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Zimbabwe: Artisanal Gold Mining and Violence. The Case of Midlands Province, 2017–2026

Vincent CHENZI, Munyaradzi NYAKUDYA,
Enock NDAWANA, Wilford MUTENDA

Abstract: This article seeks to unpack the nuances of violence in Zimbabwe’s artisanal gold mining sector and how it impacts the wider community. Drawing on data gathered from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews, the findings indicate that violence in the artisanal gold mining sector is primarily sustained by economic exclusion, a weak regulatory environment, and corrupt security arrangements. To this end, the study utilizes the rational choice model to demonstrate how situational cost–benefit calculations shape the choices of militant actors seeking to profit aggressively from chaos, leading to an upsurge in violence in the gold sector. In this regard, the study argues that economic exclusion and weak regulation create profitable opportunities that are protected by corrupt local security arrangements, resulting in violence, lawlessness, and instability across Zimbabwe’s Midlands gold mining sector. Given the multisectoral nature of this violence, the research concludes by recommending measures aimed at stabilizing the mining sector, thereby diffusing artisanal mining violence.

Keywords: Artisanal gold mining violence, Midlands province, rational choice model, border porosity, Zimbabwe.

Vincent CHENZI

Lecturer, Department of Peace, Security and Society, University of Zimbabwe
E-mail: chenziv05@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-3617-1058

Munyaradzi NYAKUDYA

Associate Professor, Department of Peace Security and Society, University of Zimbabwe
E-mail: nyakazm@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-3581-267X

Enock NDAWANA

Senior Lecturer, Department of Peace and Security Studies, Midlands State University
E-mail: ndawanae@staff.msu.ac.zw
ORCID: 0000-0001-7159-2136

Wilford MUTENDA

Senior Officer in the Zimbabwe Republic Police, Superintendent Operations Support Unit
E-mail: wilmutenda@gmail.com

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Introduction

Zimbabwe grapples with escalating violent attacks targeting its lucrative gold mining industry, which underpins the broader economy through export earnings (accounting for at least 60%) and employment creation (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2020). The gold mining industry is thus a critical pillar of the national economy, contributing significantly to government revenue and fostering linkages with other key sectors (Zimbabwe Miners Federation, 2022). However, the escalating violence poses grave threats to the industry's viability and to Zimbabwe's socio-economic recovery efforts, which heavily rely on the growth of the mining sector. Persistent armed attacks have disrupted production and revenue flows, jeopardized the safety of workers and nearby communities, and eroded investor confidence in the sector (International Crisis Group, 2020). The epicenter of the violence is Zimbabwe's Midlands Province, which hosts over 50% of large-scale gold mines but has paradoxically transformed into a hotbed of mining-related violence, posing complex security, economic, and human rights challenges. As observed by Mkodzongi (2020), "Parts of Zimbabwe's gold mining heartland have become violent, lawless territories controlled by gangs that wield machetes with impunity" (p. 1481).

While factors such as unemployment, porous borders, and ineffective policing have been linked to the crisis, most analyses rely on disjointed insights from sporadic media reporting that fail to unravel the systemic drivers sustaining the tide of violence that threatens citizens, undermines mining investments, and retards national economic progress (International Crisis Group, 2020). This constitutes a critical knowledge gap, which this research seeks to address by offering in-depth academic insights into the intersection of economic grievances, regulatory deficiencies, and political incentives driving the evolution of sporadic artisanal mining violence into formidable, cartel-driven violence affecting Zimbabwe's Midlands goldfields. The study, therefore, goes beyond fragmented commentary to expose the root causes, shadowy networks, and vested interests underpinning mining-related violence. The central argument of the research is that economic exclusion, coupled with a frail regulatory framework, not only causes but also sustains artisanal mining violence across the Midlands goldfields.

The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is particularly effective in explaining artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands province due to its emphasis on the strategic decision-making processes of individuals involved in mining conflicts. This theory posits that actors, such as artisanal miners and state agents, engage in violence based on a calculated assessment of risks and rewards, which aligns with findings that competition between these groups significantly contributes to conflict dynamics (Rigterink et al., 2024). Furthermore, it incorporates elements of deterrence, suggesting that the perceived consequences of violence can deter or provoke conflict, thus providing a nuanced understanding of the motivations behind violent actions in the artisanal mining sector (Brown et al., 2010). This multifaceted approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of the local context and the agency of miners, rendering it a superior explanatory model in this setting.

Therefore, through the utility of the RCT, the study posits that economic exclusion and a fragile regulatory framework provide ample opportunities for violence and lawlessness to manifest in the Midlands. Economic exclusion and weak regulation significantly impact artisanal mining communities, leading to widespread violence. Artisanal gold mining, while providing essential livelihoods amidst economic decline, often results in severe economic disparities among various social groups. The local community members, particularly women and youth, are usually sidelined by external mining syndicates that exploit their domestic mineral wealth, forcing them to resort to violence as a bargaining instrument. Likewise, the lack of formalization and regulatory frameworks exacerbates these issues, as corrupt security arrangements fronted by security operatives, politicians, environmental officials, and members of the judiciary further exploit the regulatory laxity for personal gain, leading to further violence.

This study focused on the phase beginning in 2017, marked by the evolution of machete gangs into ruthless criminal syndicates attacking citizens and mining infrastructure with impunity. This escalation had been linked to socio-economic deterioration, regulatory lapses, and security deficiencies that had failed to decisively contain previously isolated attacks, especially in the post-2017 period. This evolution signaled uniquely complex dynamics compared to previous episodic violence. Evidence from the current escalatory period exposed dire economic exclusion, regulatory loopholes, and collusion with security organs, catalyzing the amplified threats (Navaya, 2021).

The Midlands province was selected as the case study because it is the epicenter of violent, illicit gold activities. The Midlands gold fields serve as an information-rich case study for examining a range of factors, including youth disenfranchisement, state security deficiencies, and the underlying regulatory weaknesses that continue to propel the crisis despite attempted crackdowns. Findings from the Midlands gold mining region provide empirically grounded insights to guide legislative amendments and socio-economic interventions tailored to local realities necessary for de-escalating violence and promoting sustainable mining practices (International Crisis Group, 2020). Stemming the tide of violence is, therefore, an economic and security imperative to restore stability, safeguard jobs and livelihoods, and enable the mining industry to spearhead broader national development plans. More so, conducting rigorous academic research to investigate the underlying triggers sustaining mining violence is crucial for generating empirically grounded insights that are necessary to inform evidence-based policies and practical interventions. The research is categorized into five broad sections, excluding the introduction. The methodology and literature review form the first and second segments, respectively. The theoretical framework forms the third part, followed by the findings section. The fifth and final segment consists of the discussion portion before a brief conclusion.

Methodology

This study examines the dynamics of artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands province from 2017 to 2026. The study was guided by three research questions. That is: 1) what are the drivers of the violence disrupting Zimbabwe's artisanal gold mining sector? What are the effects of artisanal mining-related violence? What are the possible measures to curb the violence and criminality? An exploratory qualitative instrumental case study design was adopted. It facilitates a flexible yet focused data gathering approach from multiple angles encompassing affected industrial mining representatives, artisanal gold panners in surrounding open fields, security commanders attempting crackdowns, and oversight administrators coordinating containment. A sample size of 33 participants was interviewed in the study. A purposive sampling technique was also applied to identify the most appropriate informants. The goal is to include information-rich cases from each of the key stakeholder categories. These key informants included eight members of staff from affected large-scale mines, ten unregistered artisanal miners, five state security operatives, five displaced former mining community residents, and five civil society advocates. This gathering of informants allowed for robust data collection from key stakeholder perspectives without risking data redundancy.

The primary sampling scope for the research encompassed accessible large mine facilities, enforcement command centers, and oversight coordination offices across 3 violence-riven Midlands districts of Shurugwi, Kwekwe, and Zvishavane. Recent police and media monitoring suggest these areas continue to experience intensified raids, infrastructure sabotage, and gang violence compared to other localities. The study utilised three main sources of primary data: interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and direct observation by the researchers who had been actively involved in studying this issue. Academic journal articles, official mining industry reports, policy documents, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) reports, and other published literature were reviewed to gather background information and contextualise the collected primary data.

The in-depth key informant interviews involved extensive in-person engagements with seven security commanders, administrators, and mining managers, leveraging purposive expert sampling. Four FGDs with eight participants each, particularly with collectives of artisanal miners in hotspot communities, security personnel, large-scale mine workers, and affected community members. Each of the four FGDs lasted 2 hours to reveal motives, drivers, and protection outlooks. Direct observations involved several observational visits across attacked mining plants and residential areas to enable site assessments regarding vulnerabilities, effects of violence, and protection mechanisms employed. Last but not least, researchers also acted as instruments, given their active long-term involvement in studying mining violence. Their insights and perspectives thus served as valuable sources of primary data.

Literature Review

Contemporary empirical studies investigating escalatory artisanal mining conflicts across mineral-rich African countries provide useful comparative insights contextualizing the evolution of Zimbabwe's current gang violence crisis besieging lucrative gold mining regions. Assessments expose illicit smuggling networks, politicization risks, and oversight deficiencies, enabling unrest. However, perspectives explicitly focused on Zimbabwe's unrest remain quite limited, signaling important knowledge gaps this study seeks to address.

An expanding interdisciplinary literature explores links between informal artisanal mining, illicit cross-border smuggling channels, and outbreaks of violent micro-conflicts in mineral-rich African locales ranging from the Sahel to the Great Lakes region (McQuilken & Hilson, 2022). Studies focused on the Sahel and Central Africa trace illicit financing pathways whereby artisanally mined gold is smuggled across porous borders, bypassing state buyers, providing off-book rents supporting the sustainability of militias and terrorist cells like ISIS-affiliates, even motivating violent territorial seizures of mining areas (Pásztor, 2024).

Studies demonstrate informal panning often catalyzes clan clashes and armed group incursions in countries like Mali, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where oversight is minimal. The enforcement gaps and untraceable

contraband lucrateness sustains cycles of micro-conflicts across mineral-rich regions. Where states lack capacity demarcating regulatory frameworks, clashes frequently erupt over contested mining access rights (Wagner & Hunter, 2020). Empirical assessments globally concur that inadequate oversight and factional state interests can incentivize opportunistic use of violence to access resource rents and mining infrastructure (Auty & Furlonge, 2019; Ogwang et al., 2019).

On a similar note, there is also literature highlighting how high-value mineral reserves catalyze violence by making anticipated payoffs from illegal extractive activities appear lucrative enough to outweigh risks of confrontations, arrests, or deaths for economic underclasses (Berman et al., 2017). This literature concurs with the RCT that strained regulatory and economic circumstances incentivize criminals to evaluate mineral looting to discount threats when outsized profits beckon. This literature is critical for this study as it provides contextual evidence which sheds light in understanding Midlands gold mining violence. As a point of departure, this study further probes the RCT, especially how it can be utilized to disincentivize violence.

Scholars further observe pronounced risks of unrest where surging informal artisanal mining remains unchecked by inadequate formalization and oversight mechanisms but is actively encouraged by local political leaders seeking electoral support of licensing authority patronage (Hilson et al., 2022). These governance complexities abound in countries like Ghana and Zambia's Copperbelt, where politicians have mobilized exploitative patron-client networks around artisanal gold mining, catalyzing violent clashes over contested

sites and claims amid deficient national regulatory frameworks unable to effectively govern rapid informalization. Where mineral wealth activation proceeds in the absence of state stewardship, risks of unrest escalate.

Additionally, research focused on East Africa demonstrates that overlooking artisanal mining in policy reforms focused narrowly on large-scale industrial growth risks exacerbating precarious livelihood insecurity for marginalized mining-dependent populations, heightening grievances (Bryceson & Geenen, 2016). Studies across Africa also highlight how burgeoning cohorts of unemployed youth in resource-rich but economically stagnant states become critical drivers of disruptive mining-related unrest based on perceived injustices blocking prosperity (Sarfo-Mensah, Adjaloo, & Donkor, 2009). Likewise, this study demonstrates how economic exclusion of the youth encourages them to risk their lives, health, and well-being by resorting to violence in order to gain access to lucrative Midlands gold fields.

Investigations assessing impacts of unrelenting artisanal mining violence in locales across Africa also expose resulting socioeconomic disruptions, including internal displacement as communities flee insecurity, loss of agricultural livelihoods and revenue due to coerced mining labor regimes, human rights abuses by trafficking networks, including child conscription, and proliferation of banditry targeting citizens under cover of chaos (Amnesty International, 2020). Studies focused on crisis regions like eastern DRC further trace devastating impacts whereby continued violence and community safety fears have led to the collapse of essential basic services like healthcare and education across mining centers (Bafilemba & Lezhnev, 2015).

Evidence spotlights that beyond direct casualties, unrelenting unrest creates a climate of fear undermining wider prosperity.

These empirical cases provide convenient comparative insights for contextualizing Zimbabwe's contemporary eruption of decentralized mining violence emanating from economic marginalization, fragile policy frameworks, and corrupt local security provisions. They demonstrate wider conflict risks stemming from artisanal mining exclusion and criminalization. However, perspectives focused explicitly on examining Zimbabwe's mining violence drivers, networks of state-gang collusion, and policy complexities enabling the crisis remain quite limited. Additionally, coverage of impacts has focused predominantly on production losses rather than wider societal effects on displaced communities and the collapse of basic services, signaling an important evidence gap addressed in this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study deploys the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) of economics, first propounded by Adam Smith, to articulate the underlying factors behind artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe (Dowding, 2011). Through the utility of the RCT, the study posits that economic exclusion, compounded by a fragile regulatory framework, engenders lucrative

prospects that are sheltered by corrupt local security arrangements. Although there are numerous theories that can be used in explaining artisanal mining violence, such as political economy, state fragility, violent entrepreneurship, or hybrid governance, these theories do not fully capture the dynamics of artisanal mining violence in the Midlands (Cohn & Hira, 2020; Ferreira, 2017; Makadok & Coff, 2009; Volkov, 2002). That is, while these frameworks highlight the interplay between economic conditions and state dynamics, they tend to overlook the nuanced relationships among local actors and the informal networks that govern artisanal mining activities, as evidenced by the flexible bargains between new political actors and the state (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023).

Additionally, the focus on militarized interventions and environmental concerns fails to address the socio-economic realities that drive individuals towards artisanal mining, which is often a response to unemployment and economic decline (Ofosu et al., 2024).

The RCT, however, provides a more comprehensive understanding by emphasizing individual decision-making processes influenced by competition and resource availability, thereby elucidating the motivations behind violent conflicts between artisanal and industrial miners (Rigterink et al., 2024). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the strategic choices made by miners in response to both local and broader economic pressures, ultimately offering a clearer lens through which to analyze the violence associated with artisanal mining in Zimbabwe (Mawowa, 2013).

The RCT provides three key variables that articulate the nuances of artisanal mining violence. These are: 1) high benefits vs. low costs; 2) impunity and collusion; and 3) resource capture. Regarding high benefits vs. low costs, artisanal miners in the Midlands engage in violent competition because the rewards, such as high-grade gold deposits, are immediate and significant. For instance, one can get US\$700 for 10 grams of gold ore, which is more than what most working Zimbabweans earn each month (FGD with illegal miners, Shurugwi, personal communication, 19 February, 2023). Furthermore, the cost of violent attacks, detention, or death is often perceived as lower than the cost of poverty or starvation. Likewise, the assurance of impunity emanating from corrupt local security collusion removes the perceived negative consequences whilst reinforcing the allure of violent behavior. Last but not least, violence is used as a strategic tool to seize lucrative mining claims or pilfer processed ore from others, a rational tactic to maximize output with minimum labor.

Weak regulatory frameworks and corrupt local security arrangements significantly contribute to the persistence of violent artisanal mining practices in the Midlands. Zimbabwe's socio-economic crisis has led to a surge in illegal mining, with approximately 400,000 miners operating without oversight, particularly in districts like Kwekwe, Shurugwi, and Mberengwa, where mining-related violence is rampant (Mwatwara et al., 2022). Corruption within the security sector, particularly involving the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), has exacerbated this issue, as security forces collude with informal miners and black-market dealers, prioritizing personal gain over public

welfare (Saunders, 2016; Maringira & Masiya, 2016). This dynamic not only facilitates the exploitation of resources but also undermines efforts for democratic governance, as profits from mining are funneled to sustain political elites, further entrenching corruption and violence in the mining sector (Saunders, 2014; Mawowa, 2013).

This pursuit of personal interests by both state and non-state actors operating within the artisanal mining sector has colloquially been referred to as the ‘goat mentality’. The term is rooted in Zimbabwe’s Shona proverb: *mbudzi inodya payakasungirirwa* meaning, “a goat browses where it is tied”. Just as a goat will eat anything to survive, artisanal miners often operate in defunct, unsafe, or illegal shafts without protective equipment because their focus is solely on immediate monetary gain. The ‘goat mentality’ therefore succinctly captures how entitlement through proximity justifies personal aggrandizement within the artisanal mining sector, just as a tied goat feels entitled to eat anything within its reach (Maringira & Masiya, 2016). The ‘goat mentality’ has thus been used to describe how state actors, particularly security sector operatives, violently abuse their access to mineral-rich regions for personal enrichment. This local conceptualization of the nuances of artisanal mining violence through the ‘goat mentality’ dovetails well with the RCT.

The integration of RCT and the ‘goat mentality’ concept offers a nuanced framework for understanding artisanal mining violence in Zimbabwe’s Midlands province. The RCT posits that individuals act based on self-interest, which aligns with the motivations of artisanal miners and state security personnel who engage in violence to secure resources and personal gain (Malešević, 2022). On the other hand, the ‘goat mentality’ reflects a mindset among security forces, where state agents exploit public resources for personal enrichment, exacerbating tensions with artisanal miners (Maringira & Masiya, 2016). Additionally, competition between artisanal and industrial miners fuels conflict, as economic pressures and resource scarcity lead to violent confrontations (Rigterink et al., 2024). The exploitative labor relations within the artisanal mining sector further complicate this dynamic, as vulnerable miners face violence from both criminal gangs and state actors, highlighting the intersection of economic motivations and systemic inequalities (Mkodzongi, 2021). Thus, this integrated approach elucidates the multifaceted causes of violence in Zimbabwe’s artisanal mining landscape.

Therefore, the RCT explains artisanal mining violence not as irrational chaos, but as a deliberate, goal-oriented strategy where actors weigh the costs and benefits of using violence to secure economic gain. In the context of artisanal gold mining, violence is a tool used by individuals, syndicates, and gangs to control territory, loot resources, and enforce local order. The cost-benefit calculations of individuals involved in artisanal mining violence are influenced by several interrelated factors, including competition between artisanal and industrial miners, economic incentives, and the socio-political context. Competition for resources often leads to violent conflict, particularly in the Midlands, where artisanal gold mining is feasible alongside industrial operations, as evidenced by the significant impact of price shocks on violence in these areas (Rigterink et al., 2023, 2024).

Additionally, illegal armed groups may exploit artisanal mining for direct financial gain, either by controlling mining operations or through extortion, which creates a direct incentive for violence (Rettberg & Riomalo, 2014). The presence of large youth populations can also exacerbate tensions, as economic grievances linked to fluctuating mineral prices may lower opportunity costs for young individuals, increasing their likelihood of engaging in conflict (Belhaine, 2018). Furthermore, the informal trading networks surrounding artisanal mining often evade regulatory frameworks, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability (Chirico & Malpeli, 2014). Collectively, these factors create a complex landscape where the potential for profit often outweighs the risks associated with violent behavior. In this context, rational choice perspectives focusing on situational cost-benefit calculations shaping decisions by armed groups to violently profit from disruptions provide enhanced utility in explaining Zimbabwe's upsurge in gold sector violence. Where state efficacy lapses create a low-risk ecosystem for forcibly targeting mining assets (Berman et al., 2017).

However, the RCT can also be applied to develop effective interventions aimed at reducing violence associated with artisanal mining by altering the cost-benefit calculations of individuals involved. By understanding that individuals engage in violence when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs, policymakers can implement strategies that increase the risks and decrease the rewards of such actions.

