued that unconscious childhood conflicts also foster fascist and ethnocentric attitudes. Hatred toward parental authority, suppressed in childhood, is later displaced onto marginalized or weaker groups (Rippl et al., 2000).

The authoritarian personality includes traits such as power orientation, sadomasochism, aggression toward the weak, punishment desires, intellectual hostility, and moral dualism. Described as “ego-weak,” such individuals use projection and scapegoating to stabilize their self-esteem. They also tend to identify with authoritarian leaders, submitting while also deriving strength from them. Research consistently confirms a strong link between authoritarian character structures, fascist ideology, anti-Semitism, and support for war (Bothwell & Kennison, 2004; Crowson et al., 2005; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; Swami et al., 2012).

Researchers on authoritarianism during and after the Nazi era traced the roots of the authoritarian personality to the Weimar-era educational ideals, marked by physical punishment and emotional distance from a dominant father figure. Rather than rebelling against their parents, individuals direct aggression toward strangers and others perceived as weaker (Rippl et al., 2000). Recent studies on youth violence support this view, identifying links between emotional neglect, harsh punishment, overprotection, and controlling parenting with the development of narcissistic, Machiavellian, and psychopathic traits—factors that increase readiness for violence (Yendell et al., 2022). These traits often stem from detrimental parenting practices.

A less-cited but significant contribution is Henry Dicks’ (1972) *Licensed Mass Murder: A Socio-Psychological Study of Some SS Killers*, which found that many Waffen-SS members exhibited narcissistic and paranoid personality disorders. Yet, Dicks emphasized that personality alone wasn’t to blame. It was the societal crisis of the Weimar Republic and the totalitarian conditions under Nazism that triggered regressive, antisocial behavior in otherwise seemingly normal individuals. He argued that a combination of mass regression and severe personality disorders led to SS atrocities. While this study is foundational in authoritarianism research, it is more widely cited in the Anglo-American world.

Another perspective comes from the concept of conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Decker, 2013), which Decker et al. (2020) describe as part of an authoritarian syndrome, specifically its “projectivity” dimension. This mentality assumes that secretive, malevolent elites control society. It simplifies complex societal problems, allowing authoritarian aggression toward identifiable out-groups (Decker et al., 2018). Notably, conspiracy beliefs do not protect a weak ego but reshape reality to fit personal desires. This mindset is linked with democratic dissatisfaction, right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, far-right voting, religious fundamentalism, and belief in a punitive God, revealing structural parallels with authoritarianism.

An important aspect related to the war in Ukraine is the link between male sexuality and violence. This aligns with Klaus Theweleit’s (2019) *Male Fantasies*, a psychoanalytic classic in authoritarianism research. Originally

published in the 1970s, the two-volume work analyzes the psychological and social dynamics of the Weimar Republic, especially after World War I. Theweleit focuses on radical right-wing paramilitary groups like the Freikorps, examining their letters and memoirs to explore how masculinity, violence, misogyny, and political extremism were intertwined.

A central concept is the “male body,” which Theweleit presents as shaped by violence and control—an instrument of domination used to defeat perceived enemies and impose political visions. His analysis shows how fantasies of masculinity are tied to authoritarian ideologies and structures of power.

Other psychodynamic work also links masculinity with support for war. In the British context, Graham Dawson’s (1994) *Soldier Heroes* draws on Melanie Klein’s object relations theory to show how cultural narratives of heroism deal with colonial guilt through the projection of violence onto colonial subjects and foreign “others.” This framework remains relevant today (Redman, 2024), suggesting that masculinity and militarism are deeply embedded in national imaginaries.

Another influential concept in extremism and prejudice research closely tied to the authoritarian personality theory is SDO. It measures individual support for group-based hierarchies and social inequality (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDO reflects a preference for unequal, hierarchical relations between social groups and varies across individuals (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 61). It stems from social dominance theory, which posits that stable societies maintain group-based hierarchies benefiting dominant groups. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) distinguish three systems of hierarchy: age (adults over children), gender (men over women), and arbitrarily set groups (culturally defined).

SDO has consistently shown high explanatory power for prejudice and political attitudes aimed at reinforcing social hierarchies (e.g., Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009; Dru, 2007; Newman et al., 2014; Uenal, 2016). It is also linked to support for political violence and the dehumanization of victims (Henry et al., 2005; Jackson & Gaertner, 2010; McFarland, 2005; Pratto et al., 1994).

To operationalize our theoretical framework, we include several specific indicators that reflect the constructs outlined. In addition to essential socio-demographic variables and political attitude, these factors help control for structural influences on generalized war support. Political ideology (left–right orientation) is particularly relevant, as previous research consistently links right-wing political orientations to stronger support for military interventions.

Beyond foundational controls, generalized war support refers to individuals’ broad approval of military action, endorsement of military values, and belief in war as a justified conflict resolution tool. This construct integrates elements of the authoritarian syndrome, where hierarchical worldviews, punitive attitudes, and emotional tendencies legitimize military aggression:

- Childhood maltreatment and emotional support reflect early socialization, shaping views on hierarchy and aggression. Narratives justifying war often draw on childhood experiences of discipline and lack of warmth. In contrast, greater emotional support in childhood may reduce authoritarian, militaristic attitudes.

