research program

PRIF Research Program

October 2025

PRIF

Leibniz Association

PRIF Research Program

by Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, revised version as of October 2025

This document presents the research program of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). As a strategic framework, it links PRIF's fundamental mission as a peace and conflict research institute, the current research agenda of the institute and its core units, as well as its medium-term strategic objectives. In doing so, the research program serves to guide strategic planning and to ensure the coherence of research across PRIF's Research Departments (RDs), Research Groups, and collaborative initiatives.

This program is a "living document". It has no expiry date, but is reviewed periodically, and revised and supplemented as needed. Until 2023, PRIF research programs focused on a single overarching theme for a limited period of time.[1] This program diverges from previous practices in response to PRIF's growth, its increasing thematic breadth, and the necessity of adapting to emerging needs. Some elements of this document are more foundational while others will undergo more frequent changes. The more permanent components include the general mission and the overall research agenda of PRIF (Section 1), as well as the main topics and the structure of the Research Departments (Section 2). By contrast, the research agendas of the Research Departments and Groups (Section 2) and cross-cutting research areas (Section 3) are designed to evolve with current political developments and academic debates.

1. Mission and aims

The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt is one of Europe's leading peace and conflict research institutes, and the largest of its kind in Germany. Guided by the overall aim of discovering pathways towards sustainable peace orders, we analyze first the causes, patterns and impacts of conflict from the global to the local, and second the factors and strategies that help build and consolidate peace. We define and pursue our research topics autonomously, according to the principles of academic freedom. We use this independence to provide critical stimuli for academic and political debates at both the national and international level, combining foundational research with applied policy recommendations and knowledge transfer, aiding citizens and decision-makers. To achieve this mission PRIF is a member of the Leibniz Association and is funded by the German federal government, the state of Hesse, the city of Frankfurt, and through third-party funds.

Foundational research lies at the center of all PRIF's activities. We are dedicated to academic excellence, contribute to ongoing debates in leading academic journals, and apply peer review practices to all our in-house publications. We participate in academic networks linking us to other leading research institutes and universities worldwide. With universities, we closely cooperate in teaching. Research at PRIF is interdisciplinary while also seeking to integrate the views and expertise of practitioners. In terms of theory and methods, PRIF promotes and applies a diversity of approaches. Research at PRIF takes an empirical-analytical approach, which includes theory- and concept-building as well as the theory-guided and data-based examination of normative issues.

[1] Previous research programs have included "Antinomies of Democratic Peace" (2000–2011), "Just Peace Governance" (2011–2018), and "Coercion and Peace" (2018–2023). For more details, see: https://www.prif.org/en/research/research-program

As a peace research institute, PRIF is committed to the overarching aim of generating and disseminating knowledge that helps promote peaceful change, understood broadly as processes that combine "decreasing violence, increasing social justice and political freedom in the international system and in individual societies", as stated in PRIF's constitution. We do not see conflict as inherently problematic. On the contrary, controversies and disputes that involve (partially) incompatible claims are part and parcel of everyday life, from the local to the global level. Conflicts become problematic when they lead to violence, exclusion and/or disenfranchisement of societal groups. Beyond this general normative orientation, however, PRIF deliberately refrains from establishing binding definitions of either peace or conflict, instead allowing individual researchers and research projects to work with those conceptions that are most suitable to addressing the respective research questions at stake.

In line with the Leibniz Association's motto, "*theoria cum praxi*", PRIF emphasizes the dissemination of practically relevant findings to society at large. As part of our knowledge transfer strategy, we provide background information on current events and analysis for government ministries, political parties, civil society organizations, and corporations. We issue policy advice to actors from the political arena and broader society, contribute to media reports with our expertise, and organize public discussions on current issues. We conceive knowledge transfer as a dialogical exchange between science and society, integrating into scientific the work ideas and inspiration drawn from our engagement with society. To maximize the impact of both our academic work and policy advice we continuously monitor the relevant metrics.

What makes research at PRIF stand out is the approach to long-standing as well as current societal challenges and political disputes through the lens of peace and conflict studies. That is to say, with a focus on the underlying dynamics of conflict and their implications for peace. It does so based on both in-depth foundational research and continuous, dialogical knowledge transfer. In sum, research at PRIF stands for:

- *Academic excellence*. The work of PRIF focuses on foundational research promoting the progress of scientific knowledge about peace-related issues. In this mission, PRIF collaborates with research partners from across the world and fosters an inclusive working environment for its international staff.
- *Interdisciplinarity*. PRIF researchers from the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences collaborate across disciplines on joint projects and cross-cutting issues.
- *Excellent training*. Training at PRIF prepares early-stage scholars for an academic career, but also for positions in politics, civil service, industry, civil society, and international organizations. The institute is committed to a working environment in which diversity is valued, equal opportunities prevail, and work is compatible with family life.
- *Theoria cum praxi*. In line with the motto of the Leibniz Association, PRIF aims to provide research-driven and nonpartisan policy advice and knowledge transfer. The institute follows the principle of knowledge transfer oriented toward dialogue with society and decision-makers.

