

# GÜVENLİK ÇALIŞMALARI DERGİSİ

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Andaç KARABULUT

**The Role of Intelligence in America's Grand Strategy**

Atalay BAHAR

**Büyük Çaplı Krizlerde Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü'nün Kullandığı  
Stratejik İletişim Yöntemleri: X Sosyal Medya Platformu Örneği**

Yunus ÖZTÜRK

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& Individual-Level Factors**

Esra Merve ÇALIŞKAN

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## İÇİNDEKİLER / CONTENTS

**Editörden ..... 2**

### **Makaleler**

Andaç KARABULUT

**The Role of Intelligence in America’s Grand Strategy..... 140**  
*Amerika’nın Büyük Stratejisinde İstihbaratın Rolü*  
*(Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article)*

Atalay BAHAR

**Büyük Çaplı Krizlerde Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğünün Kullandığı**  
**Stratejik İletişim Yöntemleri: X Sosyal Medya Platformu Örneği..... 156**  
*Strategic Communication Methods Used by the Turkish National Police in*  
*Large-Scale Crises: The Case of X Social Media Platform*  
*(Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article)*

Yunus ÖZTÜRK

**What Makes Civil Wars Protracted? A Review of Systemic,**  
**Organizational & Individual-Level Factors ..... 180**  
*İç Savaşları Uzatan Nedir? Sistemsel, Örgütsel ve Bireysel Düzeydeki*  
*Faktörlerin Bir Değerlendirmesi*  
*(Derleme/Review)*

Esra Merve ÇALIŞKAN

**State Cyber Warfare: The Strategic Shift Towards Private Sector Targets.... 200**  
*Devlet Siber Savaşı: Özel Sektör Hedeflerine Doğru Stratejik Değişim*  
*(Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article)*

## What Makes Civil Wars Protracted? A Review of Systemic, Organizational & Individual-Level Factors\*

Yunus ÖZTÜRK\*\*

**Abstract:** This study investigates the factors behind the increasing prevalence of intrastate conflicts since World War II, contrasting with the global decline in interstate wars, particularly in the developing world. While advancements in technology, society, and economy have facilitated a reduction in interstate conflicts, intrastate wars have persisted due to a decline in their terminations rather than an increase in their onsets. The study attributes this prolongation to systemic, organizational, and individual-level factors. At the systemic level, processes such as decolonization, Cold War interventions, and the post-Cold War multipolar order has established conditions that foster civil wars, often exacerbated by external interventions driven by power dynamics and competitive interests. Additionally, neoliberal economic policies have fragmented the global economy and marginalized the Global South, fostering the emergence of “regional conflict complexes” reliant on illicit economies. Organizationally, factors such as state capacity, geographical features, and resource availability enhance the resilience of rebel groups, particularly in rugged, resource-rich territories near international borders that facilitate contraband access and enable evasion of state control. Furthermore, the quality of leadership and cohesion within insurgent groups significantly affect conflict duration, as elite manipulation and factionalism can obstruct peace efforts. Lastly, at the individual level, motivations shaped by grievances associated with ethnic, political, or economic marginalization, alongside economic incentives for private gain, largely sustain involvement in armed conflicts. The study concludes that a comprehensive understanding of these complex factors is crucial for developing effective policy strategies to reduce conflict durations, advancing theoretical and practical approaches to civil war resolution.

**Keywords:** Intrastate Conflicts, Civil Wars, Civil War Durations, Persistent Civil Wars, Conflict Resolution

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\* This study is derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation, “Droughts in the Midst of Conflicts: A Mixed-Method Analysis of Water Insecurity & Civil War Duration and Outcomes,” completed at the University of Delaware (USA) in 2024.

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## İç Savaşları Uzatan Nedir? Sistemsel, Örgütsel ve Bireysel Düzeydeki Faktörlerin Bir Değerlendirmesi\*