Findings

Key drivers of artisanal mining violence in the Midlands province

This segment draws upon empirical findings obtained through in-depth fieldwork investigations conducted in volatile gold mining areas across the Midlands between October 2024 and March 2025. It was guided by the first research question. The drivers of mining violence resonate with the RCT, whereby the perceived benefits associated with artisanal mining violence outweigh the apparent risks. In this regard, the main argument proposed by the study is that artisanal mining violence in the Midlands persists because economic exclusion and weak regulation create profitable opportunities that are protected by corrupt local security arrangements.

The assumptions of the RCT align with the behaviors of artisanal miners in Zimbabwe's Midlands province, as these miners often make decisions based on perceived economic benefits and the costs associated with violence. Artisanal mining has become a crucial economic activity, providing livelihoods amidst political instability, which influences miners to engage in competitive behaviors that can lead to violence (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023; Rigterink et al., 2024). The decision to resort to violence can be seen as a rational choice when miners believe that such actions will secure their economic interests, especially in a context where mineral values are high and competition is fierce (Bond et al., 2013; Malešević, 2022).

Participant narratives across all stakeholder categories consistently underscored interrelated economic deprivation factors, governance lapses, and illicit opportunism coalescing to escalate mining-linked violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands region in the post-2017 period. Several security commanders and civil society representatives attributed appeal of illegal gold panning and mine robberies to lucrative returns from Zimbabwe's abundant gold resources amidst a climate of economic hardship, hyperinflation, and joblessness over recent years. This observation also concurs with the RCT, whereby economic challenges make the option of enrolling in artisanal mining more appealing. One retired police superintendent based in Kwekwe remarked:

These machete gangs engage in brutal violence precisely because our mineral wealth is so enticing and lucrative to impoverished youths when the formal economy is essentially collapsed. Gold is easy money, or at least perceived as such, so they want it by any means necessary (personal communication, retired Police superintendent, Kwekwe, 20 November, 2024).

Therefore, overlapping endemic youth unemployment exceeding 80% nationally alongside acute economic deprivation exacerbate cost-benefit outlooks framing illegal mining as a compelling, high-risk, high-reward income source worth risking bloodshed to access. This resonated with perspectives from illicit gold panners themselves operating along Shurugwi mining tracts, who cited financial desperation fueling criminal risk-taking:

With no money coming in from real jobs, we have to resort to panning for gold illegally to eat and survive nowadays. We risk police harassment and gang beatings to access these riches because the rewards make those dangers seem worthwhile, so then we become violent ourselves to protect our livelihoods (FGD with illegal gold panners, Shurugwi, 22 December, 2024).

Socio-economic grievances stemming from endemic poverty and surging joblessness are frequently cited as channeling restless youth demographics into illegal mining enterprises, stoking cycles of violence. That is, youth unemployment has risen to alarming levels exceeding 80% nationally by 2025 (Hove & Chenzi, 2024). One community advocate in Shurugwi lamented how the lack of viable livelihood alternatives pushed destitute youths toward lawless solutions:

It's heartbreaking seeing young men who should be productive members of society feeling they have no choice but to wield machetes to make ends meet through illegal mining. Where reputable jobs are totally unavailable, disruptive violence can seem like the only path out of destitution, even martyrdom (personal communication, Community Advocate, Shurugwi, 10 January, 2025).

Affected mining representatives concurred, with one operations manager observing their mining facility faced perpetual threats precisely because:

We are surrounded by economically disenfranchised youth populations without access to formal employment, but aware of our underground mineral riches. Our

fences alone cannot stop their desperate intrusions (personal communication, Mining Operations Manager, Gweru, 27 February, 2025).

Scholars concur that Zimbabwe's economic exclusion, especially in the post-2017 period, increased the chances of violent risk-taking, especially among the youth. Mkodzongi (2020) 1487), for instance, stated that "Under a neoliberalizing state, the youths, who historically enjoyed access to resource rents under the indigenization regulations, have been dis-empowered and marginalized in favor of an emerging comparator bourgeois representing foreign mining interests – increasingly dominated by the Chinese...However, the youths have not been passive victims of this state-sponsored onslaught; they have organized themselves into syndicates, arming themselves with machetes and other blunt instruments – as a way of resisting evictions" (p. 1487).

Accordingly, the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) also commented on how youth unemployment incentivizes artisanal gold mining violence in Kwekwe:

The idea is to create a vulnerable community that can be exploited, and artisanal miners are just the perfect constituency for that and this is one of the reasons why, upon assuming power [in 2017], President Mnangagwa liberalized artisanal miners and relaxed the licence requirements. What this meant was that the majority of unemployed young people could now easily find their way into the tunnels to extract the precious gold. But of course, it came at a price. The fact that most young people are unemployed creates a willing demographic that will do whatever to get a meal on the table... (Zimbabwe Peace Project, 2022).

However, while economic motivations are significant, they do not fully account for the complexities of violence, as social inequalities and emotional factors also play a critical role in shaping these decisions (Malešević, 2022; Winstok, 2013). Thus, understanding violence in this context requires a nuanced approach that considers both rational economic calculations and the broader socio-political dynamics at play, particularly a weak regulatory system that creates vested profitable opportunities fortified by corrupt local security arrangements.

The proliferation of unregulated artisanal gold miners through legal and administrative policy loopholes encourages conflicts destabilizing the Midlands province. Security agents recounted how ineffective mining licensing procedures enabled migrant panners to establish extensive operations in open tracts bordering industrial reserves, which then persistently clash with official entities. A senior police officer stationed in the Midlands' Kwekwe district stated:

We are completely overwhelmed trying to control the spread of these illegal panners mining gold without licences or oversight. They set up illegal mills and operations overnight along the borders of industrial mines, leading to bloody raids and counter-raids as both sides fight over the riches (personal communication, Police Commander, Kwekwe, 3 March 2025).

Mining managers echoed similar sentiments, with one operations director describing surrounding informal panning as “A porous labyrinth eroding our exclusivity with hordes brazenly extracting ore then smuggling it out before we can act, so clashes are inevitable in the mineral scramble” (personal communication, Mining Operations Director, Shurugwi, 18 January, 2025).

Compounding informal expansion are criticisms from multiple stakeholders regarding antiquated mining licensing policies and related legislation unable to constructively accommodate Zimbabwe’s soaring illegal artisanal gold panning sector. Both security operatives and community representatives cited dysfunctional bureaucratic procedures, overly focused on industrial capital rather than progressive reforms, and integrating disruptive illegal laborers as a core unrest catalyst.

The artisanal mining crisis we face begins with our licensing and legal regime stuck decades behind the realities on the ground. No economic alternatives are provided to absorb these armies of desperate illegal panners, so they fight the system, disrupting industrialists, which should be the backbone of our economy (personal communication, Civil Society Advocate, Harare, 21 November, 2024).

Likewise, a police officer from Gweru also echoed similar sentiments that:

Formalization of these artisanal miners operating outside regulated boundaries has stalled for ages under outdated mining acts catering only to big capital rather than workers’ needs. So those excluded resort to violence, occupying any space, fueling endless cycles of violence (personal communication, Police Officer, Gweru, 12 December, 2022).

The Mines and Minerals Act of 1961 (MMA), for instance, is archaic and has become difficult to unify with policies meant to stimulate growth within the mining industry and advance the nation socio-economically. The MMA has also contributed to violence since it prescribes that mining surpasses all other land uses, including agriculture and settlement. As a result, matters of environmental degradation, expulsion of residents, or damage to their farms and grazing lands by miners, including illegal ones, become secondary as long as mining interests are safeguarded (Ncube, 2021).

Another pivotal factor enabling emboldened gold mining violence cited across stakeholder groups was perceived deficient policing capacity and integrity compromised by alleged collusion between security forces and criminal gangs. Civil society advocates slammed militarized security responses as haphazard, undermined by factionalism and suspected criminal collusion networks:

While the government tries projecting martial toughness by deploying soldiers to hotspots, everyone knows elements within the security forces are compromised and collaborating with machete gangs. So the so-called containment only enriches corrupt enforcers perpetuating militarized chaos (personal communication, Civil Society Advocate, Harare, 5 March, 2025).

Residents displaced by unrest similarly decried how:

Our own police are paid off by these violent syndicates to turn a blind eye while they terrorize communities. We cannot rely on protectors who actively embolden criminal militias in our mining areas (FGD with displaced residents, Kwekwe, 28 January, 2025).

Artisanal panners went further, alleging direct exploitation by bribed security details:

Rather than making us safer, the police and soldiers frequently arrive only to extort illegal miners, demanding portions of our underground ore stashes. We comply out of fear since they collaborate with machete gangs to loot and assault anyone who resists their corrupt shakedowns (FGD with illegal miners, Shurugwi, 19 February 2023).

Within security ranks themselves, some operatives acknowledged graft undermining enforcement integrity, though framing it as infiltration rather than systemic failings:

It's true that under-resourced units have allowed criminal elements to infiltrate our structures, who betray mandates through collusion with machete militias controlling illicit gold flows. However, such corruption implicates a few rogue individuals rather than the institutions themselves (personal communication, Senior Police Official, Harare, 28 February, 2025).

These testimonies are also corroborated by media reports. For instance, Thomas Admire Mwale, a Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) soldier stationed in Kwekwe district at 5 Infantry Brigade, was arrested together with seven illegal gold miners on robbery charges. A report on Zimbabwe's election milieu also confirms the presence and active involvement of state agents in artisanal gold mining violence by stating that:

... we came across numerous reports of alleged involvement of serving and former state security personnel from the police, military, and intelligence in the shadow hierarchy and membership of these gangs, which all serve to confirm that the violence is unmistakably an organised crime... (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2023, p. 7).

This involvement of security sector operatives resonates with the 'goat mentality' and is strongly related to Zimbabwe's deepening economic crisis, pulling in state actors, especially members of the security services.

Effects of mining-related violence in the Midlands province

This segment focuses on the second research question, and it argues that coverage of impacts of artisanal mining-related violence in Zimbabwe has focused predominantly on production losses rather than wider societal effects on displaced communities and the collapse of basic services, signaling an important evidence gap. Inasmuch as the RCT

has been utilised in unpacking the underlying drivers of artisanal gold mining violence, it can also be applied in understanding its implications. The RCT framework elucidates the negative effects of artisanal mining violence on local communities in Zimbabwe's Midlands province by highlighting the strategic decisions made by individuals and groups in response to economic incentives and disincentives.

Artisanal mining, while providing essential livelihoods, often leads to environmental degradation and social unrest, as miners prioritize immediate economic gains over long-term sustainability, resulting in significant ecological damage and health issues for communities (Nyakuwanika & Panicker, 2025). Furthermore, economic shocks in the artisanal sector can trigger increased violence, as armed groups exploit these conditions to exert control and extract resources, leading to violence against civilians (Laurent-Lucchetti et al., 2024). The dynamics of gender also play a crucial role, as women disproportionately bear the brunt of violence and conflict, often exacerbated by the lawlessness perpetuated by external armed groups (Ngwenya et al., 2024).

This interplay of economic motivations, compromised security structures, and violence illustrates how rational choices, influenced by immediate economic pressures, can lead to detrimental outcomes for local communities (Huggins, 2016; Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023).

Hence, beyond production disruptions and lost export revenues, participant narratives illuminated how persistent criminality and violence besieging gold mining areas catalyzed devastating spillover effects on surrounding towns and villages across Midlands province. Rippling economic dislocations, collapsed social services, and climates of fear fueling internal displacement emerged as recurrent themes. According to residents and community groups, reverberating impacts from unabated illegal mining conflicts progressively eroded economic stability across peripheral population centers and informal sectors reliant on earnings derived from legitimate mining activities. One youth representative in Kwekwe described how:

Our district's entire underground economy of vegetable vendors, equipment suppliers, transporters, and artisans dependent on the gold mines has unraveled thanks to non-stop invasions, shuttering operations, and destroying work opportunities (personal communication, Youth Advocate, Kwekwe, 19 January, 2025).

Ngwenya et al. (2024) also postulate that artisanal mining violence significantly impacts informal economies in the Midlands region, exacerbating socio-economic challenges and community dynamics.

Testimonies further illuminated crippling losses undermining mining agglomeration linkages vital for diversified growth:

Beyond just extractives roles, entire secondary industries like machinery fabrication and maintenance have downsized significantly through lacking contracts from flagship mines forced into hibernation amidst machete warfare. Knock-on supply chain disruptions have been economically catastrophic for industrializing

communities (personal communication, Mining Operations Manager, Gweru, 22 February, 2025).

The Centre for Natural Resource Governance (2024) also stated that violence causes a significant revenue leakage for the Zimbabwean government at a time when the gold sector is a crucial component of the country's economic recovery strategy. Likewise, Shoko (2020) stressed that Zimbabwe loses US\$ 100 million worth of gold through leakages from the mining syndicates responsible for the violence and smuggling.

Another shattering outcome from criminality blighting mining zones was the hollowing out of public services, including healthcare and education, according to residents displaced from affected areas.

Our villages near the mines effectively lost all basic services amid unrelenting lawlessness and mayhem, which eventually forced clinics and schools to simply shut down, not from lack of funding but fears over staff safety under constant threats (personal communication, Community Elder, Shurugwi, 5 March, 2025).

The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2023) concurs that the haphazard manner in which artisanal gold mining is carried out wherever gold has been identified in considerable amounts has no regard for people's homes, roads, fields, or public infrastructure. In this regard, teachers from Kwekwe also echoed similar sentiments that:

Every time you enter formerly thriving settlements near gold operations, you encounter gutted buildings with broken windows having once served as schools or clinics, deserted due to colleagues fleeing brutality regularly inflicted by machete militias controlling those areas with impunity from authorities (FGD with teachers, Kwekwe, 14 February, 2025).

Civil society groups quantified these declines in their districts of operation, with one report detailing how, "23% of primary schools, 48% of secondary schools and 61% of state health facilities had outright closed between 2019 and 2024 while remaining services limped on with acute staff shortages lowering quality" (personal communication, Civil Society Researcher, Gweru, 11 March, 2025).

Scholarly reports further agree that the violence associated with mining activities has resulted in severe human rights violations, including the destruction of homes and schools (Ngwenya et al., 2024). Furthermore, the presence of armed groups intensifies insecurity, leading to violent deaths and a pervasive atmosphere of fear (Hove et al., 2014; Ngwenya et al., 2024).

The most far-reaching consequence illuminated by affected residents themselves is endemic displacement triggered by pervasive fear and insecurity afflicting communities proximate to embattled gold precincts transformed into warzone-like environments. One civil society-led monitoring population movements quantified chilling statistics highlighting Zimbabwe's burgeoning internal displacement crisis, driven predominantly by extractive

violence concentrated in the Midlands province, alleged that:

Over 37,000 persons originating from Midlands mining areas were displaced through mid-2022, seeking refuge in neighboring districts or informal camps around major towns like Kwekwe following systematic forced evictions by machete gangs (personal communication, Displacement Data Coordinator, Harare, 6 March, 2025).

Mandishekwa (2024) also stresses that displacement frequently leads to landlessness and social disarticulation as rural families lose their primary productive assets, which exacerbates their vulnerability to poverty.

Discussion

Measures to curb artisanal mining-based violence and criminality

The discussion section subsequently situates empirical insights within the study's conceptual framework, rooted in the economic theory of rational choice, which exemplifies criminal opportunism around mineral wealth (Berman et al., 2017). It is apparent that corrupt local security arrangements significantly contribute to the perpetuation of artisanal mining violence in the Midlands by intertwining state power with resource exploitation, leading to a cycle of violence and impunity. The security sector, closely aligned with the ruling ZANU-PF, has been implicated in the violent enforcement of control over artisanal mining activities, often prioritizing personal gain over public welfare (Nkomo & Nkomo, 2023; Maringira & Masiya, 2016). This 'goat mentality' fosters an environment where security personnel engage in corrupt practices, including extortion and violence against miners, thereby exacerbating local tensions and undermining community safety (Maringira & Masiya, 2016; Masiya, 2023). Hence, a multifaceted approach that combines deterrence with socio-economic support is essential for effectively reducing artisanal mining violence.

The RCT can be used as an instrument to gauge and increase the risk of undertaking in artisanal gold mining violence. Therefore, the RCT can be used in identifying possible areas where risk can be increased to outweigh the lure of participating in violent behaviour thereby fostering peace. For instance, enhancing law enforcement presence and improving community security can raise the perceived costs of engaging in violence (Bray, 2009). Mwatwara et al. (2022) also argued that the low presence or absence of local security in Midlands province's volatile gold mining regions has incentivised violent behaviour.

Likewise, providing economic alternatives and support for conflict resolution can diminish the perceived benefits of violent behaviour (Laurent-Lucchetti et al., 2024). Zimbabwe's dire economic milieu is one of the major underlying influences that increases the prospects of participating in violent behaviour in the mining sector. Therefore, opening other economic avenues eases the pressure on the artisanal mining sector, thus reducing violent behaviour.

Additionally, addressing underlying economic shocks that lead to violence, as highlighted in the context of artisanal mining, can mitigate the triggers of violence (Laurent-Lucchetti et al., 2024). This requires a holistic approach that moves beyond security crackdowns to focus on formalization, economic diversification, and structural reform. The violence is largely a product of class struggle, involving desperate, economically disenfranchised youth competing for resources against elite-controlled networks, exacerbated by the search for economic respite amidst hyperinflation and agricultural decline caused by climate change (Mkodzongi, 2020).

Furthermore, fostering a culture of integrity and accountability within mining operations can reduce the social acceptance of violence, thereby influencing individual decision-making processes (Cabrera, 2025). The current normalization of violence in the Midlands is primarily driven by informality, patronage, and weak governance, which allow illegal, violent actors to dominate gold-rush sites. Hence, fostering a culture of integrity and accountability within mining operations has the capability of reshaping social values and ending the culture of impunity, thereby rebuilding public trust in the compromised security architecture.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, gold mining sector violence in Zimbabwe's Midlands province continues to be a national security challenge. Zimbabwe's current economic situation, policy environment, and corrupt local security arrangements have contributed to the opportunity for violence. The effects of the violence have included widespread displacements, loss of potential revenue, infrastructural damage, collapse of communities, and perpetual insecurity. However, in order to bring sanity to the sector, a multi-pronged approach targeting the security and policy architecture, mining communities, and state actors needs to be adopted so as to prevent, diffuse, and address ongoing cases of mining violence across the Midlands gold-rich regions.

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Congo: Conflict Dynamics and Cross-Border Regional Interaction. The M23 Movement

Cihan DABAN

Abstract: One of the most significant problems in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the conflict involving the M23 Movement. This conflict is not merely a national security issue but also constitutes a major challenge at both regional and global levels. The name and continuity of the M23 Movement derive from the claim that the peace agreement signed on March 23, 2009, between the Congolese government and members of the CNDP was not implemented. This date played a decisive role in the group's adoption of the name "M23 Movement". The emergence of an armed group such as the M23 Movement in the DRC — one of Africa's largest countries — provides a critical case for understanding why ongoing conflicts in the country remain unresolved. In this context, the study aims to analyze the conflict between the M23 Movement and the Congolese army within the framework of conflict dynamics and cross-border regional interactions. The theoretical framework draws on conflict dynamics literature to examine how the conflict emerged and why it evolved into a protracted one. In particular, it considers Rwanda's direct and indirect influence on the M23-Congo conflict within the context of cross-border regional interactions. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach, employing document analysis based on United Nations reports, international news sources, academic literature, and both primary and secondary data. The findings indicate that the M23-Congo conflict cannot be explained solely by domestic factors; rather, cross-border regional actors play a decisive role in sustaining the conflict.

Keywords: Conflict dynamics, Congo, M23 Movement, Rwanda, national security.