2. Overall research agenda and Research Departments

"There will always be conflicts in this world—social, political, and economic conflicts. We must ensure that these conflicts are handled rationally and with reason and that their resolution does not restrict people's freedom." With these words, then Minister President of Hesse, Albert Osswald, presented on 30 October 1970 the foundation deed for the *Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*, later renamed *Leibniz-Institut für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* (PRIF in English). Given the historical context in which PRIF was founded, armament dynamics, arms control, and disarmament have been among the institute's core research topics from the very beginning—and they remain of crucial importance to this day. In the 1970s and 1980s, the focus on the East-West conflict was broadened to systematically include a focus on North-South relations and peace and conflict dynamics in what we refer to today as the Global South. With the end of the Cold War, PRIF started to devote more attention to international norms, regimes, and organizations, as well as to peacebuilding and democratization. Nevertheless, since the hope for an "end of history" soon proved to be in vain, the dynamics of armed conflict and organized violence have remained core topics throughout the decades. In fact, during the first two decades of the 21st century, the institute further expanded its agenda to study processes of polarization and radicalization as challenges to societal peace in the Global North. Most recent developments have indeed led to the diagnosis of a worldwide "polycrisis", a mutually reinforcing interplay of various threats to security and peace, democracy and social cohesion, as well as the environment. In response, PRIF has built up research on environmental change as a cause of both conflict and cooperation, strengthened its traditional focus on organized violence and war while also studying the interlinkages between multiple societal threats and the role of crisis discourses themselves. In doing so, PRIF both focuses on immediate responses to tame or end violence, enhance security, or mitigate the consequences of climate change, as well as on the structural measures to address root causes of violence, depolarize societal and international relations, and promote social and environmental justice. In this context, we adopt the notion of a sustainable peace order as our common normative horizon. A sustainable peace order denotes configurations of institutions, practices, and rules that help to sustainably manage crises and conflict in peaceful ways. Complementing the three dimensions of peaceful change emphasized in PRIF's constitution—decreasing violence, increasing social justice and expanding political freedom—, building sustainable peace orders also requires addressing environmental sustainability.

PRIF has built up an extensive body of knowledge on key aspects that are critical to the state and future peace in the world. The topics that we continuously address include arms control and disarmament; international norms, regimes, and organizations; armed conflict and organized violence; military and nonmilitary interventions; peacebuilding and (de-)democratization; environmental change and conflict, as well as nonviolent social conflict, radicalization, and societal peace. These topics are investigated in PRIF's five Research Departments (RD), which are the main research units of the institute. They represent key research fields in peace and conflict studies, dealing with questions of international security (RD I), the role of international institutions (RD II), transnational politics (RD III), peace and conflict at the intrastate level (RD IV), as well as the interaction between political globalization and local lifeworlds (RD V).

The Research Departments also host smaller Research Groups. These groups pool the expertise and coordinate research on specific topics. Currently, Research Groups deal with emerging technologies, biological and chemical weapons, nuclear diplomacy, public international law, peacekeeping and conflict management through the United Nations, world order conflicts, the interlinkages between ecology, climate, and conflict, terrorism and ex-

tremism prevention, regime competition, and African peace interventions (see Figure 1). In contrast to the RDs, which are the key administrative research units at PRIF, these groups are smaller and more flexible – they can be established, adjusted and phased out more easily. While anchored in specific RDs, the groups can also include members and co-coordinators from other departments. In addition, Research Groups and individual researchers can join forces in what we call *cross-cutting research areas*, which address ongoing political developments and academic debates, and facilitate collaboration across the Research Departments as well as with our national and international partners (see Section 3).

Figure 1: Working Groups by Anchoring Research Department

Research Department I: *International Security*	**Research Department II: *International Institutions***	**Research Department III: *Transnational Politics***	**Research Department IV: *Intrastate Conflict***	**Research Department V: *Glocal Junctions***
Research Group "Emerging Disruptive Technologies"	Research Group "Public International Law"	Research Group "Radicalization, Terrorism, and Extremism Prevention"	Research Group "Regime Competition"	Research Group "African Intervention Politics
Research Group "Biological and Chemical Disarmament and Security"	Research Group "World Orders in Conflict"	Research Group "Ecology, Climate, and Conflict"		
Research Group "Science for Nuclear Diplomacy"	Research Group "Peacekeeping and Conflict Management Through the United Nations"			

2.1 Research Department I: International Security

Research Department I focuses on peace and conflict at the international level. In particular, it examines how states strive for national and international security and analyzes the impact of their strategies and actions on the international order. Recent developments, whether geopolitical, technological, or socio-ecological in nature, require new thinking about how to ensure peace and security, preserve international norms and rules, particularly with regard to the use of force, and limit arms dynamics and the proliferation of weapons, especially weapons of mass destruction. For this reason, PB I combines theory-orientated foundational research with policy-oriented applied research, education and training, policy advice, and knowledge transfer.