Yunus ÖZTÜRK\*\*

**Öz:** Bu çalışmada, İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan bu yana, özellikle gelişmekte olan ülkelerde, devletlerarası savaşlardaki küresel düşüşün aksine, devlet içi çatışmaların artan yaygınlığının ardındaki faktörler araştırılmaktadır. Teknolojik, toplumsal ve ekonomik ilerlemeler devletlerarası çatışmaların azalmasını kolaylaştırırken devlet içi savaşlar, meydana gelmelerindeki artıştan ziyade sonlandırılmalarındaki düşüş nedeniyle yaygınlığını korumaktadır. Çalışma, iç savaşların uzamasını sistemsel, örgütsel ve bireysel düzeydeki faktörlere bağlamaktadır. Sistemsel düzeyde, dekolonizasyon, Soğuk Savaş müdahaleleri ve Soğuk Savaş sonrası çok kutuplu düzen gibi süreçler, genellikle güç dinamikleri ve rekabetçi çıkarlar tarafından yönlendirilen, sıklıkla dış müdahalelerle şiddetlenen, iç savaşları teşvik eden elverişli koşullar yaratmıştır. Buna ek olarak neo-liberal ekonomi politikaları, küresel ekonomiyi parçalamış ve Küresel Güneyi marjinalleştirerek yasadışı ekonomilere dayanan “bölgesel çatışma komplekslerinin” ortaya çıkmasına yol açmıştır. Organizasyonel olarak devlet kapasitesi, coğrafi özellikler ve kaynak mevcudiyeti gibi faktörler, özellikle kaçakçılığa erişimi kolaylaştıran ve devlet kontrolünden kaçmayı mümkün kılan, uluslararası sınırlara yakın engebeli, kaynak zengini bölgelerde isyancı grupların direncini arttırmıştır. Ayrıca elit manipülasyonu ve hizipçilik, barış çabalarını engelleyebileceğinden isyancı gruplar içindeki liderlik ve uyum kalitesi çatışma süresini önemli ölçüde etkilemiştir. Son olarak bireysel düzeyde, kişisel çıkarlara dönük ekonomik teşviklerin yanı sıra etnik, siyasi veya ekonomik marjinalleşmeyle ilişkili şikâyetlerle şekillenen motivasyonlar, silahlı çatışmalara katılımın sürdürülmesini büyük ölçüde etkilemiştir. Çalışma, bu karmaşık faktörlerin kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasının çatışma sürelerini azaltmaya yönelik etkili politika stratejileri geliştirmek ve iç savaş çözümüne yönelik hem teorik hem de pratik yaklaşımları iletmek için önemli olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Devlet İçi Çatışmalar, İç Savaşlar, İç Savaş Süreleri, Kalıcı İç Savaşlar, Çatışma Çözümü

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## Introduction

Since the conclusion of World War II, the global landscape has witnessed two concurrent trends in conflict dynamics. While interstate wars have become increasingly rare, mainly due to various social, economic, political, and technological transformations (see Gat (2017), Mandelbaum (1998), Mueller (2001), Pinker (2011)), intrastate wars have experienced a notable surge, particularly in the developing world (Rustad, 2024). In the period following the Cold War, scholarly debates have centered on identifying the factors contributing to these contrasting trends in interstate and intrastate wars. Particularly, the ongoing Ukrainian War has prompted a reexamination of the proposition that interstate wars are a relic of a bygone era. Consequently, some scholars have argued that conventional interstate wars remain a feature of the contemporary world (e.g., Biddle (2023), Robinson (2022)). Undoubtedly, armed conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe, coupled with the warnings of world leaders that a new potential world war may be imminent, have reignited these debates (Overy, 2024; Racker, 2023; Rustad, 2024). Despite the renewed focus on interstate wars, intrastate wars remain a more significant concern for international peace and security due to their increased prevalence, intensity, and duration. Notably, such conflicts have resulted in higher civilian casualties, displacement, and external interventions (Einsiedel et al., 2014; 2017).

The rise in intrastate conflicts can be attributed to a range of factors, including weak state capacity, contentious national identities, illegitimate and/or authoritarian governments, territorial disputes, and the enduring legacies of colonialism (Holsti, 2004; Kennedy & Waldman, 2014; Newman, 2014; Rice, 1990). Although these explanations offer insights into the root causes of intrastate conflicts, they fall short of fully accounting for the distinctive characteristics of contemporary wars. Contemporary intrastate wars, for instance, are significantly more protracted and resistant to decisive military resolutions. This is largely due to the proliferation of external interventions, the rise of criminal networks, and the expansion of extremist groups (Einsiedel et al., 2014; 2017; Walter, 2017). Specifically, while post-World War II civil wars were typically class-based conflicts aiming to incite revolutions by mobilizing the masses, post-Cold War civil wars have primarily been driven by ethnic separatism. Since the turn of the millennium, however, the global landscape has witnessed a new wave of civil wars, where religious or sectarian identities, combined with technological advancements in weaponry, have played a pivotal role. As Walter (2017, p. 470) observes that most post-millennium civil wars have occurred in Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East, where radical religious groups have pursued transnational objectives, namely the unification of the *Ummah* under a *Khalifa*.

While these arguments clarify the underlying causes of intrastate wars and illustrate their evolving trends and characteristics, they are insufficient in identifying the factors behind the steady rise in the global prevalence of civil wars since the end of World War II. Put differently, the question remains: What factors have contributed to the sustained incidence of civil wars, particularly in the post-World War II era? Collier et al. (2004) and Fearon (2004) propose that the increased incidence of civil wars is more closely linked to a decline in terminations rather than an increase in onsets. In other words, while the number of civil wars onsets remains relatively stable at approximately 2.2 per year, the rate of civil war terminations has dropped to around  $\sim 1.7$  per year, leading to the protraction of intrastate conflicts. Notably, the average duration of civil wars has exceeded 20 years during the post-World War II period (Collier et al., 2003, pp. 93–97; Fearon, 2004, pp. 275–276). In brief, the growing prevalence of civil wars since 1945 can be attributed to the increasing protraction of these conflicts, as the interval between the onset and termination has progressively lengthened over time despite fluctuations in the broader international context.