Cihan DABAN

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Economics
and Administrative Sciences,
Mersin University
E-mail: dabanchihan@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-2890-2415

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Introduction

In the post-independence period, the Congo has experienced multifaceted internal conflicts in which political, ethnic, and economic dynamics are intertwined. While conflicts persist among different ethnic groups, they also continue between the Congolese government and various insurgent groups. Consequently, the Congo has become a focal point for both ethnic conflict and cross-border regional competition. In particular, the activities of armed groups operating in the eastern regions bordering Rwanda have negatively affected not only domestic security but also the state's territorial integrity and sovereign capacity.

The armed group known as the M23 Movement emerged from these historical and structural dynamics. It was established in 2012 by former members of the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP). Given that its membership roots can be traced back to the 1990s, the movement rapidly gained influence in eastern Congo and seized strategic areas (Stearns, 2012). The M23 Movement took up arms, claiming that the Goma Agreement of March 23, 2009, had not been implemented by the Congolese government, thereby posing a threat to national security. Its actions have contributed to humanitarian crises and population displacement in eastern Congo, while also undermining regional security and state sovereignty. The group has targeted agriculture, mining sites, and trade routes, severely affecting local livelihoods. This situation highlights both social vulnerability and the inability of state security forces to effectively protect the region.

At the same time, the Congolese government faces challenges not only from the M23 Movement but also from numerous other armed groups. Allegations of bribery, corruption, political disputes, and economic inequality have further weakened the state's capacity. In particular, insufficient financial support for the military has limited its effectiveness. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for the government to combat armed groups, contributing to a more complex, multi-actor conflict environment. In this context, the activities of the M23 Movement have extended beyond the national level, prompting the involvement of global powers, international actors, and the United Nations (Okello, 2025).

At the regional level, allegations that Rwanda has supported the M23 Movement remain one of the most controversial aspects of the conflict. United Nations and other international reports, as well as state statements, suggest that Rwanda has provided military, logistical, and intelligence assistance. Such support has enhanced the group's operational capacity, enabling it to carry out attacks, expand its membership, and maintain its presence in the region. These allegations have also strained bilateral relations between Rwanda and the Congo.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the drivers behind the emergence of the M23 Movement and its renewed offensive actions. It further analyses the movement's impact on security, population displacement, and political developments in eastern Congo, and explores why the conflict between the M23 Movement and the Congolese government remains unresolved, as well as the responses of global and international actors (Sterns & Vogel, 2017).

On Conflict: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concept of conflict is inherently multidisciplinary and has been defined differently across academic fields. Within international relations, conflict is generally understood as a phenomenon shaped by interest-, power-, and identity-based disputes among state and non-state actors. In this sense, it is treated as a multidimensional concept that may manifest in the form of crises of varying intensity, with or without violence.

According to Coser (1957), conflict is a process that emerges among social groups seeking to establish dominance over identity, status, power, and scarce resources. Galtung defines conflict as a process arising when the goals of actors collide, conceptualizing it through forms of violence rooted in structural and cultural factors (Galtung, 1969). Dahrendorf, in turn, argues that conflict stems from inequalities in the distribution of authority and power, potentially leading to social change through violence (Dahrendorf, 1959).

In theoretical terms, conflict is most prominently addressed within realist theory. Classical realism views conflict as an inevitable outcome of human nature and the security dilemma inherent in an anarchic international system. In *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*, Hans Morgenthau places power at the center of international politics, arguing that it defines states' interests and renders conflict a natural and enduring feature of the system (Morgenthau, 1985). Similarly, Waltz, in *Theory of international politics*, contends that imbalances in the distribution of power and states' pursuit of security structurally generate conflict, making competition unavoidable (Waltz, 2010).

Liberal theory adopts a more optimistic perspective, emphasizing that conflict can be mitigated through economic interdependence, international institutions, cooperation, and democratic governance. Nye, in *Soft Power*, argues that power in international relations extends beyond military capabilities to include cultural attraction, values, and legitimacy, which can help constrain conflict (Nye, 1990). Likewise, Keohane, in *After hegemony*, demonstrates how international institutions facilitate cooperation despite anarchy, thereby limiting conflict (Keohane, 1984). However, the rise of civil wars and non-state armed actors in the post-Cold War period suggests that the liberal notion of "constrained conflict" requires reassessment. In this regard, Galtung's distinction between structural and cultural violence highlights that conflict extends beyond armed confrontation and is also driven by inequality, exclusion, and institutional weaknesses.

Contemporary conflict theories, particularly those focused on conflict dynamics, shift attention from the origins of conflict to its persistence and transformation. Kaldor's "new wars" thesis emphasizes identity politics, war economies, and transnational networks as defining features of post-Cold War conflicts (Kaldor, 2012). Similarly, Buzan and Wæver's concept of the regional security complex highlights the role of regional interactions in sustaining and transforming conflicts (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). From this perspective, contemporary conflicts are increasingly multi-layered, protracted, and difficult to resolve.

Ultimately, contemporary conflicts do not arise solely from internal dynamics but are also shaped by cross-border interactions, regional security perceptions, and the involvement of non-state armed actors. In this context, the M23 Movement represents a multi-layered case shaped by weak state capacity, internal dynamics, and regional influences. Building on this framework, this article analyses the emergence and evolution of the M23 Movement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with particular emphasis on its historical background.

Historical Background of the M23 Movement

The historical origins of the M23 Movement — named after the March 23, 2009 agreement — can be traced back to the post-Cold War period. Armed groups remained active in the Great Lakes region throughout the 1990s, while the early 2000s were marked by intensifying ethnic tensions, internal unrest, security challenges, and weak state institutions in the Congo, all of which contributed to growing fragmentation.

One of the key groups to emerge under these conditions was the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP), established in 2006. The CNDP claimed to protect the Tutsi-origin Banyamulenge population in eastern Congo. Founded under the leadership of Laurent Nkunda, it resulted from the merger of the Synergy for Peace and Reconciliation and the Military Council for the Defence of the People. Its core objectives included defending Tutsi interests, countering the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and facilitating the return of Congolese Tutsi refugees from Rwanda (Nzobakenga, 2024).

Nkunda, a Congolese Tutsi, had previously fought with the Rwandan Patriotic Front during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and later joined the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), contributing to the overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko during the First Congo War (1996–1997). Following Laurent-Désiré Kabila's rise to power in 1997, Nkunda eventually rebelled, accusing the government of tolerating the FDLR and failing to protect Tutsi communities in eastern Congo. He later aligned with Rwanda-backed rebel movements during the Second Congo War (Vlassenroot & Verweijen, 2017).

Relations between Nkunda and President Joseph Kabila were marked by ambiguity rather than open confrontation. While Kabila sought to consolidate state authority — most notably through the 2002 Sun City Agreement, which aimed to integrate armed groups into the national army — Nkunda pursued a competing vision centered on Tutsi security, close ties with Rwanda, and *de facto* autonomy in eastern Congo. These competing agendas culminated in the 2004 Bukavu Crisis, when Nkunda seized the city, prompting the government to label his actions as rebellion and a violation of state sovereignty (Verweijen & Wakenge, 2015). From 2005 onward, tensions evolved into a protracted and increasingly internationalized conflict. Nkunda consolidated control over North Kivu, while Kabila sought support from the United Nations peacekeeping mission (MONUC).

Despite increased UN involvement, violence persisted, and Nkunda continued to accuse the government of failing to counter the FDLR.

In response, the Congolese government gradually shifted toward cooperation with Rwanda. From 2007, bilateral negotiations intensified, driven in part by international pressure on Rwanda and concerns over regional instability. The 2008 clashes around Goma marked a turning point, transforming the conflict into a regional security crisis. Rwanda, perceiving Nkunda as a destabilizing actor, ultimately agreed to cooperate with the Congolese government (Stearns, 2012). This cooperation led to a reciprocal arrangement: Rwanda moved to neutralize Nkunda, while the Congolese government targeted the FDLR and agreed to integrate CNDP forces into the national army. In 2009, Nkunda was arrested in Rwanda, and leadership of the CNDP passed to Bosco Ntaganda (International Crisis Group [ICG], July 2009). Ntaganda subsequently negotiated the integration of CNDP forces into the Congolese army, securing a senior military position in return.

However, this arrangement proved short-lived. Ntaganda maintained his autonomous influence and continued to advocate for regional control in eastern Congo. As a result, integration failed to resolve underlying identity and security-based tensions, instead postponing and ultimately reigniting conflict dynamics.

The March 23, 2009 agreement formalized cooperation between Congo and Rwanda and facilitated the integration of CNDP elements. Yet, in 2012, Ntaganda and former CNDP members established the M23 Movement, claiming that the agreement had not been implemented. This marked the beginning of a renewed phase of armed conflict. At its core, the conflict reflects a fundamental tension between state sovereignty and regional autonomy. While the Congolese government seeks to maintain territorial integrity and central authority, the M23 Movement has pursued de facto control and autonomy in eastern Congo. The absence of consensus on these issues has ensured the persistence of conflict (ICG, October 2012).

From National Insurgency to Regionalized Conflict: An Assessment in the Context of Conflict Dynamics

From the perspective of conflict dynamics, the M23 Movement illustrates that the persistence of internal conflicts cannot be explained by a single factor but rather by multiple, interacting variables. In this context, five main dynamics contribute to the transformation of a domestic insurgency into a regionalized conflict: identity-based linkages, the availability of safe havens, the financing of armed groups through natural resources, diplomatic protection, and the flow of arms and logistical support.

During the transition from colonial rule to independence, the redrawing of borders led to identity-based conflicts in many countries, with Africa representing a prominent example. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one of the underlying factors behind the conflict

between the government and the M23 Movement is associated with ethnic and identity-based dynamics. Historical and sociological ties between the Tutsi population in eastern Congo and Rwanda have facilitated interaction between the Rwandan administration and the M23 Movement. For this reason, the conflict is often viewed not solely as a domestic confrontation but as a transnational form of identity politics extending beyond national boundaries (Machibya & Sukabdi, 2025).

The security dimension has consistently remained central to the conflict. One key dynamic is the emergence of safe havens, which has enabled the M23 and its predecessor, the CNDP, to operate in areas near the Rwandan border. Such conditions provide spaces where the M23 Movement can withdraw under military pressure or reorganize after fragmentation or defeat. Weak Congolese border control and limited state authority have further facilitated the establishment of cross-border linkages by the M23. In this context, Rwanda is frequently described in the literature as a potential safe haven, although such claims remain politically and academically debated (Okello, 2025).

Another significant factor is the financing of armed groups through natural resources. Strategic minerals such as coltan, gold, and cobalt in North Kivu have not only funded armed groups but also strengthened cross-border collaborations among them. While the natural resource economy contributes to framing the conflict in identity terms, it has also transformed the dynamics into a political process shaped by economic interests. Accordingly, Rwanda's engagement with the M23 Movement is often interpreted as being partially motivated by these economic considerations (Laudati, 2013).

The provision of arms and logistical support has increased both the intensity and persistence of the conflict. What initially constituted a domestic insurgency has gradually acquired a regional dimension, involving the direct or indirect engagement of multiple actors. This has helped maintain M23's military capacity, sustain its operations, and expand its area of influence—key factors in prolonging the conflict (Nangini et al., 2014).

Finally, diplomatic protection has played a critical role. Regional diplomatic engagement has enabled the M23 Movement to maintain its presence, complicating efforts to dismantle or isolate it internationally. Rwanda's relations with the M23 are often assessed in this context. While such policies have drawn international criticism, they appear to have encouraged Rwanda to adopt a more balanced diplomatic stance over time (Brooke-Holland, 2025).

Taken together, these factors indicate that the emergence and activities of the M23 Movement reflect a conflict dynamic that extends beyond a purely domestic insurgency, highlighting a regionalized dimension. Weak Congolese state authority, deficiencies in border control, and the abundance of natural resources in affected areas are key factors shaping both the character and persistence of the conflict.

Conflict Dynamics and Main Areas of Disagreement Between M23 and the DRC

Significant differences were observed in the conflicts experienced by the two sides. Despite being a major power on the African continent, the Congolese government has been unable to halt or eliminate the M23 Movement within its borders. Key reasons for this failure include the M23 Movement's organized and systematic attacks, as well as internal challenges within the Congolese administration, such as corruption, divisions, weak command structures, and low troop morale. Additionally, disparities in mineral wealth and strategic territories have contributed to the M23 Movement's resilience. Economically significant resources, including coltan and cobalt, along with strategically important areas under M23 control, have strengthened the movement's position against the Congolese army. As a result, the armed forces have, at times, opted to withdraw from engagements with the M23 (Reuters, 2025).

High-intensity conflicts occurred between the two sides from 2012 to 2014, followed by a period of relatively low-intensity clashes between 2014 and 2021. From 2022 until the signing of the Doha Peace Agreement on October 14, 2025, in Doha, Qatar, intense confrontations resumed (Booty, 2025). In 2013, the M23 Movement was significantly weakened following a joint operation by the Congolese army and UN-backed forces. During the subsequent period until 2021, the group focused on regrouping and reorganization. By 2022, the M23 Movement had regained strength and launched attacks against the Congolese army in eastern Congo, particularly in Rutshuru and Bunagana. The Nairobi Peace Process initiated in 2023 ultimately failed to resolve the conflict. In 2024, the M23 advanced into North Kivu, approaching areas near Goma, and engaged in intense clashes with the Congolese army, establishing control over several strategic locations in the northeastern part of the country. In January 2025, the M23 Movement launched a large-scale offensive and captured Goma. By February 2025, it had also seized Bukavu, establishing significant territorial dominance in the region (Ebuteli & the Congo Research Group, 2024). Visual Map 1 illustrates the Goma and Bukavu regions, which are notable for both their mineral wealth and dense Tutsi-origin populations.

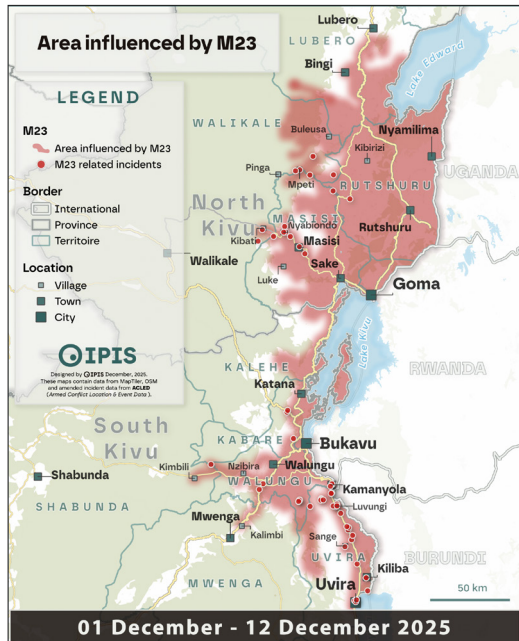
In March 2025, the M23 Movement seized Uvira and its surrounding areas and, during April–May, launched an offensive toward the Butembo region. Although the offensive did not result in the capture of the entire region, the fighting became more widespread. A Doha Peace Framework Agreement was subsequently signed between the Congolese government and the M23 Movement in Doha, Qatar; however, the agreement has not yet succeeded in ending hostilities.

In December 2025, the M23 Movement's continued occupation of Uvira and its surroundings both escalated tensions along the border and undermined the Doha Peace Framework Agreement process. In January 2026, under the framework of the Doha Agreement, a UN ceasefire monitoring mission was established, and the implementation phase of the ceasefire commenced. As of December 2025, areas under M23 control are shown in Map 2 (Ndushabandi, 2026).



Map 1: Central cities with dense Tutsi-origin populations where the M23 Movement has established territorial control

Source: Makumeno, 2025.



Map 2: Areas under the influence of the M23 Movement (December 2025)

Source: IPIS, n.d.

While all these clashes were ongoing, from the beginning of 2025 onward the United Nations issued calls for the termination of the fighting and for Rwanda to withdraw the support it had provided to the M23 movement. The statement issued by the United Nations further consolidates Rwanda's support for the M23 Movement.

Cross-Border Regional Interaction in the M23–DRC Conflict: The Case of Rwanda

Rwanda's influence in the clashes between the M23 Movement and the Congolese army can be traced back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In the post-genocide period, the withdrawal of Hutu-origin militia groups into eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo constituted a significant security threat for Rwanda. In this context, Rwanda developed relations with Tutsi-origin militias operating in eastern Congo, primarily to ensure border security. The CNDP and the M23 Movement are among these formations. Rwanda has sought to legitimize these relations through a discourse of protection against Hutu militias, suggesting that its links with Tutsi militias carry indirect or implicit strategic significance (Muleefu, 2013).

While border security is presented as a primary justification, Rwanda's policy toward the region extends beyond security concerns to encompass economic, geostrategic, and geopolitical dimensions. The presence of high-value natural resources in eastern Congo — particularly cobalt, gold, and coltan — has increased the economic importance of the region. Consequently, Rwanda's engagement with armed groups such as the CNDP and the M23 Movement is often interpreted as reflecting not only security considerations but also economic interests. These interactions are thus frequently analyzed in the literature within a framework of multidimensional regional interests (UN Security Council, 2024).

Rwanda's policies also align with its objective of maintaining regional influence. Factors such as the security vacuum in eastern Congo, the weakness of central authority, the limited capacity of the Congolese army, and the persistence of armed conflict have created conditions conducive to relationships with local armed actors. Moreover, security perceptions shaped during the 1994 genocide, along with the subsequent involvement of certain actors in eastern Congolese armed groups, contributed to historically rooted patterns of interaction between Rwanda and these groups. As a result, since the 1990s, Rwanda's relations with some armed formations in eastern Congo are generally evaluated not as direct support but as part of a broader strategy shaped by security concerns, historical experience, and regional power dynamics (Trancho, 2025).

In summary, multiple factors have influenced Rwanda's policies associated with the M23 Movement. These include the presence of Hutu militias perceived as threats to Rwanda's border regions, concerns for the security of Tutsi populations in eastern Congo, the weak internal structure of the Congolese government, the limited capacity of its national army, and the presence of significant natural resources. Additionally, Rwanda has sought to

enhance its regional influence. However, its policies — particularly regarding the M23 Movement — have been criticized by international actors and the United Nations. In response, the Rwandan government emphasizes its responsibility to ensure border security, presenting cross-border armed groups as the primary justification for its actions.

The Role of International Actors in the M23–DRC Conflict, the United Nations, and an Analysis of the Current Situation

The clashes between the M23 Movement and the Congolese army have extended beyond national boundaries, drawing significant attention from international actors and organizations. The primary geographical focus of the conflict has been eastern Congo, whose proximity to Rwanda and possession of globally significant raw materials have heightened international interest. The involvement of global powers, former colonial actors, regional states, and organizations such as the United Nations has shaped the duration, intensity, and trajectory of the conflict (Simura & Mutambudzi, 2025).

The United States evaluates the conflict through the lenses of regional stability, great-power competition, and pragmatic policy considerations. It pursues a balancing strategy in its bilateral relations with both Rwanda and the DRC, emphasizing regional stability and state security while countering the influence of Russia and China in the Great Lakes Region. Consequently, the US has refrained from directly targeting the M23 Movement, aligning its approach with UN policies and the positions of other international actors. Despite international criticism of Rwanda's support for the M23, the US has not imposed sanctions, largely due to Rwanda's pro-Western orientation. The US also endorses the Doha Peace Process and seeks the resolution of the conflict through multilateral diplomacy (ICG, December 2025).

Russia approaches the conflict more indirectly, seeking to expand its influence in Africa while cooperating with the DRC on military and security matters. Russia addresses the M23 conflict within the UN framework, emphasizing Congo's territorial integrity and criticizing Western interventionist policies. Its regional influence, however, remains limited compared with that of the US and France (Titeca, 2023).

China prioritizes economic and strategic interests over regional security, focusing on its investments in Congo's high-value minerals and infrastructure projects. While supporting UN peace efforts and condemning the seizure of key areas such as Goma and Bukavu, China avoids direct involvement or mediation, adhering to its principle of non-interference in African internal affairs (Lau, 2025).

The United Kingdom takes a more explicit stance, condemning the M23 Movement and providing humanitarian aid to Congo. It emphasizes human rights, regional security, and the humanitarian crisis, calling for the UN's recommendations regarding the conflict to be implemented (Davey, 2024).