- Support for violence and radicalization directly measures acceptance of aggression as legitimate, crucial to war support. Those endorsing violence or radical change are more likely to legitimize military interventions. Militarism also links closely with hyper-masculine norms valorizing strength, dominance, and force.
- SDO reflects a preference for group-based hierarchies, often framing conflicts as battles between “superior” and “inferior” groups. High SDO predicts seeing war as necessary to maintain or expand dominance.
- Conspiracy mentality often fuels authoritarian aggression, framing war as a defense against hidden threats. Those high in conspiracy beliefs are more susceptible to pro-war propaganda stressing existential dangers.
- Building on Adorno et al. (1950) and Altemeyer (1981, 1996), we examine authoritarian aggression (punitive war justification), submission (deference to military authority), and conventionalism (support through nationalism/traditionalism). This tripartite model offers clearer measurement than the original fascism scale.
- Dark tetrad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism) also shape war support. Psychopathy and sadism reflect detachment and acceptance of harm, while narcissism and Machiavellianism link to nationalistic or dominance motives.
- Empathy functions as a counterforce, correlating with peace-oriented attitudes. Empathy disrupts dehumanization processes central to war propaganda, reducing support for aggression.

Our hierarchical regression framework combines these factors, offering a theoretically grounded and empirically robust method for identifying psychological and ideological drivers of war support in democratic contexts. We do not aim to diagnose individuals but to explain statistical variance in war support, recognizing this as one perspective among many for understanding militaristic attitudes.

Our approach focuses on psychological and ideological dispositions within a general population sample. We do not make any clinical or diagnostic claims, nor do we aim to establish a fixed psychological profile of individuals prone to violence. Rather, we examine to what extent specific attitudinal and personality-related factors statistically explain variance in support for war, acknowledging that this represents only one perspective among several possible approaches to understanding militaristic attitudes.

4. Method and Measures

4.1. Sample and Survey

The survey, entitled Political Attitudes, Violence, and Extremism in the UK (PAVEX-UK 2023), was conducted between February and March 2023 among a sample of 1,009 respondents in the UK, aged 15 to 74 years. The sample included 53.9% women and 46.1% men, ensuring a balanced gender distribution. In terms of educational background, 47.7% had a low level of education, 32.7% a middle level, and 19.6% a high level, based on official statistical classifications. The data were collected through an online access panel provided by Bilendi, with quotas set for age, gender, and education to achieve a representative sample of the UK population. Participants are pre-registered panel members who take part voluntarily and receive incentives for their participation.

Additionally, the survey covered a broad range of topics beyond war support, including political attitudes, ideological orientations, and personality traits. The wording of both the dependent and independent variables used in this study can be found in the Supplementary File.

4.2. Factor Analysis of War-Related Attitudes and the Dependent Variable

To investigate the underlying structure of attitudes toward war, we conducted a principal axis factor analysis with oblimin rotation on a set of statements regarding war and military conflict. The survey included various items measuring different aspects of war support, ranging from general attitudes toward war as a means of conflict resolution to opinions on military values, nuclear deterrence, and the ethical justification of war. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with statements such as “I believe that war is necessary to resolve conflicts,” “war can be ethically justified to protect freedom and human rights,” “in my opinion, nuclear weapons are useful for securing peace,” “I think arms deliveries to Ukraine are morally justified,” and “the UK should spend less money on armaments.”

Before conducting the factor analysis, we examined the response distributions for all included items. The results indicate that attitudes toward war and military action vary considerably. While 67.8% of respondents believe that war is inevitable, only 19.1% agree that war is necessary to resolve conflicts. At the same time, 66.1% stated that they would never support a war, while 58% sympathized with military values. The endorsement of specific military actions also differed; 68.7% supported arms deliveries to Ukraine, but only 37.5% believed that nuclear weapons are useful for securing peace. These distributions highlight a complex attitudinal landscape in which some aspects of war support are widely accepted while others remain highly contested (Figure 1).