In this context, the objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive review of the extant literature on the factors contributing to the prolongation of civil wars. This study specifically investigates systemic, organizational, and individual-level factors to offer a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under review. By examining protracted civil wars from a three-dimensional perspective, this study concludes that a thorough analysis of these prolongation factors is essential to comprehend the reasons behind the increased persistence of intrastate wars, particularly in the post-World War II era. Such a study would contribute significantly to academic research and policy-making efforts in three key ways (Brandt et al., 2008; Hegre, 2004).

First, in addition to the prevention of new conflicts, the resolution or shortening of protracted civil wars has become a crucial task for policymakers, given the detrimental impacts these wars have on human, state, and international security (Collier et al., 2003; Iqbal, 2006; Kang & Meernik, 2005; Thyne, 2016). Second, since the prevalence of civil wars is more closely related to their protracted nature than to their increased onsets, the earlier termination of such conflicts would lead to a decline in the overall number of civil wars, and consequently, a reduction in the total number of armed conflicts worldwide (Collier et al., 2003; Fearon, 2004; 2017; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Finally, investigating the duration of civil wars offers insights into the potential outcomes of these conflicts, thereby facilitating the identification of the most effective policy strategies for ending ongoing civil wars (Brandt et al., 2008; DeRouen Jr. & Sobek, 2004; Mason et al., 1999; Mason & Fett, 1996).

The paper is structured as follows: The initial section examines international, regional, and local factors contributing to prolonging civil wars. The second section explores organizational factors, focusing on both rebel/insurgency groups

and states/governments. The third section builds upon the preceding analysis by investigating the individual-level factors that contribute to the persistence of civil wars. The final section critically assesses the factors discussed, offering critiques, policy suggestions, and concluding remarks.

### **Systemic Factors: International, Regional & Local Levels**

The study of civil wars typically approaches factors contributing to their dynamics -onset, duration, and termination- from an individual or organizational/group perspective. The least studied area, however, pertains to international, regional, and local factors. In this context, Gleditsch (2007, p. 305) emphasizes international factors in understanding civil war dynamics and prospects for their resolution. This sub-section thus comprehensively examines systemic factors at the international, regional, and local levels. Specifically, the following factors are subjected to detailed examination: (i) shifts in the international system and the increased third-party interventions, (ii) changes in the international economic system and the advent of regional conflict complexes, and (iii) the local agendas and activities of rebel groups.

### **International Political System & Third-Party Interventions**

From a macro perspective, Hironaka (2005) argues that the surge in civil wars in the post-World War II era can be attributed to shifts in the international system. The decolonization process between 1945 and 1960 led to the admission of numerous weak African and Asian states into the international system as *de jure* sovereign equals. However, most of these states were highly dependent on foreign aid and military assistance. During the Cold War, most of these newly independent states aligned themselves with the US or the USSR, contingent on their ideological leanings. This great power competition resulted in increased financial, technical, and military support or intervention on behalf of governments or rebel factions, thereby altering the balance of power between warring parties. Consequently, neither side achieved a decisive victory, leading to protracted and intractable conflicts (Hironaka, 2005, pp. 20–28).

The Cold War period, however, was not the sole factor responsible for prolonging domestic conflicts; the post-Cold War context also played a significant role. Contrary to the expectations of those with a liberal outlook (see Fukuyama (1989)), the end of the bipolar Cold War international system, particularly following the “unipolar moment” of US hegemony during the early 1990s (see Krauthammer (1990; 2002)), led to the emergence of multiple middle powers, each competing for relative advantage. As Posen (2017, pp. 171–172) observes, in the post-Cold War multipolar world, the primary concern of major powers was to



maintain the balance of power against the rise of regional powers. Particularly, the lack of consensus on why, when, and how the international society should intervene in intrastate wars had created a political vacuum in which external interventions through the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) norm/doctrine were increasingly viewed as a way to fill that gap. In short, the pursuit of relative advantage within a multipolar world gave rise to what Posen (2017) terms “competitive interventions.” These interventions, often backed by external actors, led to persistent efforts by warring parties to maintain military activities in the expectation that external assistance would ultimately guarantee victory (Posen, 2017, p. 176).