Research in RD I focuses on three major transformations that are currently taking place:

1. *The geopolitical transformation*: Russia's war of aggression, China's rise to become an assertive military power and the West's disintegration due to the US disengagement from Europe are not only leading to a redistribution of power in the international system, but also to a crisis of international norms and institutions. The EU and its member states are responding to this with a strategy of rearmament while simultaneously striving to maintain the international order. We examine the resulting threats and risks and assess their implications for international peace and security.
2. *The technological transformation*: Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics,

etc. harbor both risks and opportunities. On the one hand, they increase the effectiveness of military means and can contribute to instability and the escalation of conflicts; on the other hand, they can promote transparency and encourage cooperation, for example through new verification systems. In addition to traditional arms control research, we are placing greater emphasis on analyzing the use, regulation, and non-proliferation of new military technologies.

3. *The socio-ecological transformation*: Environmental changes linked to the climate, biodiversity, and pollution crises threaten people's living conditions and can contribute to conflicts. Different communities are affected unequally, however, and environmental pressures often converge with gender, racial, and class inequities. We investigate how such conflicts can be avoided or mitigated and, in particular, how the harmful effects of warfare and armament can be limited. We also examine gender as well as environmental crises under the perspective of increasing backlash and its effects on norms and the sustainable peace order.

Since many of these topics involve not only political, social, and legal aspects, but also technical and scientific ones, RD I has systematically expanded its interdisciplinary expertise in recent years by recruiting natural scientists. In particular, it has established the Cluster for Natural and Technical Science Arms Control Research (CNTR), which comprises three research groups: "Science for Nuclear Diplomacy," "Use and Control of Emerging Disruptive Technologies," and "Biological and Chemical Disarmament and Security." A further research group "Ecology, Climate and Conflict" is located in both RD I and RD III. RD I has extensive international cooperation links, e.g., it is one of the leading institutions of the EU Nonproliferation and Disarmament Consortium and a driving force behind the Arms Control Negotiation Academy (ACONA). Through its research groups, it is also involved in the CBWNet network for the comprehensive reinforcement of norms against chemical and biological weapons and VeSPoTec, a research consortium on nuclear arms control verification.

For the future, RD I is planning to build an independent AI Compute Cluster to enable its use in peace and conflict research, as well as strengthening its AI expertise and building the necessary infrastructure to enable its use in peace and conflict research. More specifically, there are plans to join forces with partners to develop an AI-based early warning tool.

2.2 Research Department II: International Institutions

Research Department II studies international institutions – organizations, regimes, and conventions. The aim is to investigate how institutions can contribute to a sustainable peace order. International institutions have typically been viewed as stabilizing factors when it comes to peace. The increasing institutionalization of the international system after World War II and in the post-Cold War period is generally seen as having promoted the peaceful coexistence and cooperation of international state and non-state actors. More recently, however, many international institutions have entered a period of crisis. International organizations are losing relevance, international treaties are being abandoned, and international law is being reinterpreted, instrumentalized, and dismantled.

Against this background, current work in the Research Department focuses on the analysis of conflicts and crises in and around international institutions and norms. Its members analyze how such crises and conflicts arise, what courses they take and what effects they have on the legitimacy and effectiveness of institutions. Research is guided by the shared interest in understanding how international institutions must be designed or reformed to contribute to a sustainable peace order and how dense or thin the institutional layer of a

sustainable peace order should be. With this perspective, projects study conflicts around certain norm sets and international organizations as well as crises of world order over time and in space, while others focus on strategies of institutional conflict management like UN peacekeeping or institutional disintegration and disentanglement.

Accordingly, RD II's research topics fall into two broad areas:

1. *Institutional crises and conflicts in world (sub-)orders*: RD II analyzes contestation, resistance and exits from international institutions and norms in specific sub-orders (peace and security, trade, human rights). The aim is to develop a typology of crises depending on their gravity for the orders. To this end, research aims at comparing such crises over time (starting with historical orders from the 18th and 19th centuries) and across themes (comparing various sub-orders).
2. *Management strategies of institutional crises and conflicts*: With multiple challenges to their legitimacy and effectiveness, international institutions are under pressure to reform. Research compares various institutional strategies dealing with such challenges. What kind of conflict management do institutions employ? How do they channel and process critique and when do they react by reform, when not? Beyond the focus on particular institutions, projects also study systemic responses such as disentanglement strategies that decrease the density of institutional rules and procedures.