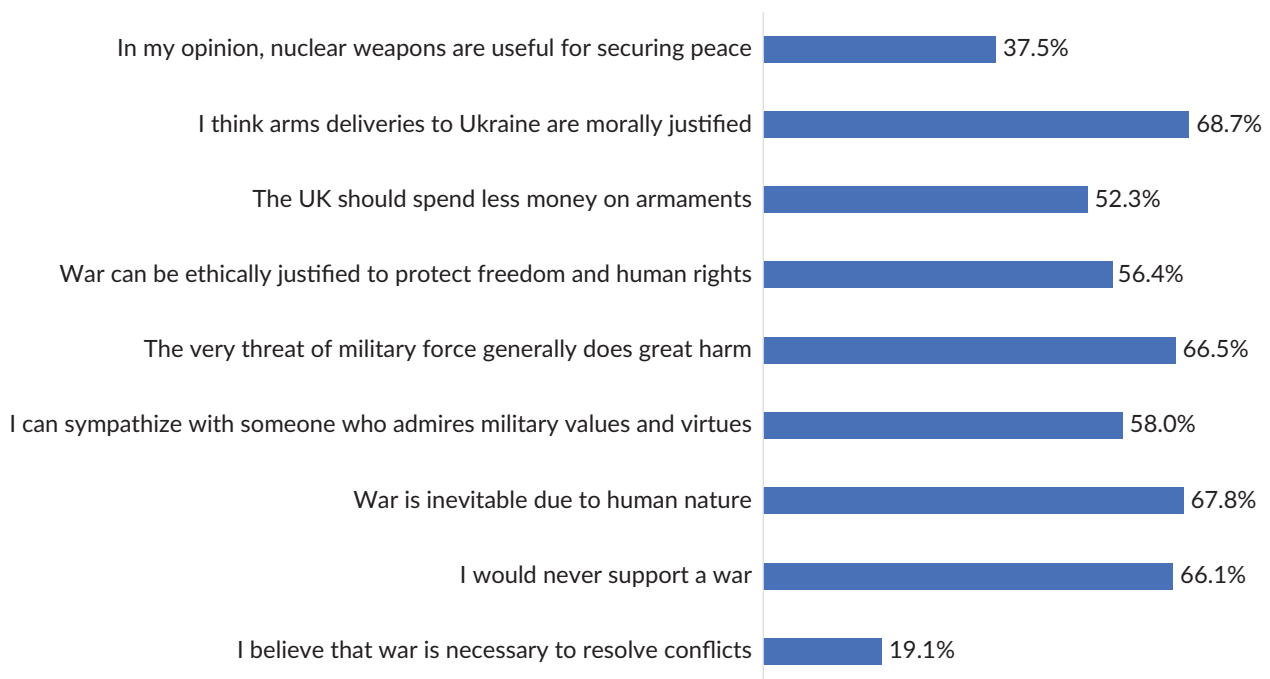


Figure 1. Agreement with statements on war, military force, and armament. Source: PAVEX-UK 2023; own calculations based on survey data, $n = 1,009$.

To extract a latent construct that captures the underlying structure of these attitudes, we conducted a principal axis factor analysis rather than a principal component analysis. This choice was made because factor analysis identifies shared variance between variables, rather than simply summarizing observed item responses. Given that war-related attitudes are likely influenced by deeper ideological and psychological dispositions, a factor-based approach allows for a more precise identification of a latent militaristic orientation. The use of oblimin rotation was justified because it allows factors to correlate, which aligns with theoretical expectations that different components of war-related attitudes may be interconnected rather than strictly independent.

Our initial assumption was that war-related attitudes would be multidimensional, potentially distinguishing between a general militaristic orientation, which reflects an endorsement of military values, and situational war justification, which involves the approval of specific conflicts under particular conditions. This assumption was based on prior research suggesting that militarism and support for specific wars may have distinct psychological foundations. However, the factor analysis revealed a single dominant factor, contradicting this expectation. Items that did not reach a loading threshold of 0.5 were excluded from the final model. The retained items all loaded strongly onto a single factor, which suggests that attitudes toward war and military values coalesce into a unified construct, rather than dividing into distinct ideological dimensions.

The final extracted factor includes agreement with statements such as “I believe that war is necessary to resolve conflicts” (loading = 0.639), “war can be ethically justified to protect freedom and human rights” (loading = 0.638), “in my opinion, nuclear weapons are useful for securing peace” (loading = 0.631), and “I can sympathize with someone who admires military values and virtues” (loading = 0.516). The inclusion of sympathy for military values, despite having a comparatively lower loading, remains justified as it exceeds the 0.5 threshold and conceptually aligns with the overarching construct of generalized war support.. Notably, some theoretically expected items, such as the perceived inevitability of war, rejection of war, military expenditure, and support for arms deliveries, did not form part of the extracted factor. Their lower loadings suggest that they do not tap into a single latent construct but rather measure context-dependent beliefs that may be shaped by external events, moral considerations, or political framing rather than stable ideological orientations.

Given these findings, we constructed an index variable based on the regression scores derived from the factor analysis. This index represents the construct we refer to as generalized war support, which integrates both the endorsement of military values and the justification of war in different contexts. This factor-based score serves as the dependent variable in the subsequent regression analyses, allowing us to examine its psychological and ideological predictors.

While it could theoretically be interesting to analyze some of the excluded items separately, conducting multiple regressions on individual items would introduce several methodological problems. First, it would theoretically fragment the analysis, as isolated items lack the coherence of an overarching latent construct. Second, it would increase the risk of overinterpretation, since individual responses are more susceptible to temporary external influences compared to latent ideological orientations. Finally, it would compromise structural validity, as factor analysis identified only one coherent dimension, making it methodologically inconsistent to treat the excluded items as if they represented distinct psychological constructs.

Rather than conducting separate regressions on individual war-related items, our approach ensures greater coherence in capturing generalized war support, a construct that reflects both the endorsement of military values and the justification of war in different contexts. By focusing on this unified measure, the subsequent regression analyses allow for a more theoretically meaningful and statistically robust examination of the psychological and ideological determinants of war support.

4.3. Assessing the Predictors of Generalized War Support

To test our theoretical assumptions, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis using data from a representative general population survey. The analysis includes socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, and political orientation) as well as a series of validated indices capturing psychological dispositions (e.g., sadism and empathy), ideological orientations (e.g., authoritarian submission, conspiracy mentality, and social dominance), and gender-related norms (e.g., masculinity-related violence). These indicators were introduced stepwise to evaluate their relative contribution to explaining generalized war support. Details on the operationalization, scale construction, and reliability are provided in the following sections and in the Supplementary File. Rather than assuming a deterministic pathway from childhood experiences to war support, we employ hierarchical multiple regression analysis to assess which factors exert independent effects on generalized war support and how their relative explanatory power shifts when additional variables are introduced.