It is evident that the primary factor contributing to the prolongation of civil wars during both the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods was the increased frequency of external interventions, whether financial, technical, or military. Third-party interventions have been shown to extend the duration of civil wars in ethnically polarized societies by reducing the coordination costs for rebel groups (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000). Moreover, the mere anticipation of external assistance can foster an environment conducive to protracted conflicts. Warring parties may persist in their military efforts until such assistance arrives or refrain from settling the conflict until they have exhausted their existing resources (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005). Although the intentions behind third-party interventions, whether neutral or biased, are critically important, it is argued that third-party interventions are more likely to prolong civil wars (Balch-Lindsay & Enterline, 2000; Regan, 2002). Because of the importance of the intervenors’ impartiality, biased interventions make it less likely that belligerents will seek to terminate civil wars promptly. The partiality of external intervenors reduces the likelihood that the warring parties will see the cessation of hostilities as being in their interest.

The strategic competition among intervenors also plays a crucial role in determining the duration of civil wars (Anderson, 2019). While the intervenors endeavor to ensure that their proxies are sufficiently robust to achieve a decisive military victory through aid and assistance, they simultaneously seek to avoid provoking other external actors into intervening or escalating the conflict. In such a context, intervenors may perceive the continuation of the conflict as a more favorable outcome than its premature conclusion. Nevertheless, intervenors from democratic regimes are inclined to support would-be victorious parties in conflicts due to the constraints and obligations inherent to their democratic systems, particularly those related to accountability and transparency (Norrevik & Sarwari, 2021). In addition to competition and regime types, the specific intervention tools employed -whether sanctions or military deployment- are significant determinants of conflict dynamics. For example, economic sanctions have been shown to reduce conflict duration more effectively than arms embargoes (Escribà-Folch, 2010). In the context of military interventions, however, larger military deployments in conflict zones have been associated with shorter civil wars (Kathman & Benson, 2019).

## **International Economic System & Regional Conflict Complexes**

It is important to note that systemic factors are not inherently political. Following the 1970s, alterations to the global economic system through the implementation of neoliberal policies, including deregulation and privatization, have resulted in a significantly more fragmented global capitalist system, contrary to the anticipated outcomes of globalization. Adopting neoliberal policies has led to a clear distinction between the North and South in the global economic landscape, with the former occupying the core and the latter situated at the periphery of the global economy. This fragmented economic system has resulted in the formation of an exclusionary global economy. While the North has intensified its interdependent economic relations, the South has been excluded from the emerging Northern informational economy. Consequently, the South was compelled to turn towards extra-legal networks, including transnational criminal networks and war economies (Duffield, 2001, pp. 2–7).

For Duffield (2000; 2001), the prevailing economic system exerts a profound influence on the conflict dynamics. The advent of market deregulation has precipitated a surge in parallel and transborder trade, facilitating the formation of local-global networks and shadow economies. These serve as conduits for asset realization and self-provisioning, particularly in the context of armed conflicts (Duffield, 2001, p. 14). Moreover, besides being excluded from the Northern economic network, the South lacked financial aid, technical support, and military assistance from their patrons in the post-Cold War era. Those in positions of power in the South, whether ruling elites or rebel leaders, have become significantly more inclined to pursue alternative sources of financial stability, primarily through extra-legal economic networks. As Duffield (2000, pp. 72–73) succinctly states, “market deregulation and declining nation-state competence [due to globalization] have not only allowed the politics of violence and profit to merge, but also underpin the regional trend toward protracted instability, schism, and political assertiveness in the South.”

Such a transformation in the international economic system led to the advent of regional war economies in the South. In this regard, Armstrong & Rubin (2002) and Studdard (2004) present a compelling argument for the role of “regional conflict complexes/formations,” namely war economies, in shaping conflict dynamics. The term “regional conflict complex” refers to actors’ social, economic, military, and political networks within particular regions. These networks facilitate the movement of “people, goods, and arms [move] back and forth across borders and among ‘internal’ conflicts, prolonging regional conflict and preventing [a] peaceful resolution” (Armstrong & Rubin, 2002, p. 4). Notable regional conflict complexes include West Africa, Southern Central Asia, the Andean region, the Middle East, the Great Lakes region, and the Balkans. These regions are characterized by the frequent occurrence of smuggling networks, illicit trafficking in

humans, drugs, and arms, transborder armed groups, mercenaries, and refugee flows (Armstrong & Rubin, 2002, pp. 5–7).

### **Local Dynamics & Agendas of Warring Parties**

In addition to international and regional factors, local dynamics also play a role in determining the duration of conflicts. Autesserre (2009; 2010) emphasizes the significance of rebel groups' local agendas, particularly territorial/land issues, in prolonging civil wars. A comprehensive analysis of the Congolese Civil War demonstrates that an excessive focus on the broader discourse of intervenors in the context of regional or national initiatives to terminate civil wars leads to the neglect of rebel groups' local agendas and activities by peacebuilders. Such a "peacebuilding culture" diverts the attention of scholars and policymakers from the local causes of warfare, thereby contributing to the failure of peace missions and the prolongation of conflicts between belligerents.