Research in these areas draws on various quantitative and qualitative methods, ranging from survey experiments to geospatial analysis and discourse and network analysis. Currently, the department develops AI tools to broaden its methodological toolkit. RD II hosts three research groups which align with these areas: A LOEWE research group on world order conflicts and the International Law research group focus on research area 1 but also tip into research area 2. The research group on peacekeeping and conflict management through the United Nations addresses research area 2. The second area is also strengthened by an emerging focus on disentanglement and disintegration strategies in trade and security.

With these broad areas of research, RD II aims to generate a better understanding the institutional design of, and institutional pathways towards, a sustainable peace order.

2.3 Research Department III: Transnational Politics

Research Department III studies the transnational dimension of peace and conflict. In particular, it focuses on how transnational actors and transnational phenomena sustain, challenge, and shape sustainable peace orders.

Recent decades have been marked by processes of transnationalization, climate change, migration, terrorism, global economic crises, and technological advances continue to blur national boundaries, requiring responses that exceed the capacities of individual nation-states. Consequently, transnational non-state actors like armed groups, extremist networks, and private security companies are assuming more agency in governance and order-making. At the same time, global governance is in crisis due to the resurgence of state-centered and nationalist approaches to geopolitics. RD III explores the impact of transnational phenomena on peace and conflict as well as the role of transnational actors in facilitating violence or promoting peace.

RD III has three overarching research themes:

1. *Violent and non-violent transnational actors*: Since the end of the Cold War, intrastate armed conflict and transnational non-state actors have gained importance. The same

is true for transnational forms of political violence such as terrorism and intervention in civil wars by non-state actors. RD III investigates these dynamics of transnationalization and their impact on peace and conflict. It emphasizes the formation, organization, transformation, and impact of transnational armed actors in areas such as ideology and governance.

2. *Transnational phenomena*: Environmental change, transnational policy developments (e.g., on peacebuilding, economic regulation, climate policies and preventing violent extremism), the spread of violent ideologies, and technological innovations increasingly shape patterns of peace and conflict. RD III analyzes how such transnational phenomena increase conflict risks, contribute to peacebuilding, and shape the behavior of non-state armed actors. Key areas of its work include climate change, the spread of radical ideologies and religious identities, and migration, all of which have long-term consequences for peace orders.
3. *Transnational radicalization dynamics and terrorism*: RD III investigates the patterns and trajectories of extremism, terrorism, and radicalization and how state and non-state actors cope with these phenomena. This includes the justification of response strategies, the mutually escalating effects of radical milieus and intervention measures, and measures of extremism prevention.

RD III co-hosts two research groups. The research group "Radicalization, Terrorism, and Extremism Prevention" investigates the dynamics of and responses to radicalization processes, transnational practices and networks of terrorism and counterterrorism, and the societal impacts of (de)radicalization and (counter)terrorism. Deradicalization and extremism prevention are conceived as foundational for long-lasting peace. The research group "Ecology, Climate, and Conflict" investigates how changes in climate, biodiversity, and pollution can foster conflicts, and how they might be avoided or even serve as a starting point for deeper cooperation and sustainable peace. In the future, RD III plans to address other transnational challenges to peace. In the near term, the department plans to analyze the effects of transnational migration on religious pluralism and ensuing conflicts in receiving countries. In the long run, RD III will deepen its research on the formation, organization, and impact of transnational conflict actors.

2.4 Research Department IV: Intrastate Conflict

Research Department IV examines peace and conflict at the intrastate level. Among PRIF's Research Departments, RD IV studies how the organization, transformation, and exercise of political rule shapes the violent escalation or peaceful management of intrastate conflicts. This includes a focus on societal challenges to political rule and on external influences on intrastate conflict and political regimes. RD IV combines in-depth area expertise with an interest in global patterns and theory development. The overall aim is to identify the conditions and ways by which a sustainable peace order can be built at the intrastate level.

Recent years have been characterized by increasing levels of organized violence, waves of mass protests, and a global trend of democratic backsliding or autocratization. Most armed conflicts, incidents of organized violence, and mass protest movements take place at the level of the nation-state. This is related to the ways in which political regimes are organized and exercise political rule. Generally, the characteristics of states and political regimes are considered crucial when it comes to explaining patterns of political violence, the escalation of intrastate conflict, or the establishment and maintenance of intrastate peace. However, states and political regimes must be understood as being embedded in both societies and in international structures and processes. Hence, in studying intrastate

conflict over political order, RD IV's research pays particular attention to state-society relations and to external factors and forces that influence domestic politics.