Childhood maltreatment and emotional support capture early socialization into authoritarian structures, which may predispose individuals to hierarchical and punitive worldviews. If childhood maltreatment significantly predicts war support, this suggests that early adversity fosters authoritarian dispositions. However, this does not imply a deterministic pathway—many individuals with difficult childhoods do not develop authoritarian attitudes. By including childhood experiences in the first step of the regression model, we can test whether their predictive power remains robust when ideological and personality factors are added. If their effect size decreases, this may indicate that ideological worldviews account for part of the variance originally explained by childhood experiences, though no direct causal mechanism can be inferred.

Support for violence and radicalization measures the general acceptance of aggressive strategies, both in interpersonal contexts and as a means of political change. If these factors remain significant even after controlling for ideological and personality traits, this suggests that support for war is not purely driven by abstract beliefs but also by a deeper disposition toward aggression.

SDO, as a measure of intergroup hierarchy preferences, allows us to test whether generalized war support is primarily a function of hierarchical worldviews rather than specific ideological stances. If the effect of SDO persists even after accounting for authoritarian personality traits, this would indicate that beliefs about social hierarchy operate as a distinct explanatory factor in war legitimization.

Conspiracy mentality plays a role in war support by fostering perceptions of external threats and hidden manipulations. We expect conspiracy beliefs to correlate positively with generalized war support. However, if this effect weakens or reverses when authoritarian submission is introduced, this would suggest that conspiratorial thinking primarily serves as a cognitive reinforcement mechanism within authoritarian structures rather than an independent driver of militarism.

Authoritarian aggression, submission, and conventionalism capture the cognitive and emotional architecture of authoritarianism, which provides a direct ideological foundation for generalized war support. If these variables explain a substantial portion of variance when introduced, this suggests that hierarchical and punitive worldviews are central to war legitimization—potentially even more so than childhood adversity or general support for violence.

Dark tetrad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism) allow us to assess whether personality factors contribute to war support beyond ideological frameworks. If, for example, sadism remains significant even after controlling for authoritarian beliefs, this suggests that the justification of war is not only a function of ideology but also of individual-level emotional dispositions toward cruelty and domination.

Empathy and understanding serve as a counterbalance to authoritarian dispositions and function as a potential protective factor. If its effect is weak in early regression stages but strengthens once ideological and personality traits are introduced, this would indicate that empathy does not directly prevent war support but serves as a mitigating force when authoritarian cognitive patterns are activated.

Our hierarchical multiple regression approach allows us to systematically assess which explanatory factors remain significant when additional theoretical dimensions are introduced. Rather than testing direct causal sequences, this method provides insights into the relative explanatory power of different predictors and whether some variables account for variance initially attributed to others. If early-life experiences initially appear to be strong predictors of war support but their effects weaken when ideological and personality-level factors are introduced, this suggests that authoritarian attitudes might mediate part of this relationship, though formal mediation analyses would be required to confirm this. Similarly, if masculinity-related violence remains a strong predictor despite the inclusion of ideological variables, this would indicate that gender norms operate independently as a structuring force in war support rather than being fully explained by authoritarian dispositions.

This multi-level approach not only clarifies the psychological mechanisms behind war legitimization but also reveals the relative explanatory power of different dimensions—ranging from early socialization to personality traits and ideological structures. With this selection of indicators and its specific focus, this study provides a novel empirical contribution by systematically integrating a wide range of psychological, ideological, and personality-based predictors of generalized war support. While previous research has examined authoritarianism, social dominance, or conspiracy beliefs in isolation, our approach combines these factors within a single analytical framework, allowing us to determine which of these dimensions exerts the strongest influence and how they interact.

By employing a hierarchical regression strategy, we go beyond simple correlations to test how the explanatory power of different variables shifts as new levels of analysis are introduced. This method allows us to assess whether certain factors retain their predictive power when additional theoretical perspectives are considered, or whether their influence is better explained by higher-order ideological or personality-based constructs. By explicitly integrating militarized masculinity into the authoritarianism framework, this study extends Theweleit's (2019) conceptualization of gendered authoritarianism and tests empirically whether rigid masculinity norms function independently from other authoritarian structures or

are mediated by broader hierarchical worldviews. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how gendered socialization processes shape militaristic attitudes beyond conventional ideological and personality-driven explanations.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on political psychology and conflict research by providing a comprehensive, multi-level explanation for militaristic attitudes. The findings have implications not only for understanding war legitimization in democratic societies but also for identifying psychological and ideological precursors of radicalization, authoritarianism, and support for military aggression.

5. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of War Support

To systematically assess the predictors of generalized war support, we employed a hierarchical regression analysis. In this approach, variables were introduced stepwise to examine their incremental contribution to explaining the dependent variable. Below, we describe the independent variables included in the models, grouped according to their conceptual domain, and provide a brief overview of their measurement. Detailed information on item wording, index construction, and reliability coefficients can be found in the Supplementary File.