### **Organizational Factors: State Capacity & Group Cohesion**

Undoubtedly, an exclusive focus on international, regional, and local-level factors is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the prolonged intrastate wars in the post-WWII era. The role of individual and organizational dynamics in this phenomenon is worthy of consideration as these factors are central to understanding why conflicts persist. The key explanatory variables are the timing and duration of the initial uprising by the oppressed and the continuation of insurgent warfare by rebel groups against mighty governments. Before examining why would-be rebels engage in armed conflict with formidable armed forces, this sub-section addresses the factors contributing to the resilience of rebel/insurgent groups in the face of significant challenges. From an organizational perspective, rebel/insurgent groups tend to maintain their military operations for as long as they possess (i) the opportunity and (ii) strong leadership and group cohesion necessary for their warfighting efforts against formidable government forces.

### **Opportunity Structure & State Capacity**

While the literature on civil wars emphasizes the significance of "greed versus grievance" arguments in understanding the outbreak and persistence of intrastate conflicts, some scholars (e.g., Berdal (2005), Hoeffler (2011), Humphreys & Weinstein (2008), Keen (2011)) challenge the simplicity of this perspective in explaining a complex social phenomenon like civil wars. Rather, they propose a more sophisticated approach that extends beyond the simplistic dichotomy of greed versus grievance, which often posits "opportunity" for conflict as a key *explanans*. In this regard, Fearon & Laitin (2003, p. 75) argue that "the main factors

determining [intrastate wars] are not ethnic or religious differences or broadly held grievances but, rather, conditions that favor *insurgency*.” Similarly, Collier et al. (2008) emphasize the importance of “feasibility” in the outbreak of conflicts (see also Collier (2000), Collier & Hoeffler (1998; 2004)). The opportunity or feasibility argument posits that the outbreak of conflicts by political entrepreneurs is contingent upon the existence of a militarily and financially conducive environment with a low opportunity cost and high utility of participation. Such environments allow would-be rebels to participate in armed groups in pursuit of private gains. It is evident that this line of reasoning offers a more comprehensive perspective on the circumstances under which would-be rebels are likely to take up arms and continue their participation in armed groups. The motivational arguments, which are typically framed in terms of greed *versus* grievances, are typically employed to elucidate the initial impetus behind collective violence, namely why people riot in the first place.

From the opportunity structure perspective, geographical factors, state capacity, and the balance of power between warring parties are identified as the key variables. Specific geographical features, such as rough/mountainous terrain, resource-rich lands, distance from city centers, proximity to international borders, *et cetera*, are regarded as primary contributors to prolonged conflicts, as they enhance rebel capacity against formidable government forces. The presence of rugged terrain allows rebels to conceal themselves from government forces, particularly when they are comparatively weaker and seek to achieve a balance of power through military means. Similarly, government forces are required to possess local knowledge of the terrain for logistical reasons, which is often not readily available to armed forces (Buhaug et al., 2009; Buhaug & Gates, 2002; Rustad et al., 2008). In the same way, resource-rich areas offer rebels the opportunity to extract valuable resources or engage in contraband activities, which can bolster their war effort. By raiding cultivated lands and farms for subsistence products or extracting precious gems and natural resources, such as diamonds, timber, and oil, for contraband and illicit markets, armed groups may maintain their existence through financial well-being even when confronted with mighty government forces. Moreover, the proximity of rebel groups to international borders allows them to receive external support and/or establish a haven outside of their operational area/country, thus enabling them to maintain their existence and warfighting capacity (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Buhaug et al., 2009; Buhaug & Gates, 2002; Koren & Bagozzi, 2017).

The state capacity variable is of paramount importance in determining whether rebel/insurgent groups could initiate and maintain their warfare. In her analysis of state capacity, Skocpol (1985; 2008) builds upon the formulations of Weber (1946) and Tilly (1985) to elucidate the role of state capacity in understanding why some states experience civil wars that result in social revolutions while others do not. Similarly, Tilly (1978) underscores state capacity in explaining when rebellion as a form of social mobilization could be a viable option for would-

be rebels. According to this line of reasoning, the likelihood of rebel/insurgent groups successfully pursuing a rebellion is diminished when they are likely to be repressed or accommodated by the state. In other words, the requisite time for a decisive military victory is reduced if the state possesses an effective bureaucratic apparatus and/or a powerful military force, thereby shortening the duration of conflicts (DeRouen Jr. & Sobek, 2004). Conversely, when states lack the capacity and/or resources to respond effectively, decision-makers are more likely to pursue a containment strategy against rebel groups, which can result in protracted conflicts (Fearon, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Mukherjee, 2014). Nevertheless, it is important to note that indications of robust, strong state capacity, particularly in rural areas, such as infrastructure like roads, hospitals, schools, and police stations, are more likely to be targeted by rebel groups as a means of demonstrating their resilience and power (Koren & Sarbahi, 2018).