France maintains a cautious approach, balancing support for Congo's territorial integrity with its bilateral relations with Rwanda. Drawing from its historical colonial experience and recent challenges in Africa, France emphasizes diplomatic initiatives within the UN framework and supports ceasefire efforts, reflecting a reduced regional influence compared to the past (Beloff, 2023; Petidis, 2024).

Belgium, as a former colonial power, advocates for Congo's territorial integrity and strengthening state capacity while condemning the M23 rebellion. However, Belgium exerts limited direct influence in shaping the regional balance of power (Mila, 2025).

The United Nations approaches the conflict based on international law, emphasizing Congo's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Through MONUSCO, it provides military support to the Congolese army but has achieved limited success in halting M23 activities. The UN's restricted mandate, weak state capacity, and divergent policies among major powers have constrained its effectiveness, indirectly enabling the persistence of the M23 Movement (Mishra, 2025).

Comparative analysis reveals that the M23 conflict has escalated into a transboundary regional crisis. While the US and UK stress Congo's territorial integrity, their strategic relations with Rwanda encourage a balanced approach. France and Belgium align more closely with Congo but avoid direct intervention. Russia focuses on security-oriented influence, whereas China prioritizes economic interests. These divergent approaches hinder coordinated international intervention, complicating efforts to resolve the conflict.

Current efforts under the African Union and East African Community frameworks aim to halt hostilities and restore state authority in eastern Congo. The M23 Movement is expected to withdraw from captured areas, while the Congolese government gradually reasserts control. However, these processes remain fragmented and temporary. Within the African Union's "African solutions to African problems" paradigm, durable peace is envisioned through continental, internal mechanisms rather than external intervention.

Conclusion

The actions of the M23 Movement have emerged as a significant security challenge in the region. This issue is not confined to the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone but has also manifested as a cross-border regional problem. Several factors underlie the persistence of armed conflict in the Congo, including the country's multi-ethnic composition, security vacuums along its borders, regional competition, and the government's weak policies toward the eastern provinces. Consequently, the M23 Movement has established itself as an effective force in areas where state authority is limited. Analyzing the M23 conflict solely within national boundaries is insufficient; the conflict must be understood as a multi-layered process shaped by cross-border regional interactions, which increasingly takes on global dimensions.

Findings indicate that Rwanda is the primary power actor behind the M23 Movement's active offensive operations. This assertion is reflected in both UN reports and statements from the international community. The conflict zone's proximity to Rwanda, combined with the Tutsi ethnicity of many M23 members, has facilitated the Movement's ties with the Rwandan government. This situation has weakened Congo-Rwanda bilateral relations and heightened security concerns among neighboring regional actors. The absence of a cohesive regional strategy has, in turn, enabled the persistence and expansion of the M23 Movement.

A critical examination of the M23 conflict reveals that the policies of global powers, international actors, and organizations have largely been reactive, short-term, and weak. These policy shortcomings have allowed the M23 Movement to consolidate its position as a major actor in the region. The conflict's continuity demonstrates that UN-led peace missions have not adequately accounted for the complex actor configurations on the ground or the cross-border dynamics at play. While these efforts have mitigated the humanitarian impact of the conflict, they have proven ineffective in producing a sustainable political solution. This has weakened regional security and expanded the operational space of the M23 Movement. Although the UN's policy emphasizes respect for the DRC's territorial integrity and sovereignty — a principle supported rhetorically by global powers and international actors — the lack of robust engagement has created a weak policy framework, facilitating the M23's continued operations.

Ultimately, resolving the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo cannot rely solely on military force. Achieving sustainable peace requires a combination of inclusive political dialogue, national cooperation, and cross-border regional coordination. Specifically, progress toward peace depends on the Congolese government undertaking sincere measures to strengthen national unity, implement security-focused policies in coordination with neighboring states, enhance local governance capacities, and pursue reforms that reduce social exclusion. At the same time, the limited engagement of global and international actors constrains the potential for sustainable peace. Without their active participation in formulating and supporting effective policies, the M23 Movement is likely to remain a persistent example of chronic conflict.

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Romania: Navigating the “Dreamer” Client. A Qualitative Study of Conflict Management in the Advertising Industry

Anișoara PAVELEA, Alina Diana PASCAL

Abstract: The advertising industry has transitioned into a highly fragmented and dynamic environment, yet the nature of conflict within agency-client relationships remains under-researched, particularly in transitional markets. While literature extensively covers “success factors,” there is a notable gap in understanding the pragmatic, day-to-day conflict resolution strategies employed by practitioners. This study explores how advertising practitioners in Romania perceive the causes of conflict and identifies the informal practices used to prevent, manage, and resolve these tensions. Specifically, it examines the “expectation-expertise asymmetry” that characterizes modern digital advertising services. Using an exploratory qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Romanian advertising professionals. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework. Findings reveal five dominant themes: (1) an epistemic gap where execution-level practitioners view academic theory as disconnected from rapid digital shifts; (2) a pervasive “expectation asymmetry” driven by “dreamer” clients seeking instant ROI; (3) the emergence of “technical translation” as a critical relationship-maintenance tool; (4) the proactive use of value-based boundaries to protect agency reputation; and (5) a deliberate shift from creative logic to contractual pragmatism during conflict resolution. The study concludes that conflict stems from role ambiguity and technical knowledge gaps. It identifies the Account Manager as a critical “boundary spanner” and informal mediator. By bridging conflict theory with practitioner-led solutions, this research contributes to a grounded understanding of how professional service relationships are sustained in emerging European markets.

Keywords: Advertising agency, agency-client relationships, conflict management, account management, Romania, qualitative research, thematic analysis.

Anișoara PAVELEA

Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania

E-mail: pavelea@fspac.ro

ORCID: 0000-0001-7239-7826

Alina Diana PASCAL

Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania

E-mail: alina.pascal1@yahoo.com

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Introduction

The advertising industry has undergone significant transformation over time, particularly with the expansion of digital and online advertising. Advertising has become “a prominent feature of economic life” (Bagwell, 2007, p. 1705), playing a central role in shaping communication strategies aimed at persuading consumers and generating profit (Richards & Curran, 2002). In Europe, the United Kingdom leads in advertising expenditure, followed by Germany and France (Fuchs, 2018), while major technology companies such as Google and Facebook rely heavily on advertising revenues. At the same time, the industry has become increasingly fragmented, dynamic, and less bureaucratic (Grant, McLeod, & Shaw, 2012), with agencies expanding their services beyond creative production to include marketing strategy, media planning, and research.

Within this evolving landscape, advertising agencies operate as complex organizations in which different roles contribute to both creative output and relationship management. Account managers, in particular, play a pivotal role as intermediaries between the agency and the client, translating client needs into actionable strategies and coordinating internal teams to meet deadlines, budgets, and performance objectives. As noted by Morais (2007), they function simultaneously as relationship managers, problem solvers, and communicators, operating in contexts characterized by uncertainty and fragmented information.

Despite the centrality of these relationships, a persistent gap exists between academic understandings of advertising and practitioners’ day-to-day realities. Nyilasy and Reid (2009) highlight the difficulty practitioners face in engaging with academic knowledge, often due to its abstract language and limited applicability to fast-changing industry conditions. As a result, practitioners tend to develop their own practical frameworks and assumptions about how advertising works, grounded in experience rather than theory. This divergence is particularly visible in digital environments, where rapid change challenges the relevance of static theoretical models.

A substantial body of literature has examined the factors that contribute to successful agency-client relationships, emphasizing elements such as trust, communication, expertise, and mutual understanding (Fam & Waller, 2008). These relationships are both relational and contractual, involving ongoing collaboration between partners with shared but not always aligned objectives. However, in an increasingly competitive market where clients demand measurable returns on investment, these relationships are under constant pressure, and agency switching has become more common (Arul, 2011).

While existing research has largely focused on success factors and relationship development, significantly less attention has been paid to the nature of conflicts that arise within agency-client relationships and how these conflicts are managed in practice. In particular, there is limited empirical insight into how practitioners themselves understand and navigate such conflicts, especially in emerging or transitional advertising markets such as Romania. This gap is notable given that conflict is an inherent feature of collaborative professional relationships, particularly where expectations, expertise, and responsibilities are unevenly distributed.

In response to this gap, the present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to examine how advertising practitioners perceive and manage conflicts in agency-client relationships. Rather than attempting to generalize broadly, the study seeks to provide an in-depth, practitioner-oriented perspective on the causes of conflict and the strategies used to address them in practice. By focusing on practitioner experiences, the study aims to contribute to a more grounded understanding of how conflicts emerge and are handled in real-world agency contexts.

Literature review

A. The agency-client relationship: A relational core

The agency-client relationship is frequently likened to a “marriage,” though its longevity has declined from an average of eight years in the 1990s to significantly shorter cycles today (Turnbull, 2016). This relationship evolves through a distinct lifecycle: induction, development, maintenance, and dissolution (Fam & Waller, 2008). At the heart of this lifecycle is the “people factor”—the interpersonal chemistry characterized by trust, honesty, and compatibility (Cagley & Roberts, 1984). However, the success of this bond is often threatened by two primary factors:

- Service quality vs. expectations: While agencies focus on technical and creative excellence, clients often prioritize speed, ROI, and reliability (Palihawadana & Barnes, 2005).
- Role ambiguity: Conflict frequently arises from “role definition problems” where the boundaries between the agency’s expertise and the client’s internal policies become blurred (Triki et al., 2007). In emerging markets, this is compounded by the client’s need for the agency to act not just as a creator, but as a strategic business advisor.

B. Conflict in professional service relationships

In the advertising industry, conflict is not merely an occasional disruption; it is an inherent feature of collaborative professional service work. Because advertising requires the “co-production” of value, both parties must invest significant cognitive and emotional resources.

Friction matters in this context because it directly impacts retention and creative output. According to Morais (2007), conflict often stems from a hierarchy of divergent goals, as agencies seek to preserve the relationship while producing “showcase” creative work that enhances their reputation, while clients seek to maintain control, meet strict deadlines, and achieve high copy-test scores.

When these goals collide, the relationship moves from a functional collaboration to a dysfunctional power struggle. Left unmanaged, these tensions lead to “agency switching,” a practice becoming increasingly common in competitive markets where clients demand immediate, measurable returns (Arul, 2011).

C. Frameworks for managing conflict

To interpret how practitioners navigate these tensions, two primary frameworks provide the most analytical utility:

1. Moore's Sources of Conflict (2014) — This model allows for the diagnosis of *why* a clash is occurring by categorizing triggers into five areas:

- Data: differing interpretations of briefs or performance metrics.
- Structural: ambiguity regarding responsibilities or timelines.
- Value: clashes over what constitutes “good” or “effective” advertising.
- Relationship: miscommunications or negative past experiences.
- Interest: when one party feels their specific needs (e.g., budget vs. creativity) are not being met.

2. The Trust and Interest Model — Building on the “Dispute Resolution Stairway”, this approach emphasizes moving away from power-based confrontations toward interest-based negotiations. For practitioners, maintaining the “Triangle of Satisfaction” (addressing the result, the process, and the emotions involved) is key to preventing a conflict from escalating into a total breakdown of trust (D’Urso & Gavrilă, 2020). By focusing on shared interests rather than rigid rights or professional “ego,” account managers can transition from a crisis back to a state of “functional conflict” that actually drives innovation.

Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do advertising practitioners describe the main causes of conflict in agency-client relationships?
- (2) What practices do practitioners use to prevent, manage, and resolve such conflicts?
- (3) How do practitioners explain the gap between agency expertise and client expectations?

By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to the literature on agency-client relationships by foregrounding the role of expectation asymmetry, knowledge gaps, and communication practices in shaping conflict dynamics, while also highlighting the predominantly informal and pragmatic approaches used by practitioners in managing these tensions.

Methodology

3.1 Research design and sampling

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the subjective experiences of advertising practitioners regarding conflict. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate here as it captures the “lived realities” and informal negotiation tactics that quantitative measures often overlook.

The sample consists of five advertising practitioners from the Romanian industry, recruited via snowball sampling. Participants represent a diverse cross-section of roles — from high-level management to specialized social media execution — providing a “360-degree” view of agency-client friction.

Table 1. Respondents by job title, age, gender, seniority work and company

Respondent	Job	Age	Gender	Seniority work	Company size	Company’s founding year
R1	Head of Marketing & People Operations	38	Female	2 years	36	2008
R2	Customer Success Manager	36	Female	4 years	36	2008
R3	Social Media Manager	22	Female	2 years	14	2011
R4	Social Media Manager	23	Female	7 months	14	2011
R5	Agency Manager	26	Male	4 years	4	2018

3.2 Data collection and thematic analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via email and video calls. The interview guide was structured to address three core areas: (1) the gap between academic theory and practice, (2) triggers of agency-client dissatisfaction, and (3) pragmatic conflict resolution strategies.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (TA) following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved:

1. Familiarization through immersive reading of transcripts to identify recurring concepts.
2. Initial coding: tagging segments related to “unrealistic expectations,” “technical gaps,” and “informal negotiation.”
3. Theme development: clustering codes into broader patterns of meaning.
4. Reviewing and defining themes to ensure they accurately reflect the dataset.

Findings

The analysis revealed five dominant themes that characterize the conflict landscape in Romanian advertising.

Theme 1: The epistemic gap (theory vs. practice)

A significant divergence exists between academic definitions of advertising and practitioner realities. While participants recognized academic hallmarks like “persuasion” and “awareness,” they prioritized technical utility and market attention. Notably, a divide emerged regarding the value of scientific literature: strategic leaders (R1, R5) viewed it as a foundational technical reference (e.g., understanding Google algorithms), whereas

client-facing and execution roles (R2, R3, R4) dismissed it as disconnected from the “daily-changing” digital environment.

The Head of Marketing (R1), together with the Brand Manager (R5) agreed that scientific articles are a fundamental reference in their daily work. The Head of Marketing said that:

The whole methodology that underlies the work (processes and procedures) of the agency is of a scientific and especially technical nature (e.g., how Google works, what Google algorithms involve, what they take into account, what are the differentiators from a technical point of view when talking about indexability of a site, etc.). The agency's work and success is not based on creative advertising, but on opportunities for visibility in the digital environment given by the technical context.

This is totally opposed to the response of the Customer Success Manager (R2) of the same agency, who said that “*in my job, I don't personally relate to scientific articles*”. The same thing was said by the two social media managers (R3 & R4), mentioning that there is a discrepancy between scientific articles and the digital environment that changes daily.

Theme 2: Expectation asymmetry and the “dreamer” client

The primary trigger of conflict is the gap between client “dreams” and agency “deliverables.” Practitioners characterized clients as “dreamers” who often view marketing as a “magic solution” for instant wealth (R5):

Most of them believe that marketing is the magic solution that will make them win a lot of money with as little investment as possible. They don't understand the importance of investing in an effective system to convert visitors into customers and they don't understand that once you are successful in online marketing, success can be scaled very easily.

Conflict arises when clients demand “incredible results overnight” without understanding the technical timelines required for organic growth or brand building:

Even if few clients know in detail the purpose of activity and what a campaign of a certain type entails (SEO, Content, PPC, etc.), the challenge is more about expectations vs. time. Everyone would like incredible results overnight, but most of them realize that any advertising or marketing effort takes time” (R1).

This expectational asymmetry is compounded when clients have low “advertising education,” leading to subjective feedback and friction over strategic choices.

Theme 3: The role of technical “translation” in relationship maintenance

Success in the Romanian market is predicated on the agency's ability to act as a translator. Practitioners emphasized that “translating technical information” (e.g., SEO metrics) into “business-objective language” is the essential differentiator for long-term retention. When this translation fails, or when clients refuse to implement technical recommendations, the relationship quickly shifts toward dissatisfaction and eventual termination.

The literature shows that the main causes of dissatisfaction are related to creative design, lack of staff attention to the invoices the client pays and late deadlines. However, we have discovered other causes that can create dissatisfaction: lack of knowledge, unrealistic expectations, and failure to implement technical recommendations. R1 states:

*Yes — the main cause was a lack of understanding/knowledge of SEO in terms of the technicalities involved which led to unrealistic (and sometimes miscommunicated) expectations from the client”, a response reinforced by R2:
Incorrectly set expectations or failure to implement technical recommendations, automatically resulting in failure to meet set targets.*

Only one of the respondents said that it was difficult for them to identify such causes of dissatisfaction.

Theme 4: Moral and value-based boundaries

Conflict is not always reactive; it can be proactive. Several practitioners (R1, R5) reported value-based conflicts where they refused clients from “unethical” industries (e.g., gambling, adult entertainment). Furthermore, when professional advice is ignored, agencies utilize a “responsibility disclaimer” strategy: they execute the client’s flawed vision but explicitly refuse accountability for the results, creating a formal boundary to protect agency reputation. As one of the Social Media Managers (R3) states,

if the agency feels that the client’s decision is inappropriate, we support our choices with clear information and research, and in rare cases they refuse to work with clients with very divergent views („if we notice that we are not on the same page”).

For some it is a matter of responsibility in case of failure. The client takes the final decision, but the agency staff feels they are obligated to give them advice on best possible alternatives:

We inform our client about the risks their approach would bring and present the reasons why we think we should use our approach, however, if the client does not accept, we will go with their version, without taking any responsibility for the results achieved for that product or service.

Theme 5: Pragmatism over creativity in resolution

While the industry prides itself on creativity, practitioners largely reject “creative” conflict resolution. Instead, they favor efficiency and contractual pragmatism. Resolution tactics are categorized into:

- Social restoration: physical meetings and “open, honest discussions” to rebuild trust (R2 suggests “creating a friendly environment, a physical meeting, an open and honest discussion”).
- Commercial compensation: offering bonuses, additional services, or refunds to mitigate negative feedback.
- Amicable dissolution: terminating contracts when structural changes or unrealistic demands make the “marriage” unsustainable.

Therefore, although advertising agencies relies on creativity in creating communication campaigns and strategies, when it comes to conflicts, they consider that creativity and efficiency are two totally different matters that cannot be intertwined.

Discussion and Contribution

This study confirms that Moore's (2014) Conflict sources — specifically data, structural, and value conflicts — are highly prevalent in the advertising sector. Our findings suggest that in the Romanian “transitional” market, data conflict is often rooted in the client's lack of technical education, while value conflict stems from the clash between the client's “get rich quick” mentality and the agency's strategic process. Furthermore, the data challenges the “creative” identity of the agency when applied to internal management. There is a clear “de-creative” shift during conflict: practitioners move away from the fluid, innovative logic used for campaigns and toward a rigid, interest-based negotiation style. This suggests that in high-pressure agency environments, “efficiency” is valued more highly than “creative problem-solving” when the relationship itself is at stake.

The study makes three primary contributions. First, it provides rare insight into the Romanian advertising market, highlighting how “technical translation” is a unique survival skill for agencies in emerging economies. Second, it identifies the account/success manager as a “boundary spanner” who must balance client education with professional integrity. And third, it contributes to the ADR (alternative dispute resolution) literature by demonstrating that “creative” industries may deliberately avoid “creative” resolution in favor of formal, efficiency-driven outcomes to preserve professional authority.

Managerial contributions

If we are to consider the translation of the findings of our study into actionable strategies, a series of managerial implications can be drawn, as these are meant to provide “real-world” value to the industry. Mirroring the five major themes identified, these practical recommendations for account managers are presented in the Table 2.

Limitations and Conclusion

The primary limitation of this study is the sample size ($n = 5$), which, while providing deep qualitative insight, prevents broad generalization across the entire Romanian industry. Additionally, the data relies solely on the agency's perspective, while the client's view of these conflicts remains unexplored. Finally, the use of email-based interviews for some participants may have limited the spontaneous “richness” of the dialogue compared to in-person interactions.