We begin with sociodemographic variables, including age ($M = 46.01$), gender (men and women), and highest qualification (low, middle, and high educational attainment). These control variables account for potential baseline differences in war support and ensure that observed effects are not merely demographic artifacts.

To capture political ideology, we include self-placement on a left–right scale ($M = 5.56$), where higher values indicate more right-leaning attitudes. Given prior research linking right-wing ideology to militarism, we expect this variable to be a key predictor of war support.

We further integrate early-life experiences, which may shape attitudes toward aggression and hierarchy. Childhood maltreatment ($M = 1.9$, $\alpha = 0.813$) is measured using an index of three items assessing emotional and physical abuse (e.g., “people in my family said hurtful or insulting things to me” and “I was hit so badly that I had bruises or scratches”). In contrast, emotional support ($M = 3.9$, $\alpha = 0.910$) captures the extent to which respondents experienced a protective and caring upbringing (see Bernstein & Fink, 1998). These variables help examine whether adverse childhood conditions contribute to authoritarian and aggressive tendencies, which in turn might facilitate war support.

To assess aggressive and violent attitudes, we include three indices. Support of violence ($M = 1.7$, $\alpha = 0.652$) consists of two items capturing willingness to use physical force to achieve personal goals or support violent individuals (Ulbrich-Herrmann, 1995); radicalization ($M = 1.7$, $\alpha = 0.796$) measures justification for violence and lawbreaking as means for achieving societal change (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018); and masculinity-related violence ($M = 1.7$, $\alpha = 0.725$) consists of three items reflecting traditional masculine norms endorsing violence (e.g., “a man should be prepared to use violence to defend his wife and children”). These constructs allow us to determine whether war support is rooted in broader dispositions toward interpersonal and political aggression.

Several ideological and belief-based factors are included, as they provide insight into hierarchical worldviews and cognitive styles that may influence militaristic attitudes. SDO ($M = 2.6$, $\alpha = 0.762$) is measured through

an index reflecting preferences for hierarchical social structures, with higher values indicating endorsement of inequality and group-based dominance. Conspiracy mentality ($M = 4.3$, $\alpha = 0.885$) is assessed through a three-item index capturing generalized belief in hidden, malevolent forces shaping societal and political events (Imhoff & Decker, 2013). Both constructs have been linked to authoritarian and extremist attitudes, suggesting that individuals high in these traits may be more inclined toward war support.

To account for right-wing authoritarianism, we include three core dimensions: authoritarian aggression ($M = 3.8$), which reflects punitive attitudes toward societal deviants, authoritarian submission ($M = 2.9$), measuring deference to authority figures, and authoritarian conventionalism ($M = 2.9$), which assesses adherence to traditional social norms (Beierlein et al., 2015). These dimensions have been widely associated with militaristic attitudes and legitimization of state-led violence.

In the final steps of the regression analysis, we introduce personality traits associated with the “dark” psychological profile. Four well-established constructs are considered: narcissism ($M = 2.5$, $\alpha = 0.898$), Machiavellianism ($M = 2.0$, $\alpha = 0.906$), psychopathy ($M = 2.2$, $\alpha = 0.902$; Jonason & Webster, 2010), and sadism ($M = 1.3$, $\alpha = 0.902$; O’Meara Davies et al., 2011). These indices, each based on multiple items, measure manipulative tendencies, emotional detachment, and the enjoyment of harming others—traits that have been linked to aggression and justification of violence. Additionally, empathy and understanding ($M = 3.9$, $\alpha = 0.843$) are included as a counterbalancing factor, assessing the ability to consider others’ perspectives and emotional states (Davis, 1980).

By structuring the regression analysis hierarchically, we assess the independent effects of each set of predictors while observing how explanatory power evolves across models. This stepwise approach allows us to determine the extent to which psychological and ideological dispositions contribute to generalized war support, ensuring that findings are robust across multiple theoretical domains. For detailed descriptions of the items and scale properties, we refer to the Supplementary File.

The first model (Table 1) included only sociodemographic variables (age, gender, and education). Gender was the only significant predictor ($\beta = -0.292$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that men were significantly more likely to support war than women. Neither age nor education showed a significant effect, and the model explained 8.4% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.084$).

In the second step, we introduced political ideology (left-right self-placement), which emerged as a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals with more right-leaning political views were more likely to support war. The inclusion of this variable increased the model’s explanatory power to $R^2 = 0.155$. However, age and education remained insignificant, while gender continued to be a strong predictor ($\beta = -0.264$, $p < 0.001$).

The third step added childhood maltreatment and emotional support during upbringing. Childhood maltreatment was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.176$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that early-life adversity contributes to later war-supporting attitudes. Emotional support, however, did not reach significance. Interestingly, political ideology remained a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the idea that ideological orientation is a key determinant of war attitudes. With these additions, the explained variance increased to $R^2 = 0.185$.

Table 1. Stepwise regression analysis predicting generalized war support ($N = 1,009$).