### **Leadership & Group Cohesion**

Clearly, the arguments about state capacity provide insight into the power dynamics between rebel/insurgent groups and governments, influencing the duration and outcomes of civil wars. However, this does not imply that civil wars are exclusively related to the capacity of states. For instance, the concessions made by governments to strong rebel groups are typically accepted within a relatively short period, leading to a shorter duration of civil wars, or *vice versa* (Cunningham et al., 2009). Evidently the pivotal elements in this context are not solely the states but also the rebel groups, particularly in terms of their (i) leadership and (ii) organizational strength. In this regard, theories of social mobilization and contentious politics offer valuable insights into the significance of rebel groups' organizational capacity beyond feasibility/opportunity structure in civil war dynamics (see McAdam et al. (2004; 2008), Tilly (1978), Tilly & Tarrow (2015)). As Kaufman (2015) succinctly notes, the role of elites in framing issues in a specific way -a.k.a. the "air war"- is to mobilize masses for conflicts underpinned by leadership. In contrast, the organizational strength emphasizes the structures through which participants are controlled and directed in the context of the "ground war."

Political leaders/elites play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding contentious issues, thereby manipulating public opinion and sustaining mass participation in protracted armed conflicts. Moreover, the competition among rebel/insurgent groups to control mass movements or human resources also contributes to the dynamics of civil wars. In examining the potential for the demise of terrorist organizations, for instance, Cronin (2009) identifies six different strategies, with the "decapitation" of leadership being the most crucial. This is because leaders are regarded as the "propagandist in chief," and their removal can have a significant adverse impact on the organization's ability to disseminate and promote its message/cause.

Nevertheless, despite the conventional wisdom that civil wars are inherently dyadic, a more accurate description is that they are extra-dyadic. In such conflicts, multiple rebel leaders/groups may compete with the government or with each other for a superior position. Particularly in the context of peace processes, the presence of “spoilers” - those who perceive a potential peace agreement as disadvantageous to their parochial goal, whether total, limited, or greedy - can impede the ongoing peace process in order to secure their preferences and interests in the post-conflict environment (Stedman, 1997; 2003). For such spoilers, the continuation of hostilities is preferable to a swift conclusion of the war. Moreover, the spoiler problem is not confined to the context of peace negotiations. Actors may also struggle for dominance before, during, and after peace talks. This phenomenon has been frequently observed in the Palestinian issue, where the lack of cohesion among Palestinian actors has resulted in armed conflicts within and between groups for control and leadership (see Pearlman (2009; 2011; 2012)). In short, the greater the number of conflicting actors engaged in struggles for dominance, the more probable it is that armed conflict will persist as multiple “veto players” seek to advance their parochial interests and/or preferences in the looming post-conflict environment (Cunningham, 2006; Pearlman & Cunningham, 2012).

Last but not least, the type of warfare employed by rebel/insurgent leaders/groups is also a significant factor in understanding the conflict dynamics. For instance, states are reluctant to compromise for a negotiated settlement with secessionist insurgent groups, as any concession is more likely to be perceived as a sign of weakness by other rebel groups. Consequently, as Walter (2006) illustrates, states typically engage in protracted conflicts against such rebel/insurgent groups to establish a reputation for their deterrent capabilities. Nevertheless, this line of reasoning cannot be applied to rebel/insurgent groups that demand decentralization and/or power-sharing, as these actors are more inclined to compromise and conclude ongoing conflicts in a shorter time. Similarly, “irregular warfare” frequently results in protracted conflicts that conclude with government victories, as rebel/insurgent groups require time to organize for public support and to develop military effectiveness compared to the capabilities of the armed forces (Balcells & Kalyvas, 2012).

### **Individual-Level Factors: Emotions & Interests**

One area that has yet to be sufficiently examined in this analysis is the underlying motivation of individuals driven to engage in armed conflicts on the side of rebels/insurgents. The analysis has thus far concentrated on systemic and organizational factors in order to gain insight into the international, regional, and local conditions that gave rise to protracted conflicts, as well as the organizational structures that enable rebel/insurgent groups to sustain their involvement in armed conflicts.

Nevertheless, these arguments are inadequate for comprehending why individuals would engage in armed conflict with formidable armed forces, even at the risk of their own lives. Given that rebel/insurgent groups require a consistent supply of personnel to engage in combat (a.k.a. recruitment), it becomes evident why exploring the motivation of would-be rebels/insurgents for participating in armed groups is a crucial element in the analysis.