This research highlights that conflict in advertising is less about the “creative product” and more about the management of expectations and technical knowledge. In Romania,

Table 2: Practical recommendations for account managers (AMs)

Research theme	Identified challenge	Strategic recommendation for practitioners
The epistemic gap	Disconnect between academic theory and fast-paced digital execution.	Hybrid knowledge integration: use technical „theory” (e.g., algorithms, SEO logic) as a credibility anchor, but supplement it with real-time case studies to prove agility.
Expectation asymmetry	The „dreamer” client: unrealistic ROI goals and „magic solution” mindsets.	The „reality brief”: replace the standard brief with an „estimate vs. risk” document. Set „minimum, expected, and stretch” goals in writing before the contract begins.
Technical translation	Communication breakdown due to technical jargon or lack of client education.	Translational audits: Conduct monthly „objective alignment” meetings where technical metrics are explicitly mapped to the client’s specific business KPIs (e.g., „clicks = foot traffic”).
Pragmatic resolution	High-pressure friction leading to potential contract termination.	„De-creative” conflict buffering: switch from creative brainstorming to interest-based negotiation during disputes. Use „face-saving” tactics — such as bonus services — to de-escalate without admitting professional failure.
Value-based boundaries	Tension between agency reputation and „uneducated” or „difficult” client feedback.	The advisory disclaimer: when a client insists on a flawed strategy, formally document the agency’s counter-recommendation. Shift from „order-taker” to „strategic consultant” to protect agency brand equity.

practitioners navigate a landscape of “dreamer” clients by employing radical honesty, technical translation, and pragmatic negotiation. The study concludes that the “gap” between academia and practice is most visible in the speed of change; practitioners view theory as a slow-moving anchor, while the digital market requires a fast-moving sail. For the agency-client “marriage” to survive, agencies must transition from being “vendors of ads” to “educators of strategy,” ensuring that both parties are speaking the same language of results, risk, and reality.

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Cyprus: The European Union's Role in the Conflict

Laura PIMENTA

Abstract: This research examines how the European Union has approached the Cyprus conflict, focusing on why it has failed to assume a central role in conflict resolution. While EU accession initially reshaped the dynamics of the dispute, the Union has not succeeded in achieving meaningful progress toward a settlement. Instead, the EU evolved from a potential mediator into a structurally partial stakeholder in the conflict. Drawing on a constructivist framework, complemented by the concept of Normative Power Europe and an institutional perspective, the article analyzes how perceptions, norms, and institutional constraints have shaped the EU's role in Cyprus. The research adopts a qualitative, document-based case study approach, supported by interviews with experts and members of the Cypriot communities, providing insights into both institutional dynamics and lived experiences. The article concludes that Cyprus' accession has internalized the conflict within the European Union, reinforcing asymmetries between the two communities and limiting the Union's capacity to act impartially.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, Cyprus conflict, EU external action, European Union, Normative Power Europe, United Nations.

Introduction

The Cyprus conflict is an important topic in International Studies due to its complexity: it is not only the oldest protracted conflict in Europe but also one of the world's most enduring unresolved ethnic disputes. While the island's historical and ethnic past has shaped the conflict, the failure to resolve it now lies in the hands of major global actors such as the United Nations and the European Union—the latter facing the unique situation of hosting a conflict within its own territory.

Laura PIMENTA

ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
E-mail: laura.pimenta02@hotmail.com

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This article argues that Cyprus's accession to the EU in 2004 reshaped the social and political dynamics on the island without leading to a meaningful transformation toward resolution. Instead, membership turned the Union from a potential mediator into a structurally partial stakeholder. By internalizing the conflict, accession consolidated asymmetries of recognition and created institutional constraints that limited the Union's capacity to play an effective role in peace negotiations. At the same time, the EU's normative identity further restricted its actions, constraining its role as a peacemaker in Cyprus. The main research question guiding this article is: How has the European Union approached the resolution of the Cyprus conflict?

Theoretical Framework

The complex nature of the Cyprus problem, coupled with the unique role of the European Union on the international arena, requires a comprehensive theoretical framework to cover the various aspects of the analysis. This study adopts Constructivism as a theoretical lens of analysis in light of the conflict's deep roots in issues of identity, ethnic divisions, and divergent perceptions of historical events. The constructivist emphasis on social context, as outlined by Alexander Wendt (1992), is particularly relevant to this study, considering the emergence of different narratives and interpretations of the dispute among the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities over time.

The concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE), as developed by Ian Manners (2002), enriches and deepens the constructivist perspective by focusing on the EU's international role. This complementary approach provides a deeper understanding of the EU's unique form of power, examining how its actions, values, and influence are reflected in the norms it promotes throughout the Cyprus conflict.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical perspectives, this article uses an institutional analytical approach to examine the institutional structure of the European Union. Its internal norms, decision-making mechanisms and strategic interests shape its identity as an international actor and influence its actions. This lens enables the research to explain how institutional constraints limit the Union's role as a neutral mediator in the conflict while its norms simultaneously influence the behavior of other actors.

Methodology

In order to answer the question, the article employs a qualitative methodology in the form of a document-based analytical case study, drawing on EU and UN official statements regarding the Cyprus conflict, as well as relevant academic literature. A small number of semi-structured interviews complement the analysis, providing illustrative insights from experts, stakeholders and representatives of the Cypriot communities. This combined approach allows for a thorough examination of the institutional and normative factors that

have constrained the EU's role as a mediator and limited its ability to act as a neutral actor in the conflict.

To ensure a wide variety of respondents, the interviews conducted included a Greek Cypriot (R1), an Armenian Cypriot (R2), a Turkish Cypriot (Professor Ahmet Sözen), and a British professor and researcher with expertise in conflict analysis (Professor James Ker-Lindsay). At their request, the two respondents from the Republic of Cyprus chose to remain anonymous and are therefore referred to by code.

As the study aims to present new information, particularly concerning the EU's role in the conflict, the analyzed period ranges from the rejection of the Annan Plan and Cyprus' accession to the European Union in 2004 to the present day.

1. The European Union and the Cyprus Conflict: Pre-accession Context

1.1. Historical overview of the conflict

Formally annexed by the United Kingdom in 1925, Cyprus has always been home to a diverse population, including Greeks and Turks. In 1955, the Greek Cypriot community launched an offensive campaign to end colonial rule on the island and achieve *enosis* — the political union of Cyprus with Greece. This marked the beginning of a guerrilla war that drew both Greece and Turkey into the conflict as the 'motherlands' of each side (Adamides & Constantinou, 2012; Dietzel & Makrides, 2009).

It was not until 1960 that Cyprus became an independent state and a member of the United Nations. The agreements and the Constitution sought a balance between the political and administrative rights of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, which were to share power equally (Müftüler-Bac & Güney, 2005). In addition, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom became "guarantor powers with the constitutional right to military intervene unilaterally in Cyprus should the need arise" and British military bases remained on the island (Adamides, 2012, p. 122).

Even with a unique regime in place, tensions escalated into a civil war in 1963 following a constitutional crisis. Despite the efforts of the guarantor powers and the intervention of the UN — which established the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) in 1964 —, the conflict between the two Cypriot communities continued, reaching its peak in July 1974. A *coup d'état* against President Makarios, carried out by Greek Cypriot forces and supported by the Greek military junta, led to Turkey's military intervention, resulting in the occupation of the northern part of the island and part of Nicosia (Müftüler-Bac & Güney, 2005; UN Department of Public Information, 1996).

After the ceasefire demanded by the UN, a neutral zone was created — the 'Green Line' — which turned out to be a geopolitical division of the island. The two communities were officially separated, resulting in the Republic of Cyprus — in the South of the island, ruled and inhabited by Greek Cypriots — and the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern

Cyprus (TRNC), inhabited by the Turkish Cypriot community (UN Department of Public Information, 1996).

1.2. The EU as an external actor in the conflict

The European Union's role in the Cyprus conflict has evolved from that of a mere observer to an indirectly involved actor, particularly since 1974. By supporting the work and decisions of the UN, the EU gradually became engaged in the conflict, though it did not remain neutral for long. Greece's accession in 1981 raised questions about the Union's neutrality in the Cyprus problem: a party to the conflict had become a Member State, thereby gaining rights that could influence EU actions towards Cyprus in its favor. This led Turkey to no longer perceive the EU as an "impartial mediator in the dispute over the division of the island" (Hutchence & Georgiades, 1999, p. 85), signaling the Union's gradual shift from potential mediator to structurally partial stakeholder.

Following a progressive enlargement period, the EU decided to 'open its doors' to countries from Central and Eastern Europe, as "an opportunity to unite Europe after generations of conflict" (Eralp & Beriker, 2005, p.178). Along with the wave of applications, Cyprus applied for full membership in 1990, despite the continued division on the island. The application was made by the Greek Cypriot authorities on behalf of the entire island — a controversial decision given that the northern part of the island was ruled by the Turkish Cypriot authorities. Yet the European Commission considered Cyprus eligible for membership, linking it to the resolution of the conflict as part of an attempt to influence the conflict's dynamics according to its norms and values. Many Member States were opposed to accepting Cyprus into the Union before a solution to the conflict had been found. However, Greece was open to accepting South Cyprus, as it would benefit its position in the conflict, and so used its veto power as a 'threat' for the upcoming enlargement — a decision that required unanimity (Eralp & Beriker, 2005; Sertoglu & Ozturk, 2003). This forced the EU to change its approach due to its internal power dynamics and consequently consolidated its partial role in the Cyprus problem, shaping the perceptions of neutrality and legitimacy among the conflicting parties and highlighting how the Union's normative identity constrains its involvement in Cyprus.

Shortly before the EU enlargement took place, the UN Secretary-General developed what many considered to be the best chance of resolving the Cyprus conflict: the 'Annan Plan'. Proposing the reunification of the island through the creation of a United Cyprus Republic consisting of two constituent states, the plan aimed to achieve a peaceful settlement and prevent Cyprus from joining the European Union as a divided state (Loizides & McGarry, 2019). The European Union endorsed the initiative and, in order to make it compatible with the EU's *Acquis Communautaire*, became the main mediator of the Annan Plan. However, by 2002 it was already established that, regardless of the outcome of the plan, the Republic of Cyprus would join the European Union in May 2004 (Axt, 2009).

The two Cypriot communities reacted differently to the Annan Plan due to diverging narratives on the conflict and perceptions about the EU's role. The Turkish Cypriots, having developed a kind of Euro-skepticism due to the Union's prior loss of neutrality, saw the benefits of European integration, political equality, and international recognition — reflecting the EU's normative framework — and accepted the Annan Plan. By contrast, the Greek Cypriots perceived it as unfair and identified several disadvantages for the community, which, together with the guaranteed EU membership, contributed to the rejection of the plan. The referendum outcome prevented the reunification of the island, and on 1 May 2004, Cyprus joined the European Union. Although the entire island became a *de jure* member, only the area administered by the Greek Cypriot authorities is a *de facto* member, meaning that the *Acquis Communautaire* does not apply to the Turkish North (Axt, 2009; Loizides & McGarry, 2019; Kyris, 2012). This demonstrates that the EU's normative power was insufficient to resolve the Cyprus conflict or influence the social context, resulting in the internalization of the unresolved conflict and the admission of a divided Member State.

2. The European Union's Approach to the Cyprus Conflict

2.1. The EU's involvement after Cyprus' accession

The accession of Cyprus to the European Union failed to resolve the conflict, contrary to widespread expectations that it would facilitate a settlement. Instead, it marked a shift in the Union's role: the EU has increased its involvement in the island's affairs and sought to engage with both communities, but this engagement takes place within an asymmetrical institutional framework, since EU law does not apply to the TRNC territory (Kyris, 2013).

The Union committed itself to helping the Turkish Cypriot community through a series of regulations aimed at reducing its international isolation. Framed as a 'reward' for the community's acceptance of the Annan Plan, this approach reflected the EU's normative logic of incentivizing alignment through the promise of integration. Furthermore, these measures were also intended to pave the way for the eventual implementation of the *Acquis Communautaire* once the dispute had been resolved. In this context, the European Union adopted the Green Line Regulation (GLR), designed to control intra-island trade and the flow of people across the UN buffer zone; and the Financial Aid Regulation (FAR), aimed at providing financial assistance to support the economic development of the Turkish Cypriot community and prepare it in the event of reunification (Kyris, 2012, 2013; Sotiropoulou, 2024). However, the Union's engagement remained structurally constrained: the Direct Trade Regulation (DTR), proposed to facilitate a trade agreement between Northern Cyprus and the European Union, remains blocked, reflecting the influence of Member States' positions within the Union.

Throughout the peace process developments of 2015–2017, the EU saw its role diminish once again. Its gradual shift from potential mediator to indirect participant during the

pre-accession period reduced the Union to the *status* of mere observer at the UN-led Crans Montana talks (International Crisis Group, 2023). Although indirectly involved through the Republic of Cyprus' membership, the EU did not actively intervene in the negotiations. The Union's role as a neutral actor was increasingly questioned and its ability to influence decisions remained limited.

Although it may not achieve transformative results through the use of soft power, the Union has remained actively engaged in the Cyprus problem, leveraging the normative tools at its disposal — primarily, discourses and diplomatic actions. On many occasions, the EU has reiterated its commitment to a bizonal, bicomunal federation on the island, as stated by Josep Borrell in a speech in Nicosia. After noting the fundamental role of UN peacekeeping operations, Borrell stressed that the Cyprus problem remains “one of the most difficult and longstanding conflicts in Europe” and the importance of achieving “a comprehensive settlement based on a bicomunal, bizonal federation with political equality” which should be in line with the EU *acquis* and European law (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2021). Ursula von der Leyen reinforced the EU's support for a settlement in a press statement alongside the President of the Republic of Cyprus, stating that it “should take place within the UN framework, on the basis of a bicomunal, bizonal federation with political equality”, and adding that the Union “also stand[s] ready to support all stages of the UN-led process, within appropriate means” (European Commission, 2024). These statements reflect a consistent position and demonstrate the EU's role as a normative actor: by publicly supporting UN-led initiatives and promoting a comprehensive resolution, the Union endorses its principles while keeping the Cyprus problem on the international agenda. At the same time, the EU recognizes the need for practical power, which it cannot fully exercise, thus remaining under the UN's umbrella.

Finally, a meaningful instrument of the Union's diplomatic action has been financial assistance, particularly through civil society and reconciliation initiatives in cooperation with the UN. The EU has been the main donor to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Cyprus, facilitating dialogue and cooperation between the two communities and contributing to the island's development across multiple dimensions. The Union has also been the principal financial donor of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus (CMP), whose humanitarian work relies on the cooperation of the two Cypriot communities with the UN to recover and identify the remains of thousands of missing persons. This illustrates the EU's involvement in Cyprus through alternative means, while enabling the UN to implement practical activities crucial for the development of both communities.

Overall, the European Union has demonstrated consistent, albeit indirect, engagement with the Cyprus problem since its accession in 2004. Its involvement on the island has focused primarily on promoting a settlement through the UN framework and providing financial assistance, rather than engaging in direct mediation between the parties. This reflects that the Union's influence and actions remain limited, requiring a closer examination of the constraints shaping its role in Cyprus.

2.2. Barriers to a more effective role

The EU's approach to Cyprus has been shaped by the distinct nature of the conflict. While the Union's normative identity has contributed to a more moderate stance, over twenty years later it is possible to compare its role in Cyprus with its approach to other conflicts where its response has been more open and direct. The war in Ukraine illustrates a case in which the Union intervened immediately and took a strong position. Despite the differences between the Cyprus conflict and the war in Ukraine, the EU reacted firmly to the Russian attacks, condemning Russia and imposing sanctions, while providing humanitarian, military and financial aid to Ukraine. By contrast, in the case of Cyprus, the Union tolerated Turkey's actions and eventually condemned the 1974 invasion, although with a significantly softer approach (Kyris, 2018; Theophanous, 2023). This comparison exemplifies how the EU's approach to conflict resolution adapts in response to structural constraints and geopolitical interests.

The difference in the EU's approach can be explained by two key factors. Firstly, the Union's relationship with the parties involved: according to Andreas Theophanous (2023), while Russia is perceived by the Union as an enemy, Turkey is seen as a strategic partner with whom it would be inconvenient to create bad relationships or worsen the existing ones. In addition to its geopolitical relevance in the Mediterranean, Turkey is also a candidate country for EU accession. Therefore, the EU must adopt a more cautious approach since Turkey's involvement in the dispute carries significant strategic importance for the Union. The circumstances surrounding Cyprus' accession created structural constraints that have shaped the EU's role and limited its capacity to act independently, reinforcing its position as a partially engaged actor constrained by its own geopolitical interests. Secondly, and crucial in the context of the Cyprus problem, there is the question of recognition. The EU accepted Cyprus into the Union without resolving the conflict, and therefore without recognizing part of its territory. This created a unique geopolitical situation: the whole island is considered EU territory, but the north is ruled by a government that the Union does not recognize. Consequently, it cannot engage directly with the Turkish Cypriot authorities on the island, meaning normal procedures cannot be implemented and must be carried out by other means. The issue of recognition explains why the EU deals with non-state actors, such as NGOs and civil society initiatives, instead of official government contact with the north — not only is it structurally prevented from acting as an impartial mediator, but it must also adapt to the limitations of engaging with an internationally unrecognized entity in the context of an unresolved conflict.

These dynamics highlight two major obstacles preventing the European Union from acting more effectively: EU–Turkey relations, and the rights and powers of Greek Cypriot membership. The Union's relations with Turkey have been shaped by broader geopolitical tensions, within which the Cyprus conflict is embedded: the non-recognition of the TRNC by any state except Turkey, coupled with the EU's alignment with Greece in resolving the conflict, contributed to the increasing incompatibilities. Meanwhile,

Turkey's refusal to recognize the Republic of Cyprus has also created internal divisions within the EU, thereby complicating the development of a coherent approach. However, the Union's internal structure grants power to its members, and if in the past Greece had threatened to use its veto power to influence EU decisions, Greek Cypriot accession has "boosted the confidence" of the community through the power of membership. Using its membership rights, the Greek Cypriot government has exercised its veto power to prevent the EU from trading with the Turkish Cypriot community and to undermine the Turkish accession process (Eldani, 2022; Kyris, 2012, p. 92). This places the Union in the midst of the Cyprus conflict, reflecting its inability to address asymmetries effectively through normal engagement. The old divergences between the two Cypriot communities continue to hinder the EU's role, reinforce its lack of neutrality and affect matters relating to its role as an international actor. This illustrates how the Union's past decisions have shaped and constrained its present capacity to act.

A further challenge for the Union lies in the divergent perceptions of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities on the historical and political foundations of the dispute. Conflicts of interest over property rights, political equality and power-sharing, as well as competing claims regarding the rights of both communities, limit the prospect of reunification (Yakinthou, 2009). These positions are deeply rooted in contrasting historical narratives, particularly those relating to events dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, which still shape how each community interprets the conflict. In such a context, the European Union is prevented from acting as an impartial external actor, as these socially constructed perceptions and identities cannot be influenced or transformed through normative or institutional mechanisms.

Lastly, the EU's normative identity and guiding principles may also limit its effectiveness in resolving the conflict. The soft power nature of the Union limits potential actions that could contribute to conflict resolution, given that its policy relies primarily on diplomatic and financial instruments (Yakinthou, 2009). Unlike NATO or the United Nations, the European Union lacks the capacity to implement hard power measures on the ground. While this can be an advantage, it also diminishes the EU's capacity to influence the conflict decisively.

3. The European Union as a Partial Stakeholder

3.1. Institutional constraints and structural partiality

The EU has played a decisive, albeit limited, role in the Cyprus conflict. As argued by Professor James Ker-Lindsay: "If you looked at the landscape of the 1990s in Cyprus, it was deadlocked. There was no progress at all. There hadn't been for a very long time". It was the prospect of EU membership that reshaped the dynamics of the conflict. While the earlier accession of Greece had already shaped perceptions, leading the Turkish Cypriot community to no longer consider the EU a neutral actor, the prospect of Cyprus joining

the European Union created new momentum. Yet, during the accession process and even after Cyprus joined the EU, it became evident that the Union's involvement ultimately did not facilitate the peace process or contribute to achieving a settlement.