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Age	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.111 (***)	.090 (***)	.117 (***)
Gender (0 = men; 1 = women)	-.292 (***)	-.264	-.270 (***)	-.129 (***)	-.119 (***)	-.098 (***)
Highest qualification	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Political attitude (left-right)	—	.269	.250 (***)	.159 (***)	.117 (***)	.100 (***)
Childhood maltreatment	—	—	.176 (***)	.110 (***)	.103 (***)	.064 (*)
Emotional support	—	—	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.056 (*)
Support of violence	—	—	—	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Radicalisation	—	—	—	.188 (***)	.161 (***)	.119 (***)
Masculinity-related violence	—	—	—	.274 (***)	.256 (***)	.244 (***)
Social dominance orientation (SDO)	—	—	—	—	.085 (**)	.060 (*)
Conspiracy mentality	—	—	—	—	-.061 (*)	-.062 (*)
Auth. aggression	—	—	—	—	n.s.	n.s.
Auth. submission	—	—	—	—	.195 (***)	.178 (***)
Auth. conventionalism	—	—	—	—	n.s.	n.s.
Narcissism	—	—	—	—	—	n.s.
Machiavellism	—	—	—	—	—	n.s.
Psychopathy	—	—	—	—	—	.073 (*)
Sadism	—	—	—	—	—	.134 (***)
Empathy and understanding	—	—	—	—	—	n.s.
Corrected R^2	.084	.155	.185	.311	.358	.376
Change R^2	—	.071	.030	.126	.047	.018

Notes: Results from hierarchical regression analysis; the dependent variable is *generalized war support*; values represent standardized regression coefficients (β); significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Source: PAVEX-UK 2023, own calculations based on survey data, $n = 1,009$; n.s. = not significant.

The fourth step incorporated support for violence, radicalization, and masculinity-related violence. Radicalization significantly predicted war support ($\beta = 0.188$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals with extremist tendencies are more likely to favor military interventions. Masculinity-related violence had an even stronger effect ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the theoretical assumption that aggressive masculinity norms are closely linked to support for war. At this stage, age became a significant predictor for the first time ($\beta = 0.111$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that older individuals might not inherently support war, but, when considering their ideological and socialization patterns, their attitudes align more with militaristic views. The model at this stage explained 31.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.311$), marking a considerable improvement.

The fifth step introduced SDO, conspiracy mentality, and the three authoritarianism dimensions (authoritarian aggression, submission, and conventionalism). SDO significantly predicted war support ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.01$), aligning with previous research that hierarchical worldviews are associated with militaristic attitudes. Authoritarian submission also had a strong effect ($\beta = 0.195$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals who show high deference to authority are more likely to support war. However, conspiracy

mentality, which was positively correlated with war support in bivariate analyses, showed a negative effect in the regression model ($\beta = -0.061$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests a suppressor effect—while conspiracy theorists might initially appear more militaristic due to distrust of external forces, when controlling for authoritarian worldviews, their skepticism toward state and military narratives may actually lead them to oppose war. The explained variance increased further to 35.8% ($R^2 = 0.358$).

In the final step of the regression analysis, personality traits—including narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, sadism, and empathy and understanding—were introduced alongside the previously included ideological and socio-psychological predictors. This model accounted for 37.6% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.376$), reflecting a moderate increase from 35.8% in the previous step, confirming that while personality traits contribute to explaining war support, ideological and authoritarian factors remain the strongest drivers.

Among the dark personality traits, psychopathy ($\beta = 0.073$, $p < 0.05$) and sadism ($\beta = 0.134$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as significant predictors. These findings suggest that individuals who exhibit callousness, emotional detachment, and a tendency to derive pleasure from harming others are more likely to support war. The effect of sadism is particularly pronounced, aligning with theories suggesting that aggressive tendencies and dominance motivation play a crucial role in militaristic attitudes. However, narcissism and Machiavellianism were not significant, indicating that support for war is not primarily driven by self-importance or strategic manipulation, but rather by a deeper inclination toward aggression and dominance.

Another notable but small effect is that emotional support ($\beta = 0.056$, $p < 0.05$) emerged as a positive predictor of war support. Although this factor was not significant in earlier models, its appearance at this stage suggests a suppressor effect, as individuals with greater emotional support in childhood show a slightly higher inclination toward militaristic attitudes once other socialization and personality variables are controlled for. However, given its small effect size, this does not override the stronger impact of authoritarian and ideological factors. Conversely, empathy and understanding did not show a significant association with war support ($p > 0.05$), indicating that a general tendency to empathize with others does not necessarily translate into lower war approval once ideological and authoritarian factors are accounted for.

Looking at the key ideological and authoritarian predictors, the final model strongly reinforces the importance of authoritarian submission ($\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.001$), masculinity-related violence ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$), and radicalization ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < 0.001$) as the most robust predictors of war support. These findings confirm that individuals with a tendency to submit to authority figures, those who endorse violent masculinist ideals, and those prone to radicalized thinking are among the most likely to support war.

Additionally, SDO ($\beta = 0.060$, $p < 0.05$) remained a significant predictor, further supporting the idea that individuals who endorse hierarchical and dominance-based worldviews are more likely to justify military aggression. However, the effect size is weaker compared to authoritarianism-related factors, suggesting that group-based dominance motivations play a role but are secondary to authoritarian submission and radicalization.

A particularly unexpected finding is the negative relationship between conspiracy mentality and war support ($\beta = -0.062$, $p < 0.05$), despite its positive bivariate correlation. While descriptive analyses suggested that

individuals with a conspiratorial mindset are more likely to express pro-war attitudes, the multivariate model reveals that once authoritarian and ideological factors are accounted for, this relationship reverses. This suggests that while conspiracy-oriented individuals may support war narratives when framed as a response to external threats, they ultimately reject militarism within a broader ideological stance that often includes skepticism toward state institutions and military interventions.