“What motivates individuals to engage in risky actions, even at the cost of their own lives?” is the central question that one is required to answer in order to understand the radicalization of individuals and the sustenance of rebel/insurgent groups through recruitment. The extant literature has thus far addressed this question from two distinct perspectives: the emotional motivations (grievances) associated with a sense of injustice and the economic incentives (greed) that drive individuals to pursue material gain (e.g., Cederman et al. (2011; 2013), Collier (2000), Collier & Hoeffler (1998; 2004), Gurr (2010), Keen (2000; 2011), Reno (2000), Soysa (2000), Stewart (2008)). Given that these two perspectives analyze the phenomenon in a limited fashion, a more holistic approach, including both emotions and incentives, is necessary to fully comprehend the motivations underlying the decision to risk one’s life for a cause (see Berdal (2005), Berdal & Malone (2000), Collier et al. (2008)).

In fact, emotional or incentive-based factors that prompt individuals to engage in armed conflicts against formidable governments are directly related to Mancur Olson’s (2002) argument regarding the “collective action problem.” As Olson (2002, p. 116) observes, individuals are more likely to engage in “free-riding” behavior when they benefit from public goods without any associated risks or costs and when others are willing to assume the responsibility and bear the cost on their behalf. In light of the cost-free benefits inherent in civil wars, the question of why some individuals, but not others, take up arms against armed forces at the cost of their lives becomes a significant conundrum. On the one hand, some scholars (e.g., Cederman et al. (2013), Gurr (2010), McLauchlin (2018), Montalvo & Reynal-Querol (2010), Østby (2008), Stewart (2008), Wucherpfennig et al. (2012)) posit that individuals are more likely to engage in armed conflicts when they have specific grievances, such as experiencing economic inequality, political discrimination, ethnic, religious or sectarian polarization, cultural exclusion, *et cetera*. In contrast, others (e.g., Bagozzi et al. (2017), Collier (2000a; 2000b), Collier & Hoeffler (1998; 2004), Keen (2000; 2011), Koren & Bagozzi (2017), Reno (2000), Shearer (2000), Soysa (2000)) claim that people primarily join in armed groups for personal gain, including through external support, natural resource extraction, looting, pillaging, plundering during armed conflicts, *et cetera*.



### **Emotional Motivation or Grievances**

In particular, Stewart (2008) proposes that the existence of “horizontal inequalities” in economic, social, and cultural spheres is the underlying cause of violent conflicts among social groups. In this line of reasoning, the intensification of grievances at the leadership and mass levels due to the perception of “relative deprivation” among social groups and the occurrence of systematic discrimination by states against specific social groups result in individuals resorting to rioting against governments in pursuit of a more favorable set of conditions (see also Gurr (2010)). Moreover, compared to economic discrimination, social, political, and cultural exclusion have been identified as the most significant factors in mass mobilization for armed conflicts (Cederman et al., 2011; 2013; Østby, 2008). Exclusionary state policies directed at specific social groups, whether ethnic, religious, or sectarian, are likely to contribute to the persistence of armed conflicts. Such policies exacerbate the existing grievances among would-be rebels, thereby providing the requisite human resources for protracted conflicts (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2010; Wucherpfennig et al., 2012). Moreover, the implementation of exclusionary policies or selective promotions results in the social groups supported by such policies becoming more loyal to the regime. This inevitably gives rise to assurance problems for rebels attempting to negotiate a peace process (McLauchlin, 2018).

### **Economic Incentives or Greed**

In light of the pervasiveness of social, political, and cultural grievances inherent across diverse societies, some scholars (e.g., Collier (2000a; 2000b), Collier & Hoeffler (1998; 2004)) contend that economic incentives for private gains offer a more compelling rationale for the mass participation of individuals in armed conflicts. Collier (2000b) and Collier & Hoeffler (1998), in particular, elucidate the tendency for individuals to be more responsive to economic incentives than socio-political motivations, rendering the accumulation of personal wealth a more probable motive for would-be rebels. In other words, individuals are more likely to engage in rebel activities if they perceive the potential for personal gain during the conflict or a favorable outcome at its conclusion. Collier et al. (2004) demonstrated in their renowned quantitative analysis that economic inequality and *per capita* income are the most significant factors in prolonging civil war by lowering the opportunity cost for would-be rebels. Put differently, individuals are more likely to engage in armed conflicts when they face high income inequality and when the cost of participation is low, whereas the potential rewards of rebellion are comparatively high. In such circumstances, rebellion is regarded as a commercial venture or “business” for most would-be rebels rather than an “investment” in addressing their existing grievances.



In line with this reasoning, violence is not an irrational act perpetrated by the masses; rather, it is a deliberate and strategic action undertaken by political elites to maintain their privileged position by manipulating the masses to engage in armed conflict against rivals. Moreover, lay people also engage in rebel activities for reasons related to security, survival, and, when feasible, economic gain through plundering, pillaging, raiding, and other forms of criminal activity. From this perspective, warring parties, whether political elites or rebel leaders, are not regarded as dedicated actors striving to overcome their grievances through armed conflict. Instead, they are considered bandits or pirates, driven by a desire to loot and exploit economic and political resources (Reno, 2000; Soysa, 2000). In such circumstances, the ultimate aim of warfare is not to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield, as is the case in conventional wars, but rather to prolong an ongoing conflict in order to accumulate wealth and sustain privileged positions (Aliyev, 2020; Keen, 2000; 2011).