Despite an evolving approach, the EU has remained fundamentally constrained in its ability to act independently. Though it initially aimed to promote reconciliation and demonstrate its power as an international actor, the Union's actions became increasingly shaped by the interests of its Member States — particularly Greece, whose historical ties to Cyprus and its role as a guarantor power significantly shaped EU action, as illustrated by Cyprus' accession. Another notable example of this influence is the EU's explicit non-recognition of the political identity of the TRNC due to Greek and Greek Cypriot pressure. As Professor Ahmet Sözen highlights, in Protocol 10 of the Accession Treaty of 2003 “the EU doesn't use the word TRNC with or without quotation marks. Not Cyprus, Northern Cyprus, nothing of that sort. Instead, the EU uses twenty-one words: ‘those areas of the Republic of Cyprus in which the government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control’”. Such deliberate wording reflects the Union's avoidance of recognizing the identity of the self-proclaimed state. In addition, the suspension of the *acquis* means that Turkish Cypriots are effectively excluded from the Union's political and institutional framework despite efforts to reduce the international isolation of the community. As argued by Professor Ahmet Sözen, “this does not really bring Turkish Cypriots closer to the Union, which was the initial goal of the EU”. It reinforces existing asymmetries and highlights the EU's lack of neutrality and effectiveness.

Over the years, the Union has evolved into a partial stakeholder in the conflict, missing the opportunity to become a neutral mediator. The Crans Montana talks illustrate the Union's role as an indirect participant in the conflict during the post-accession period. While it was neither a mediator nor a negotiating party in the conflict, it had to “be in the room in any negotiation” as one side of the conflict is a Member State and, therefore, “anything that's done on settlement has got to be in accordance with the EU *acquis*”, as explained by Professor Ker-Lindsay: “It's got to, it can't contravene the *acquis*. So that necessarily means that when you start to get into the really thorny issues of what is required under a settlement, and there's huge areas that have got to be dealt with, the European Union needs to be in the room”. However, the Union's presence is merely symbolic, as its influence over the process remains highly constrained, despite the use of normative power.

The structural and political complexities inherent to the Cyprus conflict, combined with the EU's normative identity, have reduced the Union's potential to play a more significant role. The EU has been unable to meet the conditions necessary to influence conflict resolution, nor has it strengthened its position as a global actor. My Greek Cypriot interviewee (R1) argues that “the EU missed key strategic opportunities to actively shape the resolution of the Cyprus conflict” as “its actions have been too cautious, reactive, and deferential to Member States, limiting its effectiveness as a peacebuilding actor”. At the same time, the EU itself has been influenced by the interests and perceptions of Member

States. The pressure to include Cyprus in the 2004 enlargement placed the EU in a rather delicate position. As my Armenian Cypriot interviewee (R2) notes, “the EU is in a very difficult position, as it tries to maintain a balanced relationship with Turkey, which has its own strategic interests”. Taken together, these factors demonstrate that the European Union has consistently faced a challenging scenario amid this conflict. Balancing Member States’ interests with its normative ambitions has constrained the EU’s ability to act decisively in the international setting, a position with limited prospects for change. In such conditions, “the EU seems to have taken more of an observatory or passive stance rather than exerting a strong, assertive role in resolving the conflict”, as R2 describes.

3.2. Prospects and limits of EU engagement

The Cyprus conflict appears to have been largely overlooked by the European Union. Despite the island’s geopolitical relevance, there have been no significant developments for decades. Although some initiatives have been proposed and applied in Cypriot territory, they have not achieved transformative results. The barriers faced by the EU raise broader concerns about the risk of Cyprus setting a precedent for the Union’s approach to other protracted conflicts.

The current situation does not present an optimistic outlook for the EU, as its normative identity limits its capacity to implement stronger measures. In particular, the Union’s relationship with Turkey remains a significant challenge, as potential progress is closely tied to its ability to influence its stance. This is reflected in the differing perspectives of my interviewees. R1 suggests that the EU could “apply political and economic pressure towards Turkey, by linking EU-Turkey relations to constructive engagement”. By contrast, Professor Ker-Lindsay argues that “it’s very, very difficult to see what the EU can do to put pressure on Turkey on Cyprus settlement. Maybe it would have more room to put pressure on the Greek Cypriots”, despite asserting that the EU “doesn’t like to usually go against its own members”. Similarly, R2 emphasizes the importance of prioritizing Cyprus over the strategic partnership with Turkey: “the EU needs to stop trying to balance its relationship with Turkey while simultaneously claiming to support the resolution of the Cyprus Problem. Cyprus should be treated unequivocally as an EU Member State and should receive the political attention and support it deserves, regardless of Turkey’s reactions”. These divergent views highlight the Union’s structural need to prioritize the interests of Member States while balancing them with broader geopolitical considerations, stressing the complexity of envisaging its future role in Cyprus. In this context, Turkey’s role in the conflict not only shapes the EU’s range of possible initiatives but also constrains their implementation.

The issue of non-recognition is likely to remain a significant obstacle that the EU will struggle to overcome in the near future. The limited engagement between the EU and Northern Cyprus constrains opportunities for conflict resolution and for fostering the

integration of the Turkish Cypriot community. This reflects the Union's institutional structure, which limits its capacity to act in ways that contradict the position of its Member States, thereby reinforcing existing asymmetries. The question of recognition generates differing perspectives on how the EU might engage with the island. Professor Sözen suggests: "Engage with the authorities. Engagement without recognition. Bringing Turkish Cypriots closer together. Finding ways of including Turkish Cypriots into projects, programs like Erasmus, and finding ways of applying the *acquis* in the northern part of Cyprus, rather than treating the northern part as if it's a diseased area which needs to be sanitized". This view presents an approach that promotes integration without necessarily addressing the political concern of recognition. By contrast, my Greek Cypriot respondent (R1) outlines the need for the EU to adopt "a more strategic, visible, and coordinated approach not just as a passive supporter of the UN, but as an active political stakeholder", recommending "targeted initiatives towards both communities, such as infrastructure funds, green and digital transition" which may foster trust between the two communities. These diverging perspectives arise from two individuals experiencing different political and social realities within the same island: while one enjoys the benefits of EU citizenship, the other faces the effects of international isolation. This helps explain why Turkish Cypriots perspectives tend to prioritize engagement and practical inclusion, whereas Greek Cypriots place greater emphasis on institutional positioning and structured EU involvement. Moreover, it stresses the difficulty of formulating a coherent EU approach able to accommodate both communities' interests without compromising its normative identity and institutional constraints.

Finally, the willingness of both Cypriot governments to engage in negotiations remains crucial for any meaningful progress. However, the interest in resolving the conflict has fluctuated between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot sides, and the misalignment of recent years has further limited the prospects for a settlement. This highlights the impact of local political dynamics on the role of external actors, including the European Union. In the absence of a shared commitment to negotiations, external action remains significantly limited.

Conclusion

The European Union has played a significant yet structurally constrained role in the Cyprus conflict. Although the prospect of accession initially transformed the dynamics of the dispute, the Union's capacity to influence the conflict has remained limited. Rather than acting as a neutral mediator, the EU has become a partial stakeholder, shaped by the interests of its Member States and the normative constraints inherent to its institutional structure.

The findings of this research demonstrate how the Union's approach has been shaped by both internal divisions and external constraints. The need to align with Member States'

geopolitical interests, together with the sensitive nature of the Cyprus conflict and the role of external actors, has prevented the EU from playing an effective role in resolving the dispute. Despite its normative ambitions and attempts to adapt its approach, the EU has not succeeded in achieving a sustainable solution.

In this context, the Cyprus case illustrates the limitations of the European Union as an international actor in conflict resolution. By internalizing an unresolved conflict, the EU has placed itself in a difficult position, reinforcing asymmetries between the two Cypriot communities while limiting its own capacity to act impartially. More broadly, this case highlights the limitations of the Union's normative power, proving that the EU's ability to act effectively on the international stage is ultimately restricted not only by structural and political constraints, but also by the social and political realities in which it operates.

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Syria: Unfinished Uprising. Structural Persistence and the Recalibration of Conflict Mechanisms under Ahmed al-Sharaa

Tuğçe URALER

Abstract: This study examines the evolving mechanisms that transformed Syria's 2011 popular uprising into internal conflict, arguing that these dynamics, though reconfigured, persist under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025. Drawing on Adrian Florea's "Contentious Politics Approach", the analysis focuses on three interlinked processes: erosion of legitimacy, radicalisation, and militarisation. The empirical foundation of the study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 32 individuals, including civilian actors formerly affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition and military personnel who later served in the Syrian National Army, previously known as the Free Syrian Army. The sample was selected to reflect variation in gender, age, regional origin, professional background, and socio-economic status. Data were analysed using MAXQDA 24 Analytics Pro, enabling both thematic coding and statistical mapping of participant narratives. The findings reveal how structural conditions, particularly socio-economic exclusion and authoritarian resilience, continue to drive identity politicisation, which in turn facilitates radicalisation and militarisation through sustained regional and global interventions. By situating Syria's post-uprising trajectory within broader debates on post-conflict reconstruction, rebel victory, and civil conflict, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how legitimacy crises and external entrenchment perpetuate cycles of instability in fragmented state contexts.

Tuğçe URALER

Department of International Relations,
Istanbul Kent University
E-mail: tugce.uraler@kent.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0002-1148-7403

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By situating Syria's post-uprising trajectory within broader debates on post-conflict reconstruction, rebel victory, and civil conflict, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how legitimacy crises and external entrenchment perpetuate cycles of instability in fragmented state contexts.

Keywords: Legitimacy contestation, radicalisation, militarization, civil conflict, politicisation of identities.

Introduction

This article argues that the structural mechanisms that transformed Syria's 2011 popular demonstrations into a full-scale civil conflict — namely the erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — remain operative, albeit recalibrated, under the transitional leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025. Despite the passage of more than a decade, Syria continues to grapple with the fragmentation of central authority, the proliferation of armed actors, and the erosion of institutional trust, all of which have rendered conventional post-conflict reconstruction paradigms inadequate.

On May 20, 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned that Syria was “on the verge of potential collapse and a full-scale civil war of epic proportions” (Gritten, 2025). While such statements underscore the persistence of conflict dynamics, they often obscure the deeper structural drivers of instability, particularly the transitional government's failure to establish inclusive and pluralistic institutions capable of addressing longstanding grievances and fostering societal reconciliation.

Although the early phase of the Syrian conflict has been extensively studied (Hinnebusch, 2012; Phillips, 2016), recent developments — especially those following the formation of the transitional government in December 2024 — have introduced new dynamics that remain underexplored. Moreover, few studies offer a longitudinal and comparative analysis that connects the initial and current phases of the conflict within a unified conceptual framework. This article addresses that gap by employing Adrian Florea's (2017) *contentious politics approach*, which conceptualizes civil conflict not as a singular rupture but as a dynamic process shaped by strategic interaction, identity mobilization, and contested legitimacy. This framework enables a mechanism-based analysis of how structural conditions — particularly socioeconomic exclusion and authoritarian resilience — continue to fuel identity politicization, which in turn sustains radicalization and militarization.

The empirical foundation of this study is based on 32 in-depth interviews with Syrian opposition actors, including representatives of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), journalists, civil society activists, and former members of the Free Syrian Army (now operating under the Syrian National Army). These narratives provide a rich dataset for tracing the transformation of protest dynamics into militarized governance and for examining how legitimacy is negotiated in the absence of a functioning state.

The central research questions guiding this inquiry are:

- What mechanisms triggered the transformation of Syria's mass protests into armed conflict in 2011?
- In what ways do these mechanisms persist during the interim administration period?
- What are the implications of these dynamics for post-conflict reconstruction and long-term stability?

To maintain analytical clarity and depth, the scope of this article is deliberately limited to three interlinked mechanisms — erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — while broader themes such as transitional justice, economic liberalization, and regional geopolitics are addressed only insofar as they intersect with these core processes.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the conceptual and explanatory framework. Section 3 details the methodology, including the sampling strategy, data collection, and ethical considerations. Section 4 presents the findings, organized around the three core mechanisms. Section 5 discusses the broader implications of these findings and future research directions. Section 6 concludes with reflections on policy relevance.

Conceptual and Explanatory Framework

This study adopts Adrian Florea's (2017) *contentious politics approach* as its central analytical framework to examine the transformation of Syria's 2011 uprising into a protracted civil conflict. Rather than treating civil war as a singular rupture, this framework conceptualizes conflict as a dynamic and iterative process shaped by three key mechanisms: militarization, encompassing the strategic interactions of state and non-state actors; radicalization, referring to the mobilization and politicization of identity-based claims; and the contestation of political legitimacy, which underpinned the emergence of popular demonstrations.

According to the *contentious politics approach*, background structural factors do not automatically translate into the institutionalization of violence. Instead, mediating mechanisms play a central role in this process. By linking structural conditions to violent outcomes — particularly through radicalization, whereby the state marginalizes opposition actors, and militarization, which intensifies through regional and global intervention — this framework facilitates a detailed understanding of how factors such as socioeconomic exclusion, authoritarian resilience, and institutional fragmentation contribute to the sustained institutionalization of violence.

Within this framework, the Syrian conflict is analyzed through three interlinked mechanisms:

- Erosion of legitimacy: The gradual breakdown of state-society relations, driven by the regime's failure to deliver inclusive governance, uphold accountability, and respond to citizen grievances. This process is marked by the delegitimation of state institutions and the proliferation of alternative sources of authority.
- Radicalization: The intensification of oppositional discourse and identity-based mobilization, often catalyzed by state repression, exclusionary policies, and exploitation by regional and international actors. Radicalization is closely linked to identity politics at national, regional, and international levels. It is understood here not merely as ideological extremism but as a strategic shift in claims-making and collective action in response to perceived existential threats.

- Militarization: The transition from civil resistance to armed contention, facilitated by internal dynamics — such as the collapse of nonviolent opposition and the marginalization of moderate actors — as well as by external interventions that provide material and symbolic support to armed non-state actors. In this sense, militarization is conceptualized as a reconfiguration of contention, wherein violence becomes institutionalized as a primary mode of political engagement.

These mechanisms are not discrete or sequential; rather, they operate in recursive and mutually reinforcing ways. For instance, the erosion of legitimacy creates fertile ground for radicalization, which in turn increases the likelihood of militarization. The *contentious politics approach* thus provides a coherent lens through which to trace the continuity and transformation of conflict dynamics from 2011 to 2025.

By applying this framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of the Syrian conflict and toward a mechanism-based explanation of its persistence. While this article does not offer a comparative analysis, the proposed model may be applicable to other fragmented post-authoritarian contexts such as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, where similar structural vulnerabilities and contentious dynamics have shaped conflict trajectories. Ultimately, the framework underscores the importance of understanding civil conflict as a process embedded in structural fragilities and shaped by the strategic behaviour of actors navigating contested political spaces.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, mechanism-oriented research design to investigate the structural persistence of conflict dynamics in Syria between 2011 and 2025. Anchored in the *contentious politics framework*, the methodology is structured to trace how the mechanisms of legitimacy erosion, radicalization, and militarization have evolved over time and across political contexts. The research design integrates semi-structured interviews with thematic and process-tracing analysis to uncover the causal pathways linking structural conditions to conflict escalation via mediator dynamics.

Research design and case selection

Given the study's focus on dynamic mechanisms operating across time, a longitudinal within-case design was adopted. Syria was selected as a paradigmatic case of post-uprising conflict transformation, where the initial mass mobilisation of 2011 evolved into a protracted and multilateral civil war and, later, into a contested transitional governance process. The case offers a unique opportunity to examine how conflict mechanisms persist and recalibrate under changing political configurations.

Data collection

Primary data were collected through 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2023 and May 2024. Respondents included a diverse cross-section of Syrian opposition actors, such as former members of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), Civil society activists and journalists and former military personnel affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its successor, the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure variation in gender, age, regional origin, political affiliation, and socio-economic background. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and Turkish, depending on participant preference, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a protocol designed to elicit narratives related to perceptions of state legitimacy and governance (legitimacy erosion), experiences of repression and identity-based mobilization (radicalization) and views on armed resistance and external intervention (militarization).

Analytical strategy

The data were analysed using a combination of thematic coding and mechanism-based process tracing. Coding was conducted in MAXQDA Analytics Pro (v24.10.0), using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. The initial coding framework was derived from the *contentious politics* literature and included categories such as state abandonment, sectarian legitimacy claims, grievance escalation, structural violence, collective mobilisation and armed resistance rationales.

Process tracing techniques were utilized to examine the operation of mechanisms over time by identifying recurring patterns in actor narratives and connecting them to broader structural conditions. Document variables, including respondent role, region of origin, administrative status preference based on sectarian and ethnic identity, and temporal context, were assigned to each transcript to facilitate comparative analysis across subgroups. Cross-tabulations and code co-occurrence matrices were used to explore correlations between mechanisms and respondent characteristics. Secondary sources, including policy reports, media archives, and academic literature, were used to triangulate interview data and contextualize findings within broader political developments. This multi-source strategy enhances the validity of the analysis and supports the identification of causal mechanisms.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the research context, strict ethical protocols were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details. The study received ethical

approval from the Altınbaş University Research Ethics Committee and complied with all relevant data protection regulations.

Limitations

While the study provides a rich and context-sensitive account of conflict dynamics, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample is composed exclusively of opposition-affiliated individuals, which may introduce bias and limit the inclusion of regime-aligned or neutral perspectives. Additionally, due to security constraints, fieldwork was conducted outside Syria, primarily in neighbouring countries and exile communities. These factors may affect the representativeness and immediacy of the data. Nonetheless, the study's mechanism-based design and triangulation strategy mitigate these limitations by focusing on causal processes rather than population-level generalisations.

Findings: Mechanisms of Escalation in the Syrian Conflict

The findings of this study are organized around three core mechanisms — erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — which trace the escalation of the Syrian conflict from peaceful protest to protracted civil war through processes of radicalization and militarization. In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that they derive from interviews with 32 opposition-linked actors, a non-representative sample reflecting primarily anti-regime perspectives. While these accounts provide rich insights into the perceptions and experiences of Syrian opposition members, they do not encompass the full spectrum of viewpoints (e.g., those of regime supporters or neutral civilians).

The analysis of the 2011-2012 uprising and the onset of civil war draws heavily on first-hand interview data and is therefore comparatively well grounded. In contrast, evidence on the 2024-2025 interim period is drawn from a combination of limited interview material (collected by the end of 2024) and secondary sources, including policy reports and expert commentary, given the scarcity of direct field data for this fluid period. Accordingly, the discussion of the transitional era is framed with caution and appropriate qualifications and is further supported by external analyses, such as those produced by the International Crisis Group and the Royal United Services Institute, to avoid overstating conclusions.

The results are presented below for each mechanism, beginning with the well-documented events of 2011-2012, followed by a carefully qualified examination of continuities and changes under the interim government of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2024-2025.

2011-2012: Erosion of legitimacy: From reformist demands to ongoing crisis

The collective mobilization of 2011 in Syria was rooted in a deep-seated crisis of state legitimacy. Participants consistently described how, in the years leading up to 2011, the Ba'ath administration failed to meet public expectations of good governance. Key

grievances included entrenched socioeconomic exclusion — manifested in corruption, crony capitalism, and stark urban–rural inequalities — alongside a lack of political freedoms and the pervasive influence of the *mukhabarat* (secret police). These longstanding issues eroded the regime’s legitimacy and public trust in state institutions, thereby fueling popular discontent.

When mass protests erupted in March 2011, the regime’s response further accelerated the breakdown of its legitimacy. Participants widely recounted how peaceful demonstrations were met with indiscriminate repression, including arbitrary detentions, torture, and violent crackdowns on protesters. Rather than quelling dissent, this heavy-handed approach confirmed many Syrians’ view that the state had become, in the words of Participant 16 from Homs, “the people’s adversary, not its protector” (Interview 16, ex-military, 2024).