Finally, age ($\beta = 0.117, p < 0.001$) remains a significant predictor, strengthening from earlier models, indicating that older individuals are more likely to support war once authoritarian, ideological, and personality-related factors are taken into account. Gender remains significant as well ($\beta = -0.119, p < 0.001$), confirming that men continue to show higher levels of war support compared to women.

Overall, the final model underscores the dominance of ideological and authoritarian drivers of war support, with radicalization, masculinity-related violence, and authoritarian submission as the most powerful predictors. While dark personality traits, particularly sadism and psychopathy, provide additional explanatory power, their impact is secondary compared to ideological and authoritarian factors. The unexpected inverse relationship between conspiracy mentality and war support highlights the complexity of how distrust in institutions interacts with militaristic attitudes, and the small buffering effect of emotional support suggests a limited role of early socialization experiences in mitigating war support.

5.1. Key Findings and Interpretation

The results of the regression analysis strongly confirm the theoretical assumptions outlined earlier. Masculinity-related violence, authoritarian submission, radicalization, and political ideology emerge as the most important predictors of support for war. These findings provide strong empirical support for theories linking authoritarianism and gendered violence norms to militaristic attitudes.

Masculinity-related violence was one of the strongest predictors throughout all models ($\beta = 0.244, p < 0.001$), remaining highly significant even after controlling for multiple psychological and ideological variables. This finding supports Theweleit's (2019) and Dawson's (1994) argument that aggressive masculinity and militaristic fantasies are closely linked. In our model, masculinity-related violence is conceptualized as an attitudinal disposition—reflecting beliefs that men should be dominant, assertive, and willing to use force. Individuals who endorse such norms are significantly more likely to support war. Rather than viewing this disposition as entirely separate from cultural or institutional factors, we understand it as part of a broader psychosocial syndrome in which gendered identity constructions and militarized worldviews reinforce each other.

Authoritarian submission ($\beta = 0.178, p < 0.001$) also plays a major role in explaining war support. Individuals who exhibit high deference to authority and embrace hierarchical structures are significantly more inclined to support military action. This supports Adorno et al.'s (1950) theory of the authoritarian personality, which emphasizes the tendency of highly submissive individuals to align with aggressive state policies, including warfare.

Radicalization is another critical factor ($\beta = 0.119, p < 0.001$), with strong and consistent effects throughout the models. People with extremist tendencies—those who endorse radical political or ideological views—are

more likely to support military aggression. This aligns with research linking ideological rigidity and extremist worldviews to belligerent attitudes.

Political ideology (left–right self-placement) remains a stable and significant predictor across all models. Right-leaning individuals consistently show stronger support for war ($\beta = 0.100$, $p < 0.001$), independent of other ideological and psychological factors. This reinforces previous findings that conservative political orientations are associated with more hawkish attitudes and a preference for military interventions.

Interestingly, gender remains highly significant throughout the analysis, even when controlling for psychological, ideological, and social factors. Men show a systematically higher support for war ($\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.001$) than women, underscoring long-standing research on gender differences in aggression, military attitudes, and authoritarianism. Another noteworthy pattern is the emergence of age as a significant predictor from Step 4 onward.

While age was not significant in the earlier models, it became relevant once radicalization, authoritarian submission, and masculinity-related violence were included. In the final model, older individuals showed greater support for war ($\beta = 0.117$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that their war support is mediated through ideological and psychological variables that become more pronounced over time.

Finally, conspiracy mentality, despite showing a positive bivariate correlation with war support, turns negative in the multivariate analysis. In the final model, the effect was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.062$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests a suppressor effect, while conspiracy theorists may generally distrust global institutions and elites (which could make them more susceptible to war support in some contexts), when controlling for authoritarianism and social dominance, their skepticism toward state-led military actions becomes more apparent. This highlights the complexity of ideological structures and the need for careful interpretation of correlations in political psychology.

6. Conclusion: The Role of Authoritarian Psychology in War Support and the Neglected Dimension of Gender

This study has demonstrated that support for war as an attitude is deeply embedded in a complex interplay of psychological dispositions, ideological orientations, and personality traits. Our hierarchical regression model explained 37.6% of the variance in generalized war support ($R^2 = 0.376$), providing substantial empirical support for the idea that individual psychological and ideological orientations significantly shape how individuals evaluate and justify military aggression.

Among the strongest predictors, we identified authoritarian submission, SDO, and radicalization as central explanatory factors. These findings reinforce established theories on the psychological underpinnings of authoritarianism and militarism, confirming that individuals who favor hierarchical structures, deference to authority, and ideological rigidity are more likely to hold pro-military attitudes and see war as a necessary means of conflict resolution. Importantly, our results show that political attitude (left–right orientation) remains an independent predictor of war support, even when authoritarian dispositions and social dominance preferences are accounted for. This suggests that beyond personality-based predispositions, political ideology continues to play a crucial role in shaping militaristic attitudes.