RD IV's main research topics fall into two broad areas:

1. *Causes, dynamics, and resolution of armed intrastate conflict*: RD IV investigates armed intrastate conflict and the challenges of rebuilding peace and political order after civil war. The empirical focus is on current dynamics and transformations of violence in intrastate conflicts; humanitarian military interventions and other forms of external intervention and support in intrastate conflict; post-conflict peace- and state-building.
2. *Challenges to societal peace below the level of armed conflict*: RD IV studies the dynamics and causes of political violence in non-war settings as well as struggles over political order and social justice. The empirical focus is on intrastate violence against civilians (e.g., police violence, violence against civil society, repression); conflict-ridden political transformation processes; conflicts in the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation; the politics and policies of international democracy promotion.

Bringing together research on these two overall topics, RD IV aims to generate new insights into the role of changing political regimes in intrastate peace and conflict. We do so, first, by investigating regime configurations and changes that do not fit simple dichotomies (e.g. democracy versus autocracy). Second, we systematically investigate how external actors influence and intervene in nonviolent and violent intrastate conflicts. We examine from several perspectives, from international cooperation in the context of the energy transition to military interventions, civil wars and humanitarian crises. In doing so, the department strives to leverage its diverse methodological expertise in projects with multi-method designs to further international collaboration, especially with partners from the Global South. A model example of international collaboration is RD IV's involvement in the German-Colombian Peace Institute (Instituto CAPAZ), based in Bogotá.

To develop its research agenda RD IV is more systematically addressing socio-environmental dimensions of intrastate conflict. This includes how climate change adaptation and mitigation are impacting conflict dynamics. This research examines the promise of ongoing energy transitions by analyzing broader contentious transformation processes that accompany the shift from fossil to renewable energies. In addition, the department has begun to address the ongoing transformation of the global order and its impact on intrastate conflict and political regimes. The research group "Regime Competition", which is hosted by RD IV, brings together PRIF research and expertise to study how political actors deal with the diversity of political regimes in an increasingly multipolar world. It explores how this affects conflict dynamics and political orders at the global, regional, and national level. In this context, research in RD IV zooms in on the role of China in conflict-affected countries. The department also participates in the research network External Democracy Promotion (EDP), which brings together around 20 scholars from Germany and other European countries. Research, here, focuses on the implications of global autocratization for the study and practice of international democracy promotion.

2.5 Research Department V: Glocal Junctions

Research Department V focuses on analyzing the fault lines and frictions that emanate from political globalization processes. It studies pertinent conflict situations as well as peace politics, observed from the perspective of local lifeworlds.

Today's world is marked by entangled transformations, discourses, and actors, across local, regional, and global spaces. With these entanglements come fragmentations, junc-

tures, and disjunctures that shape political conflicts. The growing complexity makes it necessary to address conflict constellations at different scales, the ways in which they interact with each other, and how they can be addressed to foster sustainable peace. While Research Departments I-IV also study entangled conflicts of and in the globalized world, RD V prioritizes the analytical lens of local practices to understand how meaning and political subjectivities are constituted and negotiated under current world conditions. This analytical approach is derived from the epistemic role of social experiences in informing political action and aims to disentangle larger societal conflict figurations using the results of empirically grounded knowledge.

Research in this department addresses three overarching fields:

1. *Political subjectification and conflict in everyday life*: Political subjectification is shaped in and through social conflicts as experienced in everyday life. These conflicts are anything but local. They are rooted inter alia in processes of globalization, urbanization and commodification of spaces, transnational migration, or regional economic dependencies. In our interconnected world, the circulation of localized political ideas influences how individuals and social groups perceive their possibilities for political agency in general, and security and peace in particular. Our research looks at the multiple ways in which actors respond to these forces. We apply multisite in-depth research with the aim of understanding the conditions for (social) peace in context.
2. *Memory culture politics*: Globalized discourses and representations of excessive violence and the role they play in local-level memory practices and reconciliation politics, as well as in foreign relations, are one example of the entangled memory culture politics that RD V examines. The issue has gained momentum in recent years with the leverage of critical postcolonial studies: global effects of colonial intrusion and the fundamental transformations it produced shed new light on existing inequities. With an eye to the interplay of political, discursive and legal ways, RD V studies memory culture politics as a practice in ongoing struggles for justice and for the recognition of identities or shared experiences of violence.
3. *Local figurations of international politics*: International politics assume distinct shapes in varying social arenas across the globe. There is no uniform effect of, for example, the political decision to enforce international human rights or gender norms. Instead, there is a host of subjective types of involvement, individual as well as collective, from among different stakeholders on different scales. Aiming to understand the conflict lines that emerge from international politics in affected localities, RD V conducts intensive qualitative research that examines the repercussions of politics with a global impact for local lifeworlds.