Importantly, opposition-affiliated respondents emphasized that the initial protesters largely sought reform, not regime change. Many demonstrators called on the government to address corruption and injustice, hoping for inclusive reforms that would restore public trust. However, as Participant 22 from Dar’a noted, “We were asking for reforms, not war, but the regime treated us like enemies from the beginning” (Interview 22, private sector, 2024). The Ba’ath government’s unwillingness to engage in dialogue or compromise — epitomized by President Bashar al-Assad’s dismissive speeches and violent security responses — destroyed what remained of its political legitimacy.

By mid-2012, even Syrians who had been undecided came to view the state’s authority as no longer representative of the broader population. This process of delegitimation unfolded rapidly: the state’s refusal to acknowledge legitimate grievances and its framing of all dissent as treason or terrorism alienated large segments of society. The majority of participants described this period as a “point of no return” when hopes for reconciliation vanished under the weight of state violence. The result was a profound loss of trust in official institutions and a deep delegitimation of the regime in the eyes of protesters and many ordinary citizens alike.

Empirical findings on mass mobilization dynamics

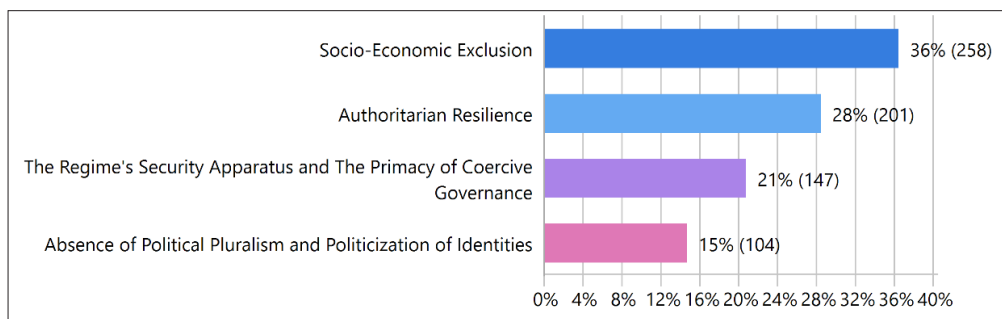


Figure 1: Pre-uprising mobilisation dynamics

The graphic illustrates the key variables that significantly contributed to the outbreak of collective mobilization in Syria, triggered by the legitimacy crisis. A thorough understanding of these dynamics is essential, as they represent central challenges and focal points that must be systematically identified, analyzed, and addressed throughout the post-reconstruction process. Recognizing how these interconnected forces operate — politically, economically, and socially — allows stakeholders, policymakers, and implementing agencies to develop more targeted, context-sensitive interventions. Without this foundational awareness, efforts to rebuild institutions, restore livelihoods, and reestablish social cohesion risk being fragmented, misaligned with ground realities, or unsustainable in the long term.

First, socioeconomic exclusion operated as a persistent and deeply rooted undercurrent of discontent, shaping the grievances of large segments of the Syrian population long before the outbreak of open conflict. The Ba’ath government’s approach to economic governance was characterized by a set of structural and policy failures that opposition-affiliated participants consistently identified across their accounts. These failures coalesced around six interrelated themes defining both the regime’s policy orientation and its broader structural outcomes: entrenched corruption and cronyism, which concentrated wealth and opportunity among regime loyalists and connected elites; extensive nationalization and centralized state control over key industries, which stifled competition, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification; selective liberalization and privatization initiatives that, rather than broadening economic participation, primarily benefited regime-connected business networks; the strategic yet distorted role of private manufacturers, who operated within a system of patronage rather than a genuinely competitive market; persistent macroeconomic instability, including high unemployment, inflation, and deteriorating living standards, particularly in rural and peripheral regions; and the compounded effects of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, which deepened existing vulnerabilities and accelerated the erosion of livelihoods across already marginalized communities. These findings echo Abboud’s (2015) comprehensive study of Syria’s political economy, which highlights how decades of crony capitalism and rising inequality underpinned public disillusionment with the regime’s legitimacy.

Second, the regime’s authoritarian resilience was maintained through a sophisticated hybrid governance model that combined selective, carefully managed liberalization with systematic coercive retrenchment. This model allowed the Ba’ath government to project an image of modernization and openness, particularly during the early years of Bashar al-Assad’s presidency — often referred to as the “Damascus Spring” — while simultaneously reinforcing the structural foundations of authoritarian control. Political openings were superficial and tightly controlled, engineered to serve as instruments of regime adaptation and legitimation rather than as pathways to genuine democratic reform. Concessions were strategically calibrated: enough to manage international pressure and co-opt segments of the educated urban middle class, but never sufficient to meaningfully alter the distribution of political power or threaten the regime’s core interests. Civil society actors, opposition figures, and independent media faced continuous and systematic surveillance, harassment,

arbitrary detention, and repression, effectively limiting the institutional space available for organized, sustained dissent. Security agencies operated with broad discretionary authority, creating a pervasive climate of fear that discouraged political mobilization and constrained public discourse. Minority communities, tribal networks, and regional elites were managed through a combination of co-optation, patronage, and selective coercion — a divide-and-rule strategy designed to fragment potential opposition coalitions and reinforce the regime's indispensability as a guarantor of stability. The cumulative effect was a political environment in which formal institutions — parliaments, courts, and local councils - existed largely as facades, providing a veneer of governance legitimacy while real decision-making authority remained concentrated within the regime's inner circle.

Third, the primacy of coercive governance, anchored in the expansive reach of the security apparatus, functioned as both a deterrent and a catalyst for mobilization. The *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) permeated everyday life, instilling a culture of fear and self-censorship. However, this omnipresent coercion also contributed to the erosion of regime legitimacy, as citizens increasingly viewed the state not as a provider of security, but as its principal threat.

Fourth, the absence of political pluralism, compounded by the deliberate politicization of identity, further entrenched authoritarian control while progressively fragmenting societal cohesion across Syria's diverse communities. The Ba'athist administration's monopolization of political space systematically eliminated meaningful avenues for peaceful contestation, dissent, or negotiated political change. By suppressing independent political parties, trade unions, and civil associations, the regime ensured that no organized alternative power base could emerge to challenge its authority. In the vacuum created by this enforced political uniformity, identity — sectarian, ethnic, regional, and tribal — became one of the few remaining axes around which collective grievances could be articulated and mobilized (Zaiter, 2020).

The regime's instrumentalization of sectarian and ethnic identities was not incidental but strategic. By selectively privileging certain communities — most notably through the disproportionate representation of Alawite networks within the security and military apparatus — while marginalizing others, the Ba'athist state cultivated a landscape of mutual suspicion and intercommunal mistrust. Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Druze, Christians, and other communities were positioned in relation to the state not as equal citizens within a shared civic framework, but as distinct groups whose loyalties were managed, rewarded, or punished according to their perceived alignment with regime interests. This dual strategy of political exclusion and identity fragmentation did not immediately inhibit collective action; in the short term, the climate of fear and absence of organizational infrastructure constrained open mobilization. However, over the longer term, it laid the structural groundwork for identity-based political mobilization, as deepening alienation among marginalized communities transformed latent grievances into active sources of opposition, ultimately contributing to the conditions that made the 2011 uprising both broad-based and difficult to contain.

Following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria entered a crucial and turbulent period that significantly affected multiple aspects of life within the country. This era was characterized by substantial upheavals across economic, political, legal, and social dimensions, leading to widespread uncertainty and instability.

2024-2025: Early signs of persistent legitimacy deficits under the interim government

In late 2024, Assad's ouster and the rise of an interim government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa created cautious optimism for a more inclusive, accountable Syrian state. Yet opposition-linked participants (participants 3 and 22, interviewed after the collapse of the Ba'ath administration) already voiced skepticism about the new administration's commitment to transparency and broad-based governance. They noted that the initial steps of the transitional leadership, such as the drafting of a 2025 Constitutional Declaration and the formation of a National Commission for Transitional Justice (NCTJ), were conducted in a top-down manner, dominated by Sharaa's inner circle. As human rights observers have pointed out, the 2025 Constitutional Declaration's lack of public consultation or minority protections has raised fears that it is merely a "rebranding of authoritarianism," leaving many Syrians suspicious of the new government's legitimacy (Abdulghany, 2025; Khaddour, 2025). Observers immediately warned of a "dangerous drift" in the transition (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2025), noting that early governance missteps, such as top-down decision-making and the exclusion of key minority groups, risked reproducing the very legitimacy deficits that had fueled the uprising.

These perspectives, while reflecting the particular concerns and experiences of opposition-affiliated actors, find significant resonance in a broader body of external analyses, policy assessments, and independent monitoring reports produced by international observers and research institutions.

For instance, the Crisis Group Middle East Briefing (2025) observed "growing uncertainty over interim President al-Sharaa's perceived drive to monopolize power" and highlighted fears that the transition might not yield a truly inclusive government representative of Syria's diverse communities. These concerns centered on the concentration of executive authority within a narrow leadership circle, the limited participation of non-Islamist factions in transitional institutions, and the absence of transparent mechanisms for political accountability. The risk, as analysts noted, was that the post-Assad transition would reproduce familiar patterns of exclusionary governance under a different ideological banner, undermining the foundational principles of a legitimate and durable political settlement.

Similarly, policy commentators have warned that the transitional authorities' approach to transitional justice risked becoming symbolic and one-sided, aimed more at consolidating the new leadership's legitimacy and settling scores with the former regime than at genuinely addressing the grievances of all affected communities. Meaningful transitional justice, scholars and practitioners have consistently argued, requires impartial truth-

telling processes, inclusive victim participation, and accountability mechanisms that apply universally rather than selectively. Without these elements, transitional justice initiatives risk deepening intercommunal divisions rather than healing them and may generate new cycles of grievance among communities that feel excluded or instrumentalized by the process.

Indeed, an independent parliamentary briefing noted that by mid-2025 the interim authorities still struggled to extend governance and public services beyond core urban centers, reflecting only a partial and uneven restoration of state authority across Syrian territory (Loft & Mills, 2025). Peripheral regions, rural areas, and communities historically marginalized under the Ba'athist state continued to experience significant governance deficits, including limited access to justice, basic infrastructure, and administrative services. This geographic unevenness in state reach not only undermined the practical effectiveness of transitional institutions but also reinforced perceptions of continued exclusion among communities whose buy-in is essential for any sustainable post-conflict political order. The absence of genuine political pluralism, evidenced by the exclusion of certain minority groups from decision-making and the dominance of HTS-linked figures in key posts, was frequently cited by interviewees as a red flag suggesting that Syria's legitimacy crisis was not yet resolved.

It must be stressed that conclusions about the interim government's legitimacy are tentative. Our direct evidence on the 2025 period is limited, and the situation remains highly fluid. Nonetheless, preliminary signs raise concern that some structural issues persist. For example, early decree laws and appointments by President al-Sharaa signaled continuity with past practices: significant decisions were made by executive fiat, and power remained concentrated within a tight circle of elites. An independent analysis of Syria's transitional governance noted that the interim administration's heavy reliance on emergency decrees and exceptional powers (e.g., the unilateral establishment of the NCTJ by presidential decree) may undercut the very accountability and rule of law that the new regime has pledged to uphold (ICG, 2025; Loft & Mills, 2025).

While average Syrians initially welcomed the end of Assad's repressive rule, by mid-2025 many were expressing frustration that daily hardships — from economic insecurity to the lack of local political voice — had not substantially eased. Credible reports suggested that public trust in the transitional authorities was eroding in some areas, particularly where communities felt underrepresented or excluded from the national political process (Erkmen & Özçelik, 2025; ICG, 2025). These observations do not imply a complete return to the old authoritarian order; rather, they indicate that achieving legitimacy remains a work in progress. Addressing this first mechanism - rebuilding state legitimacy through inclusivity and accountability — emerges as a fundamental challenge if Syria's new leaders are to prevent the recurrence of conflict. In summary, the erosion of legitimacy that undermined Assad's rule is only partially repaired: early transitional reforms and institutions have yet to convince all segments of Syrian society that the state truly represents and serves them.

2011-2012: Radicalization, identity, repression, and the shift to extremism

A second pivotal mechanism in Syria's conflict trajectory is the radicalization of the opposition. What began in 2011 as a diverse protest movement with broad calls for reform gradually splintered and, under intense pressure, took on increasingly radical and sectarian overtones, according to opposition-affiliated participants. This transformation is attributable in large part to the regime's actions. Participants recounted how state violence and propaganda fueled a sense of existential threat among Sunni communities, laying the groundwork for extremist narratives to gain traction. For example, Bashar al-Assad was accused of deliberately stoking sectarian fears: this strategy portrayed overwhelmingly Sunni protesters as Islamic extremists and, in a calculated move, reportedly led to the release of a number of Islamist militants from prisons in 2011–2012. Several participants interpreted these events as a regime strategy to “taint” the uprising's image and justify harsh reprisals. The immediate effect, however, was to deepen communal mistrust and fear. Minority groups, such as Alawites and Christians, grew more fearful of Sunni Islamist dominance, while many Sunnis came to see the regime's Alawite leadership and its allies, including Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias, as threats to their community's survival. One former opposition fighter described how, after witnessing regime atrocities against Sunni civilians, he felt “there was no choice but to fight fire with fire,” even if that meant aligning with hardline Islamist factions he had initially distrusted (Interview 6, ex-military, 2024).

By late 2012, the moderate, pluralistic ethos that had characterized the early protest movement had given way to a significantly more militant, fragmented, and ideologically charged opposition landscape. The transformation was neither sudden nor monolithic, but rather the cumulative product of sustained regime violence, the collapse of nonviolent organizational infrastructure, and the progressive entry of well-resourced armed actors into a conflict space that had been forcibly vacated by peaceful civil society.

Secular youth activists, grassroots coordination committees, and local civil society networks — the organizational backbone of the uprising's early phase — lost influence rapidly as Islamist and ethnically based armed factions filled the vacuum created by the regime's brutal crackdown on peaceful dissent. The suppression of unarmed protest left communities feeling that nonviolent resistance was not only ineffective but existentially dangerous, creating conditions in which armed mobilization appeared to many as the only viable path to protection and political change. International actors, including Gulf state donors and jihadist networks, exploited this vacuum by channeling financial and material support to armed factions whose ideological orientations frequently diverged from the democratic aspirations of the uprising's founding constituencies.

This radicalization process was not linear or uniform across Syrian territory; its pace and character varied significantly depending on local dynamics, community composition, and the intensity of regime violence in particular areas. Nevertheless, participants identified several catalysts that recurred across many locales. Chief among them was the

regime's deliberate deployment of sectarian violence and inflammatory rhetoric, which progressively convinced significant segments of the Syrian population that the conflict had become a zero-sum battle for communal survival rather than a shared struggle for political transformation. By framing the uprising as an existential sectarian threat — particularly to Alawite and Christian communities — the regime succeeded in fragmenting the cross-sectarian solidarity that had briefly characterized the early protest movement and in recruiting communal fear as a tool of political mobilization on its own behalf.

This trajectory accords closely with Hokayem's (2013) observation that an initially broad-based, "upbeat and peaceful uprising quickly and brutally descended into a zero-sum sectarian civil war", as the regime's tactics, including the deliberate release of Islamist militants from detention, systematically stoked sectarian fears, deepened intercommunal mistrust, and fractured the opposition along ideological and identity lines (pp. 49–52). The long-term consequences of this engineered radicalization extended well beyond the immediate conflict: by reshaping the opposition's composition and public image, the regime complicated international support for anti-Assad forces, narrowed the political space for negotiated settlement, and embedded sectarian narratives into the conflict's identity narratives that would prove extraordinarily difficult to dislodge in subsequent peace and reconstruction efforts.

The influx of well-funded foreign jihadist groups, along with their provision of humanitarian and military aid, established an alternative source of support for civilians and fighters facing desperation. Participant 6 from Idlib province noted that foreign Islamist groups delivered social services and security in areas abandoned by the regime, resulting in either support or acquiescence from communities exhausted by conflict (Interview 6, ex-military, 2024). This phenomenon is extensively documented by Lister (2015), who explains that jihadist groups capitalized on the power vacuum and wartime chaos to secure local legitimacy by offering services and security, thereby diverting support from moderate rebels. Likewise, Baczkó, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) argue that violent regime repression and the arrival of foreign fighters in 2012 contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition into competing armed social orders, each characterized by its own radical ideology (pp. 85–89).

In summary, the interplay of internal repression and external influences contributed to the radicalization of Syria's opposition. As peaceful avenues for change remained inaccessible and violence intensified, armed resistance became increasingly extreme and sectarian.

Empirical findings: Radicalization and identity-based threat perception in the Syrian conflict

Field data reveal that the proliferation of Iranian-backed militias has exerted a more immediate and tangible influence on Sunni radicalization than the infiltration of transnational Islamist networks. This pattern is best understood through the lens of identity-based threat perception, particularly the notion of existential extinction. Sunni communities interpreted the regime's sectarian alignment — especially its facilitation of

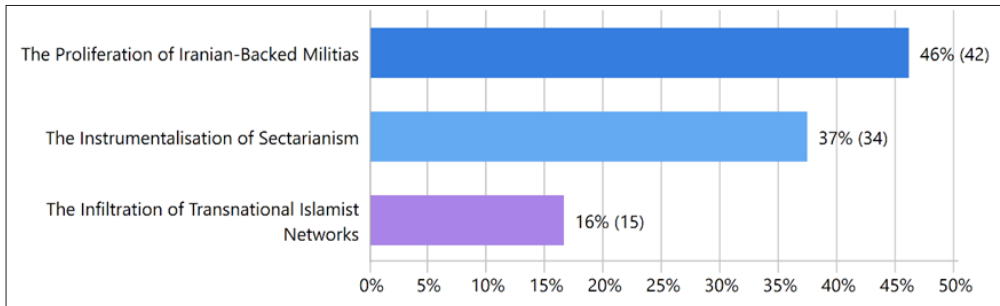


Figure 2. Radicalization and identity-based threat perception in the Syrian conflict

Iranian influence and the granting of citizenship to foreign Shia fighters — not merely as exclusionary, but as a direct threat to their communal survival. Two dimensions of this threat perception proved especially salient: its external origin and its historical continuity. Interviewees consistently framed Iranian-backed actors as part of a long-standing geopolitical project aimed at demographic and ideological transformation. This framing intensified Sunni vulnerability and contributed to a defensive posture that was not primarily ideological but strategic.

Consequently, many Sunni groups exhibited increased susceptibility to transnational Islamist networks. Their engagement with actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS was often driven by a logic of survival rather than doctrinal alignment. These networks were perceived as provisional shields, a “lesser evil” in the face of regime-militia collusion that had redefined the boundaries of citizenship and belonging. The radicalization process, therefore, was not simply a product of ideological indoctrination, but a response to perceived existential threat, shaped by the instrumentalization of sectarianism and the historical depth of external danger.

2024–2025: Cautious optimism and ongoing risks of radicalization

The removal of Assad and the establishment of an interim government in late 2024 significantly altered the conflict’s landscape, but it did not automatically eliminate the risk of continued radicalization. On one hand, some positive developments were noted. Interviews conducted largely in early 2024 captured cautious optimism among opposition activists that the end of Assad’s “politics of fear” might gradually reduce sectarian tension. Indeed, early in the transition, there were anecdotal reports — from participants and local media — of goodwill gestures, such as the release of some political prisoners and outreach meetings with leaders of minority communities intended to build trust. These steps aligned with the new government’s public narrative of fostering national unity and reversing the divisive policies of the Assad era.

However, as the transitional period unfolded, many underlying drivers of radicalization remained unresolved. Participants, whose insights into the interim government were

limited and one-sided given their opposition background, worried that identity-based mistrust could resurface if reforms stalled. Events on the ground by mid-2025 lent some support to these concerns. For instance, in March 2025, violent clashes erupted in Latakia and Suwayda, areas with significant Alawite and Druze populations, illustrating that communal tensions were still raw. The new administration's challenges in extending effective governance over Kurdish-held northeastern Syria also meant that questions of political inclusion for the Kurds remained unanswered (Loft & Mills, 2025).