A particularly striking result of this study is the independent role of masculinity-related violence, which emerges as a strong and significant predictor even after controlling for authoritarian submission and SDO. While previous research has focused primarily on authoritarianism as an ideological structure, our findings highlight that rigid masculinity norms operate as a distinct and influential factor, not merely as a byproduct of broader authoritarian worldviews. This supports Theweleit's (2019) expansion of authoritarian personality theory, which emphasizes the role of militarized masculinity in shaping authoritarian and violent dispositions.

The strong predictive power of sadism further underscores the importance of individual-level personality dispositions in the justification of military aggression. Unlike other personality traits within the dark tetrad, sadism is characterized by the active enjoyment of cruelty and harm, making it a uniquely relevant factor in understanding why some individuals show greater acceptance of war as a legitimate means of conflict resolution. However, it is crucial to emphasize that this study does not measure actual behavior, but rather the underlying attitudes and psychological structures that contribute to war support.

In addition, authoritarian submission plays a notable role in shaping militaristic attitudes, reinforcing the idea that deference to authority figures and hierarchical power structures is an essential psychological mechanism in war support. Individuals who exhibit strong authoritarian submission tendencies are more likely to trust government narratives on military action, accept security-driven restrictions, and defer moral judgments to perceived strong leaders. Similarly, radicalization emerges as a key factor, indicating that support for war is linked not only to authoritarian tendencies but also to an underlying willingness to embrace extreme, unlawful, or violent political actions.

These findings also have broader theoretical implications. War and militarism are often analyzed primarily through the lens of geopolitics, power struggles, and economic or strategic interests. However, as Theweleit (2019) and previous authoritarianism researchers have pointed out, these macro-level conflicts are deeply intertwined with psychological structures operating on the individual and collective level. Behind the rhetoric of imperial ambitions and power politics lie unconscious inner conflicts, authoritarian personality structures, and rigid masculinity norms that shape the way societies engage in militaristic endeavors. Geopolitical decisions and historical trajectories are not made in a vacuum; they are shaped by the collective psychology of societies, including deeply ingrained hierarchies, notions of dominance and submission, and the legitimization of violence.

One disturbing manifestation of these dynamics is the widespread use of sexual violence in war—not as a by-product, but as a strategic tool of terror and domination. It reflects the link between militarism, rigid masculinity, and control over sexuality. While our study does not examine war crimes or military actions, it addresses the ideological structures that make societies more willing to justify war, including its violent dimensions. The prevalence of sexual violence in conflicts points to broader systems of gendered power and control that help legitimize aggression.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates how authoritarian submission, militarized masculinity, and hierarchical dominance ideologies intersect in political conflict. State propaganda contrasts the “feminized” and “decadent” West with a strong, traditional masculinity and frames aggression as a defence of cultural and moral order. This includes explicit rejection of gender diversity and LGBTQ+ rights, linking authoritarianism, homophobia, and militarism. While this example helps illustrate how psychological and

ideological structures manifest in political contexts, our findings are based on a UK sample and should not be generalized to non-Western authoritarian regimes.

However, the presence of such psychological structures is not limited to autocratic regimes. Even in democratic societies, war-supporting dispositions can persist in the form of violent subcultures that normalize aggression, dominance, and rigid gender roles. A notable example is British football hooliganism, where hypermasculine violence, group-based hierarchy, and the glorification of physical aggression form a parallel to the psychological structures underlying war support (Redhead, 2016). While such forms of aggression may seem detached from political decision-making, they reveal that militaristic and authoritarian attitudes can remain socially embedded even in otherwise democratic contexts. Recognizing these cultural undercurrents is crucial, as they highlight that democracy is not an automatic safeguard against violent and hierarchical worldviews. Societies must actively counteract these tendencies to prevent their escalation into broader political and militaristic legitimizations of aggression.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers a thorough analysis of psychological and ideological predictors of war support, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference. Although the hierarchical regression approach helps disentangle the relative importance of predictors, longitudinal data would be needed to understand how authoritarian attitudes, masculinity norms, and personality traits influence war support over time. Second, as noted, the UK-based sample limits the generalizability of our findings. Future research should examine whether the same mechanisms apply across cultures and political systems. Moreover, a fuller account of the genesis of war support requires attention to socio-cultural dynamics, particularly the circulation of cultural narratives (Dawson, 1994; Hochschild, 2016; Sawicka, 2024)—an aspect not captured by our design. This points to the value of mixed methods and interdisciplinary approaches.

Finally, these findings have practical relevance for political education, media literacy, and conflict prevention. Understanding that war support is shaped not only by strategic considerations but also by psychological dispositions and gendered belief systems allows for more targeted interventions. Public discourse on militarism should critically engage with how masculinity, authoritarian submission, and social hierarchy normalize war. This study ultimately underscores the need to integrate psychological, ideological, and gendered dimensions into analyses of war support. Recognizing these mechanisms is essential to understanding how authoritarian regimes exploit societal anxieties to legitimize violence and how such support might be challenged.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Oliver Hidalgo (University of Passau).

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available at present because further analyses are planned by the authors. The dataset will be made publicly available in 2027. Until then, the authors are happy to provide additional information about the dataset and the analyses upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4, 2024) to support the translation and linguistic refinement of selected passages. The tool was employed solely to improve clarity and accuracy in English, as one of the authors is not a native speaker. All intellectual content, analyses, and interpretations are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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