It is important to note that the financial resources of rebel/insurgent groups are not solely dependent on natural resource extraction. Rebel groups employ a variety of income-generating activities, including the raiding of aid convoys, participation in illicit trade and trafficking networks, and the looting of agricultural lands and farms for sustenance (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Koren & Bagozzi, 2017; Shearer, 2000). Moreover, the erosion of states' territorial integrity and sovereignty through globalization and neoliberal policies (e.g., privatization, marketization) since the 1970s has created an environment conducive to warring parties engaging in international criminal activities without robust state surveillance for wealth accumulation through smuggling and trafficking (Duffield, 2000; 2001). As Keen (2000, p. 24) succinctly states:

“Conflicts have seen the emergence of war economies (often centered in particular regions controlled by rebels or warlords and linked to international trading networks). Members of armed gangs have profited from looting and other forms of violent economic activity. [...] These developments add to the difficulties of bringing violence to an end, [...] because many have a vested interest in prolonging violence [...]”

## Conclusion

Since the end of World War II, the global landscape has witnessed a notable increase in intrastate conflicts, particularly in comparison to the global reduction in interstate wars. While technological and socio-economic advancements have mitigated interstate conflicts, intrastate wars persist not because of an increase in the incidence of such conflicts but due to decreased rates at which they are concluded. After a comprehensive review of existing literature, this study identifies three key levels of contributing factors to the prolongation of civil wars: (i) systemic, (ii) organizational, and (iii) individual.

Systemic factors essentially point to the legacy of decolonization, Cold War interventions, and the post-Cold War multipolar world order, in which these processes create conditions conducive to civil wars. In many instances, external or third-party interventions have contributed to intensifying ongoing conflicts through geopolitical competition. The proliferation of neoliberal policies, particularly since the 1970s, has contributed to the global economy's further fragmentation, resulting in the Global South's economic marginalization and the emergence of "regional conflict complexes" that are dependent on illicit economies for sustenance.

At the organizational level, factors such as state capacity, geographical features, and resource availability play a crucial role in the resilience of rebel groups. The capacity of states to exert control over territory is frequently constrained by several factors, including the presence of rugged terrain and the proximity of rebel groups to international borders and resource-rich areas. These conditions permit rebels/insurgents to evade strict state control and gain access to illicit markets, thereby prolonging conflicts. Moreover, the quality of leadership and group cohesion within insurgent groups considerably impact on the duration of conflicts in which elite manipulation and factional competition within rebel groups create additional obstacles (e.g., spoilers) to peace processes.

Last, the continued involvement of rebel groups in armed conflict can also be attributed to individual-level factors. The decision to engage in armed conflicts is driven by a complex interplay of individual motivations, including grievances and economic incentives. Marginalization in social, economic, or political arenas exacerbates grievances, whereas the presence of economic opportunities within conflict zones incentivizes continued involvement among would-be rebels. This dual motivation (a.k.a. *greed & grievances*) sustains individual participation, thereby rendering ongoing conflicts more resistant to resolution.

In brief, this study highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the increasing prevalence and prolongation of civil wars. By examining these multifaceted factors – systemic, organizational, and individual, the research contributes to both the academic literature and the formulation of policy strategies aimed at reducing conflict durations and thus achieving sustainable peace. To this end, the study puts forth the following ten policy recommendations for decision-makers to curtail the duration of intrastate conflicts: (i) reducing third-party interventions either through impartial mediation and/or negotiation mechanisms under the auspices of neutral international organizations; (ii) increasing economic aid and investments to marginalized regions in the Global South to mitigate their reliance on illicit and/or war economies; (iii) enhancing international cooperation to dismantle transnational criminal networks through the strict border controls and international monitoring; (iv) providing technical and financial assistance to conflict-prone states to improve their control capacity, particularly in contested areas; (v) employing strategies to undermine rebel/insurgent group cohesion through incentivizing defections and fostering splinter

groups; (vi) using targeted sanctions or diplomatic pressures on rebel/insurgent factions to reduce their adverse impacts on peace processes; (vii) designing peace agreements that account the preferences of potential spoilers for power-sharing and resource distribution; (viii) implementing community-based reconciliation programs to address historical grievances and thus building trust among marginalized social groups; (ix) creating economic opportunities for would-be rebels in conflict-affected areas through development programs and job creation in order to reduce their reliance on war economies; and, lastly, (x) fostering regional alliances through regional organizations to address cross-border issues collaboratively.

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