Analysts caution that identity-based mistrust remains deeply embedded and operationally significant in Syria's transitional period, representing one of the most complex and potentially destabilizing challenges facing post-conflict governance and reconstruction efforts. The sectarian divisions and intercommunal fears deliberately cultivated and instrumentalized during the conflict have not dissipated with the fall of the Ba'athist regime; rather, they have been carried forward into the transitional environment, where they continue to shape political behavior, community relations, and perceptions of the new order's legitimacy.

Khaddour (2025) notes that many Alawites fear exclusion and retribution in the new political order, a fear rooted not only in the community's historical association with the Assad regime but also in early transitional dynamics that have done little to reassure minority communities of their place in a post-Ba'athist Syria. This fear, if left unaddressed through credible inclusion mechanisms and transparent accountability processes, carries a significant risk of driving radicalization among minority groups, potentially generating new cycles of violence and undermining the broader project of national reconciliation. The challenge for transitional authorities is therefore not merely symbolic: it requires the construction of genuine institutional guarantees, constitutional protections, representative governance structures, and impartial security arrangements capable of convincing historically marginalized or regime-affiliated communities that the transition represents a departure from exclusionary governance rather than its continuation under new management.

Likewise, Erkmen and Özçelik (2025) argue that the July 2025 clashes in Suwayda, a Druze-majority region in southern Syria, demonstrate with stark clarity how unresolved grievances, when left unaddressed within transitional frameworks, can rapidly rekindle localized radicalization and violence. The Suwayda clashes illustrated that peripheral and minority communities retain both the motivation and the capacity for armed mobilization when they perceive the transitional order as failing to protect their interests or deliver meaningful change. Such episodes carry systemic risks that extend beyond their immediate geographic scope: they erode confidence in the transitional authorities' capacity to maintain security and manage diversity, embolden spoiler actors who benefit from continued instability, and reinforce the narrative that Syria's post-conflict order is replicating rather than transcending the exclusionary patterns of the past.

This continued salience of sectarian framing in 2025 is also powerfully evident in online and media discourse, where the information environment remains deeply contested. Zaiter

(2020) finds that throughout the conflict, Syrian media spaces functioned as active arenas for “constructing identities” and amplifying polarizing narratives, processes through which sectarian identities were not simply reflected but actively produced and hardened through communicative practice. This dynamic almost certainly endures in the transitional period’s fragmented information environment, where multiple competing actors—including transitional authorities, armed factions, diaspora communities, regional powers, and international media—each seek to shape the dominant narrative of what the Syrian transition means and whom it serves. In the absence of trusted, independent, and inclusive public information infrastructure, the risk is that identity-based polarization will continue to be reproduced and amplified through media and social media channels, complicating efforts to build the shared civic identity that sustainable post-conflict reconstruction ultimately requires.

These unresolved questions—how to integrate Kurdish regions, how to reassure Alawites and other minorities, and how to handle hardline Islamist factions—contributed to a continuing climate of uncertainty and fear. Analysts cautioned that Syria’s transition, while free from full-scale war in early 2025, was “neither a flawless transition nor a descent into chaos”. This in-between state, however, was fragile.

Syria’s tradition of identity-based political mobilization has persisted despite the regime change. Analysts have highlighted the interim government’s limited capacity or willingness to integrate all sectarian and ethnic groups into the new power structure, noting that certain key minority factions were excluded from early power-sharing arrangements (ICG, 2025; Erkmen & Özçelik, 2025). This perceived lack of inclusivity may perpetuate the grievances and sense of exclusion that contributed to radicalization during the civil war. It is important to note that conclusions regarding ongoing radicalization remain tentative, as the 2025 data are primarily derived from secondary sources and opposition perspectives, and the situation is still evolving. Nevertheless, available evidence indicates that although political discourse under al-Sharaa is less overtly brutal than under Assad, Syria remains vulnerable to further radicalization. If segments of the population, including disenfranchised minorities or disillusioned former rebels, perceive the new system as a continuation of previous practices, they may resort to extreme measures outside the political process. Therefore, the mechanism of radicalization, closely linked to identity politics and perceived existential threats, continues to pose a risk of instability during Syria’s transitional period, despite widespread aspirations for a return to normalcy and peace.

2011-2012: Militarization. From civil resistance to entrenched armed factionalism

The third mechanism, militarization, denotes the transition from civil resistance to large-scale armed conflict. In the Syrian context, this shift was neither rapid nor consistent nationwide; however, interview data reveal several recurring factors that compelled segments of the opposition to adopt armed resistance. The regime’s escalating violence emerged as a primary catalyst. As nonviolent demonstrations were met with live ammunition and mass

arrests, some protesters and defected soldiers formed local defense committees and nascent militias, initially to protect their communities. As Participant 26 stated, “When they started shooting at unarmed crowds, what option did we have?” (Interview 26, private sector, 2024). Regime actions, such as the brutal crackdowns in Daraa and Homs in 2011, were frequently identified by interviewees as pivotal moments when “the struggle changed”, leading many to conclude that peaceful resistance was no longer viable.

The emergence of external support for the armed opposition represented a significant turning point. By late 2011 and early 2012, several participants observed that weapons and financial resources began arriving from abroad, primarily through sympathetic networks in the Gulf states, to select opposition groups. Although this assistance was initially welcomed by those seeking means of self-defense, it produced unintended consequences. The influx of resources empowered more militant factions and intensified divisions, as secular or localized rebel units were often outgunned or absorbed by better-funded Islamist brigades. As one former Free Syrian Army commander reflected, “We needed help, but what we got was chaos. Everyone had their own agenda, highlighting how a diverse array of foreign sponsors — from individual Gulf donors to regional powers — supported competing rebel leaders” (Interview 15, former FSA commander, 2024).

This external intervention, combined with the Assad regime’s loss of control over extensive territories by mid-2012, resulted in the proliferation of armed groups with divergent loyalties. Consequently, the military landscape became highly fragmented, with dozens of rebel factions — some coordinated, many not — engaging in simultaneous conflicts against the regime and, at times, against each other. This development aligns with Kaldor’s (2012) concept of “new wars”, in which internal conflicts merge with transnational struggles, driven by non-state networks and external sponsors. In the Syrian context, the regime’s severe crackdowns and the collapse of state authority by 2012 facilitated such external involvement, as foreign funding and arms supplied emergent rebel militias and significantly escalated the militarization of the uprising (Hokayem, 2013; Lister, 2015).

The militarization mechanism, therefore, was driven by both push factors — regime violence that forced opposition fighters to take up arms — and pull factors — the availability of external arms and support that incentivized violent resistance. By the end of 2012, Syria was embroiled in a full-fledged civil war, and any semblance of a unified opposition movement had largely given way to a constellation of armed actors.

Empirical findings on militarization

This perspective enables a more nuanced analysis of militarization as a process shaped by diverse actors and marked by strategic ambiguity, including the roles of domestic intelligence agencies and transnational support networks. Foreign intervention significantly altered the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, transforming it into a prolonged proxy war. Phillips (2016) notes that, starting in 2012–2013, Iran’s military assistance and Hezbollah’s direct



Figure 3: Armed resistance and the reconfiguration of contention

participation bolstered the regime, while financial support from Gulf states and the arrival of foreign fighters enhanced the capabilities of various rebel factions.

2024–2025: Incomplete demilitarization and continuing security challenges

Following the December 2024 regime change, a key challenge for the new authorities was reversing the entrenched militarization of Syrian politics. Some progress has been made: large-scale pitched battles of the civil war subsided after Assad’s fall, and many former rebel fighters were incorporated into collective security frameworks such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) or local police forces. However, evidence suggests that full demobilization and integration of armed actors remain incomplete. The participants, speaking mostly in early 2024, expressed concern that the transitional government might struggle to control all militias and autonomous armed groups operating in Syria. Multiple participants emphasized that security sector reform lagged behind other aspects of the transition, leaving power vacuums in some regions. Participant 29 from Daraa noted in April 2024, “The guns haven’t gone silent; some have just changed uniforms” (Interview 29, public sector, 2024). This perspective reflects a concern that various militias, especially those with Islamist or tribal affiliations, were being superficially rebranded as units of the new national forces without fully dissolving their parallel command structures and loyalties. This observation aligns with the International Crisis Group’s (2025) assessment that Syria’s security landscape in 2025 is characterized by a “patchwork of militias” integrated into security forces without full disarmament or central control. A UK parliamentary research brief further confirms that armed groups continue to operate semi-independently, noting that the interim government’s forces are “a mixture of former rebel militias and repurposed regime units, with uneven loyalty to the new state” (Loft & Mills, 2025, p. 4).

Subsequent reporting by international observers has highlighted similar issues. By mid-2025, the interim government’s security forces remained a patchwork of pre-existing rebel factions and hastily recruited former regime soldiers, with uneven discipline and allegiance (Loft & Mills, 2025). In some majority-Sunni areas, local SNA units were accused of acting as law unto themselves, raising fears among minority communities. Conversely, in formerly regime-held areas with large Alawite populations, insurgent attacks by pro-Assad

groups continued, suggesting that not all remnants of the old order had accepted the new dispensation. The International Crisis Group noted in March 2025 that Syria's security forces were overstretched and struggling to contain insurgencies brewing at the periphery. The same briefing warned that "outside actors are meddling", as various foreign powers maintain proxy forces or direct military presence on Syrian soil. Indeed, the footprint of external actors remains significant: Turkey continues to back armed factions in the north, Iran's allied militias still operate in parts of the country, and Israel has sporadically conducted airstrikes in southern Syria (ICG, 2025; Loft & Mills, 2025). The continuing presence of foreign-backed forces underscores that Syria's conflict remains internationalized. A recent RUSI analysis notes that Turkey's support for rebel factions in Idlib and Iran's backing of militias in the south persist into the transitional period, complicating the interim government's efforts to monopolize the use of force (Erkmen, 2025). These interventions, while beyond the control of the Damascus leadership, perpetuate a climate of militarized instability and complicate the interim government's efforts to consolidate a monopoly on violence.

The Syrian case exemplifies, with particular clarity, what Baczkó, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) describe as the emergence of "competing social orders" during civil war — a condition in which the collapse or fragmentation of central state authority creates a governance vacuum that multiple armed actors move to fill, each establishing its own administrative, judicial, and coercive structures in the territories under its control. Rather than representing a simple absence of governance, this phenomenon reflects the active construction of alternative political orders, each with its own logic of legitimacy, resource extraction, social regulation, and relationship to the civilian population.

In the Syrian context, this dynamic became unmistakably visible by 2013, as the conflict landscape fragmented into a complex mosaic of overlapping and competing jurisdictions. The Islamic State established a highly bureaucratized proto-state across large swaths of eastern Syria and northern Iraq, complete with taxation systems, courts, schools, and public services — a governance model designed as much to entrench territorial control as to fulfill ideological objectives. Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor formations administered areas of northwestern Syria through a distinct Islamist governance framework, while the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), commonly known as Rojava, developed an elaborate decentralized governance structure grounded in the ideological principles of democratic confederalism. Meanwhile, in regime-held areas, the Ba'athist state continued to function, albeit in a severely degraded form, alongside a proliferating network of pro-regime militias that exercised localized coercive authority largely outside formal state command structures.

This fragmentation of political authority carries profound implications for Syria's post-conflict reconstruction. As Baczkó, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) indicate, the governance structures established by armed actors during conflict are not temporary arrangements that dissolve upon the cessation of hostilities; they tend to endure, embedding themselves in local administrative practices, community expectations, and power relations

in ways that resist displacement by a returning central state. Populations that lived under these alternative orders for extended periods — some cases nearly a decade — developed functional relationships, however coerced or imperfect, with the institutions that governed their daily lives. Dismantling or bypassing these structures without offering credible, legitimate, and effective alternatives risks creating new governance vacuums, generating local resistance, and undermining the transitional authorities' capacity to extend meaningful state presence across Syrian territory. The reassertion of a strong, inclusive, and legitimate central state therefore emerges not merely as a political aspiration but as a foundational prerequisite for sustainable reconstruction — one that must navigate the entrenched legacies of competing social orders rather than assume their disappearance.

Crucially, the limited scope of the interview data on the 2024–2025 period means that this assessment of ongoing militarization is informed largely by secondary sources and should be interpreted with care. Contemporary policy analyses underscore that Syria's security situation in 2025 is tenuous and fluid. A research brief published by the UK House of Commons Library in mid-2025 documents that even after the regime's fall, sporadic violence — including revenge attacks against Alawite communities and clashes involving Druze militias — continued to erupt, requiring the new government to launch investigations and navigate complex communal tensions (Loft & Mills, 2025). At the same time, the transitional authorities had to contend with remnants of the Islamic State (IS) in the east and negotiate uneasy ceasefires among various non-state armed groups (Loft & Mills, 2025; Erkmén, 2025). These realities highlight that the militarization of Syrian society cannot be swiftly unwound. Years of conflict have normalized the presence of armed actors and weapons, and new power structures have formed that do not vanish with regime change.

Despite these hurdles, the interim government, with support from international partners, has declared its intent to demobilize militias and rebuild a unified national army. The effectiveness of such efforts remains to be seen. What is clear from both our respondents' accounts and current events is that the militarized nature of political contention in Syria endures, even if large-scale combat operations have ceased. The persistence of this mechanism means that any misstep in the transition — such as a breakdown of political talks or a failure to provide local security — could quickly lead to an uptick in violence. For now, Syria's new authorities have prevented a relapse into nationwide warfare, but the foundations of peace remain fragile. Ongoing militarization, manifested in the incomplete integration of armed groups and continuous external meddling, stands as a potent reminder that resolving Syria's conflict will require more than a change of leadership; it demands a deliberate dismantling of war-era structures and careful confidence-building among all factions. Interviews and external reports alike suggest that without such efforts, the risk of renewed fighting remains, particularly in areas where grievances are high and weapons remain readily available.

Discussion

This study has argued that the foundational mechanisms that precipitated Syria's descent into civil conflict — namely fragmented governance, sectarian polarization, and institutional erosion — remain deeply embedded in the country's political architecture as of 2025. While prevailing scholarship has emphasized the role of regional and international actors in escalating the conflict (Phillips, 2016; Lister, 2015), it has often underexamined the structural conditions that enabled radicalization and militarization in the first place. As Hinnebusch (2012) and Heydemann (2007) have shown, the Assad regime's strategy of "authoritarian upgrading", combining selective liberalization with coercive retrenchment, ultimately undermined its legitimacy and created fertile ground for identity-based mobilization.

The findings presented here build on and extend this literature by tracing how these structural vulnerabilities persisted and evolved under the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Rather than marking a rupture from authoritarianism, Syria's post-Assad governance appears to reflect a reconfiguration of exclusionary logics under a new institutional guise. The concentration of executive authority, the opacity of transitional justice mechanisms, and the marginalization of minority actors suggest that the interim administration has struggled to establish inclusive legitimacy (International Crisis Group, 2025; Abdulghany, 2025). As one civil society activist recalled, "People felt the fever of hatred was breaking; we thought maybe we could finally stop seeing each other as enemies" (Interview 17, civil society activist, 2024). Yet, this optimism has been tempered by the persistence of coercive governance and the absence of meaningful pluralism.

The radicalization of oppositional discourse, a key mechanism in Syria's conflict trajectory, has also shown signs of continuity. As Hokayem (2013) and Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) have documented, the regime's early release of Islamist detainees and its sectarian framing of dissent contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition and the rise of extremist factions. These dynamics were not merely the result of ideological shifts but were shaped by strategic calculations and identity-based threat perceptions. In the transitional period, unresolved grievances and uneven representation have continued to fuel communal anxieties, particularly among Alawite and Druze communities (Khaddour, 2025; Erkmen & Özçelik, 2025). The July 2025 violence in Suwayda, for instance, underscored the fragility of intercommunal trust and the risks of renewed radical mobilization.

Militarization, the third mechanism examined in this study, remains a defining feature of Syria's post-conflict landscape. As Kaldor (2012) has argued, contemporary civil wars are often characterized by the proliferation of non-state armed actors and the erosion of centralized authority. In Syria, the failure to fully integrate or demobilize armed factions has resulted in a fragmented security apparatus, with competing loyalties and limited state control (Loft & Mills, 2025). The continued presence of foreign-backed militias, whether aligned with Turkey, Iran, or other regional powers, has further complicated efforts to

consolidate a unified national military (Phillips, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2025). These dynamics have not only undermined the interim government's legitimacy but have also perpetuated the logic of militarized governance.

Theoretically, this analysis challenges linear models of democratization and regime change by demonstrating how authoritarian practices can be reconstituted within transitional frameworks. Rather than a clean break from the past, Syria's post-Assad governance reflects a continuity of centralization, elite consolidation, and coercive control. Empirically, the study underscores the importance of internal political architecture in shaping conflict trajectories. While external interventions have undoubtedly influenced the course of the war, their impact has been mediated by domestic vulnerabilities, particularly the state's inability to accommodate pluralistic demands and address socio-economic exclusion.

These insights suggest that policy interventions aimed at stabilization must move beyond short-term security arrangements and engage with the structural foundations of legitimacy, accountability, and civic inclusion. Without transparent and inclusive governance mechanisms, transitional justice initiatives risk reinforcing factionalism and deepening societal fragmentation (Makdisi, 2019). Moreover, the persistence of informal networks and politicized identity structures poses challenges to regional coherence, particularly in fragile states where governance vacuums invite external competition and proxy entrenchment.

Regionally, Syria's trajectory reflects broader patterns of post-authoritarian resilience observed in other Middle Eastern contexts. For regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states, Syria's post-conflict governance model serves both as a strategic concern and a potential template for influence. Understanding the interplay between domestic fragility and external pressure is therefore essential not only for Syria's future but also for the broader architecture of post-conflict governance in the Middle East.

Conclusion

This study has examined the transformation of Syria's 2011 uprising into a protracted civil conflict and the persistence of its core mechanisms — erosion of legitimacy, radicalization, and militarization — under the transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa in 2025. Drawing on the *contentious politics approach* (Florea, 2017) and grounded in empirical fieldwork, the analysis demonstrates that these mechanisms, far from being resolved, have been recalibrated and embedded within the post-Assad governance framework.

The findings suggest that Syria's interim government has inherited not only the institutional void left by the collapse of the Ba'athist regime but also many of its authoritarian legacies. The centralization of power, the exclusion of key minority actors, and the instrumentalization of transitional justice have undermined efforts to build inclusive legitimacy. Rather than dismantling the structures that facilitated conflict escalation, the transitional authorities appear to have reconstituted them under a new political order — one that continues to marginalize dissent and reproduce identity-based inequalities.

Radicalization and militarization, once seen as symptoms of regime repression, now manifest through new channels. Sectarian tensions, unresolved grievances, and the proliferation of armed actors remain salient features of Syria's political landscape. The failure to demobilize militias, the persistence of foreign-backed armed groups, and the absence of a coherent national security strategy have perpetuated insecurity and hindered the consolidation of state authority. These dynamics not only threaten the fragile gains of the transitional period but also risk reigniting cycles of violence.

Ultimately, the Syrian case underscores the limitations of transitional governance models that prioritize elite bargains and security sector consolidation over structural reform and civic inclusion. Without addressing the root causes of legitimacy erosion, socio-economic exclusion, authoritarian resilience, and identity-based marginalization, efforts at post-conflict reconstruction are likely to remain superficial and unstable. As the Syrian experience illustrates, the end of authoritarian rule does not guarantee the emergence of democratic governance. Instead, it may give rise to new forms of exclusion and coercion unless accompanied by deliberate, inclusive, and transparent institutional transformation.

Future research should continue to interrogate the evolving nature of post-conflict governance in Syria, particularly the interplay between formal institutions and informal power networks. Comparative studies across transitional contexts in the Middle East may also yield valuable insights into the conditions under which rebel victories can lead to sustainable peace or, conversely, to renewed authoritarianism. For policymakers and international actors, the Syrian transition offers a cautionary tale: stabilization without legitimacy is not only insufficient but potentially counterproductive, reinforcing the very dynamics it seeks to resolve.

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