RD V hosts the research group “African Intervention Politics”, which is part of the third research field. Projects in this group study peace and security-related activities conducted by African states and regional organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the African Union (AU) from a bottom-up perspective. The research group “Radicalization, Terrorism, and Extremism Prevention”, co-coordinated by a senior researcher in RD V, contributes to the department’s studies on political subjectification in (de-)radicalization processes, propaganda and extremist narratives. Further aspects studied here are the impacts of international and national politics on everyday polarization and extremism, as well as possible countering measures.

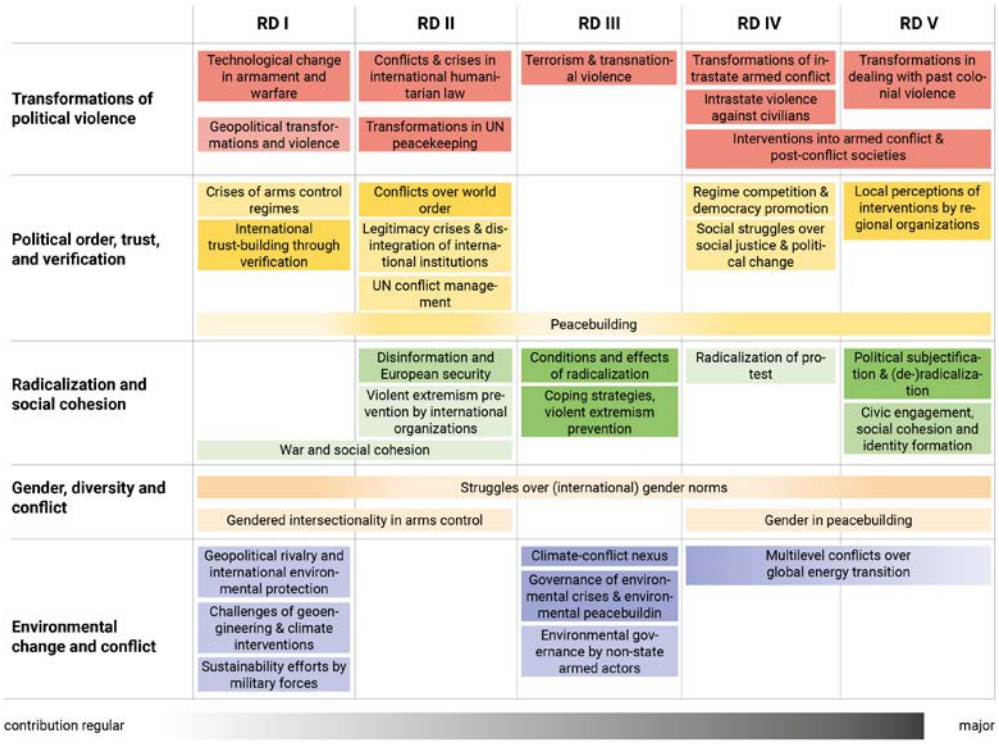
In the future, RD V plans to broaden research on global processes of social polarization in local contexts. Conceptually, RD V will continue to showcase the value added by grounded research based on practice theory. The coproduction of knowledge is an essential strategy

here, not only to overcome established hierarchies but also as a hermeneutic entry point for 'other than Global North' perspectives to be heard on issues of the emerging multipolar world order. Given the structural barriers that often render it impossible to really engage in meaningful ways with scholars and broader populations from the 'Global South' or emerging powers, RD V aims to establish strategic partnerships in the future to facilitate exactly this important moment for epistemic innovation.

3. Cross-cutting research areas

In addition to the topics and research areas that are continuously addressed by PRIF and the individual Research Departments (outlined in Section 2), research at PRIF also responds to ongoing political developments and academic debates by addressing questions and themes through cross-cutting research areas. Besides tackling issues that have been identified as particularly topical, these cross-cutting research areas also serve to integrate research across PRIF's individual Research Departments and to further collaboration with academic partners at the local, regional, national, and international level. These research areas do not constitute an additional set of organizational units and are diverse in terms of their degree and forms of coordination. Some of the following research areas are embedded in broader, third-party funded collaborative projects and, therefore, have their own institutional structure. Others bring researchers, research projects, and research findings at PRIF together in a more flexible and ad hoc manner by using the institute's established bodies and formats (such as the Research Groups, the meetings of the Research Council, the PRIF Colloquium or the institute's annual conferences). Figure 2 summarizes how research in the individual departments contributes to the five cross-cutting research areas.

Figure 2: Cross-Cutting Research Areas by Research Departments' Contributions



3.1 Transformations of political violence

In contrast to the widespread optimism of the early 1990s, current trends and debates do not suggest that the world is moving toward overcoming political violence. Since around the turn of the century, violent conflicts have increased in intensity, while globalization and technological change are enabling new forms of state and non-state political violence. Overall, current developments point to transformations that challenge existing norms and practices of containing political violence.

The research conducted by PRIF examines these developments with the aim of identifying their consequences for intra-societal and international peace and developing strategies to contain political violence in these changing conditions. In organizational terms, this research is conducted primarily in the context of the regional research center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe), which involves PRIF (as the central coordinator and research institution) as well as four Hessian universities (Goethe University Frankfurt, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Philipps-Universität Marburg, and the Technical University of Darmstadt). In line with the structure of TraCe, research at PRIF focuses on three thematic areas: (1) forms of change and continuity of political violence; (2) institutions for preventing and legitimizing political violence; and (3) interpretations and commemoration of political violence.

In terms of research topics, this cross-cutting research area brings together PRIF research on various types of political violence. With regard to armed conflict, this concerns studies on current trends in warfare in the context of technological and geopolitical change as well as on the causes and forms of military force (RD I); the institutionalization and legal regulation of armed law of war, e.g., in international humanitarian law (RD II); the internationalization of intrastate conflict (RD IV); and the regionalization and local politics of international responses to violent conflict, including through the United Nations and regional organization (RD II, V). Across all departments, we analyze international interventions—broadly defined peace operations, so-called humanitarian military interventions, and counterterrorism interventions—that respond to intrastate violence but also use violent means themselves. Transformations of violence are also analyzed with a focus on transnational actors, including terrorist groups, as well as states that use violence against civilians and civilian infrastructure (RD III, IV). When it comes to the interpretations of violence, PRIF focuses on the ways in which past instances of violence—here: use and testing of nuclear weapons, colonial genocides—are remembered and addressed (RD I, V, including in the context of the Leibniz Research Alliance "Value of the Past"). These diverse research activities are brought together and coordinated through the institutional structure of TraCe as well as the different collaborative formats established in this context (e.g., TraCe research colloquia, workshops, and annual conferences).

3.2 Political order, trust, and verification

The ways in which political rule is organized at the global, regional, and national level are currently facing a series of challenges and transformations. Observers in academia and politics have noted a crisis of the liberal world order that also implicates many international organizations designed to uphold the core norms of it, such as the UN and EU. Mistrust between states and vis-á-vis international organizations seems on the rise, while mechanisms of trust-building are undermined. For instance, institutions and regimes that verify compliance with nonproliferation, arms control and disarmament agreements have come under stress or have been terminated. As a consequence, knowledge of states' military programs is shrinking, suspicions and mistrust are aggravated. Simultaneously, scholar-

ship on democratic backsliding and autocratization has identified serious challenges to and transformations of the political order at the national level. Given the key role which international institutions and national-level political regimes play in the violent escalation or peaceful management of conflict, these trends are of immediate relevance for peace and conflict studies.

The overarching theme that unites PRIF research in this area is the ongoing transition to a pluralistic, multipolar, and possibly post-liberal world order. In this context, the contestation of supposedly shared norms and competition between diverging conceptions of political order are both omnipresent at all levels and arguably a key driver of political change. Under such conditions, trust, or the lack thereof, becomes a fundamental problem. The question of how and under what conditions trust is being formed, sustained or lost is crucial for many conflict dynamics. It becomes particularly pressing in times when trust is simultaneously eroding at several levels: between states in international relations, in political institutions at the national and international level, and between social groups and individuals at the societal level.

Following up on studies conducted in the context of the institute's research programs on the "Antinomies of Democratic Peace", "Just Peace Governance", and "Coercion and Peace", research in this area analyzes the legitimation and contestation of, as well as change in political orders at the global, regional, national, and subnational level. Research topics across the departments address the contestation of international norms and its consequences for both international institutions and the political order at the state level. To this end, emphasis is placed on the crises of arms control regimes, liberal intervention norms, and international gender norms (RD I), the disintegration of international institutions and the crisis of their legitimacy and effectiveness amid the erosion of local trust (RD II and RD V), the challenge of political order by extremist and violent transnational groups (RD III and RD V), the dynamics of regime competition and challenges to international democracy promotion (RD IV), as well as societal perceptions of international institutions and liberal intervention norms (RD V). A theme that runs through all departments in this area is a concern for norms and practices of post-conflict peacebuilding. Additionally, research on rebel governance as well as struggles over political order and social justice (RD III, IV and V) addresses the challenges to and transformations of political rule within states.

With a view to trust and trust-building, research conducted at PRIF builds on the research initiative "ConTrust: Trust in Conflict" (with Goethe University, 2021-2025) and focuses on the trust–conflict nexus in international security policy, international organizations, civil wars, contentious politics, and transnational political networks. With a view to the role of trust and trust-building, research particularly investigates interstate relations and international institutions, with a focus on arms control and conflicts over world order (RD I, II). Research on the dialectic of trust and conflict is also conducted by PRIF researchers in the context of the Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC). Verification—a practice simultaneously aiming at trust-building and coping with mistrust—has become an important theme with the integration of natural and technical science research, focusing on the role of technology in the verification of arms control agreements. The CNTR Research Groups "Science for Nuclear Diplomacy", "Biological and Chemical Disarmament" and "Emerging Disruptive Technologies" explore verification across all relevant arms control areas.

In addition to established formats at PRIF (such as the PRIF Colloquium), CNTR and the Research Groups "World Orders in Conflict" and "Regime Competition" facilitate exchange between different lines of research and help create synergies.

3.3 Radicalization and social cohesion

In recent years, the dynamics of radicalization and polarization in society have received increasing attention, both in academic debates and in the political realm. Three interrelated processes have triggered this. First, the years since 9/11 have seen new dynamics of violent terrorist attacks and changes in security policy; the involvement of foreign fighters in the causes and atrocities of the Islamic State in the 2010s; and the resurgence of far-right political violence and mobilization. Second, the confluence of crises discourses from the new millennium onward (financial and sovereign debt crisis, migration, COVID-19, environmental change, the war in Ukraine, as well as the energy crisis) has given rise to debates on the polarization of societies and threats to democracies. Third, technological transformations, such as communication on social platforms, are profoundly changing how information is distributed, news is consumed, and individuals and groups mobilize and radicalize. The desire to understand and explain these processes is the driving force behind an increasingly dense network of researchers and research projects at PRIF.

Research topics in this area investigate the causes and dynamics of radicalization processes and their interlinkages with societal dynamics. These interlinkages include the social conditions for and effects of radicalization on wider social dynamics – as well as the role that social media play in these relations (RD III); the transformation of the conditions of social cohesion in the political center of societies (RD II and V); the protest dynamics that challenge established categories and blur the boundaries between legitimate forms of protest and threats to democracy (RD III, IV); and the roles of state and civil-society actors, (international) law, and international organizations in preventing and countering extremism (RD II and III).

This cross-cutting research area bundles a variety of different initiatives, ranging from Research Groups and individual research projects to smaller formats, such as the organization of conferences and the transfer of knowledge to the political sphere and civil society. These activities are coordinated by the Research Group “Radicalization, Terrorism, and Extremism Prevention”. This group combines numerous projects that focus on a broad range of topics such as processes of radicalization and deradicalization, study and analysis of diverse Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PCVE) initiatives, or the changing terrorist threats. Many of these phenomena are increasingly intertwined and elude previous conceptual framings, stressing the need of continuous analysis and knowledge transfer. Research in this area also benefits from PRIF’s involvement in the many initiatives of the Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC). PRIF researchers also collaborate with RISC on research into violence and cohesion, as well as polarization and conflict (RD I, II).

3.4 Gender, diversity, and conflict

Gender research provides important findings for peace and conflict relations. According to quantitative studies, societies tend to be more peaceful if a variety of gender roles and identities are socially acknowledged. The realization of gender equality norms shows an ambivalent picture. In response to growing societal and legal recognition of gender norms, we also observe growing anti-feminism at various levels, especially against queer people. Some countries have adopted a feminist foreign policy, while others have discontinued it. The gender backlash also has an impact on effective and sustainable peacebuilding.

Feminist peace research at PRIF is understood as intersectional, implying a broader perspective considering other identity categories beyond gender such as age, class, ethnicity, race and sexual orientation. Current research at PRIF in this area looks at the role of gendered intersectionalities before, during, and after violent conflict, taking postcolonial

and anticolonial perspectives into account. It seeks to understand how violence during and after war is shaped by and affects gender roles and other identities. For example, in situations of armed conflict, women may become agents, certain forms of masculinity may be sought, and LGBTIQ may become victims. Our research also looks at global gender norms, such as in the context of the UN Security Council's "Women, Peace, Security" (WPS) agenda or as part of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), and at the processes and challenges of implementing these norms at the international, national and local level (RD I, IV, V). Across the Research Departments, PRIF's research on WPS has benefited from collaboration with several visiting researchers with unique perspectives and country expertise. In arms control, the issue of gendered intersectionality as part of existing and emerging norms is also an important research topic (RD I, Research Group "Public International Law" in RD II). The various forms of antifeminism and "gender backlash" that aim to systematically question and revise gender-sensitive human rights are analyzed, for instance, in the context of peacebuilding and transitional justice (RD I, IV and V). Research also focuses on the gendered nature of transnational dynamics and actors, particularly with a view to antifeminism in transnational right-wing movements (Research Group "Radicalization" in RD III).

In order to further communicate and expand research on this important topic, the Feminist Peace Research blog series (on the PRIF Blog), which discusses gender- and diversity-related issues in the thematic fields of foreign and security policy, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, human rights, displacement, and migration, makes feminist perspectives studied by PRIF visible to the broader public. In further developing this cross-cutting area, PRIF aims at including more intersectional and postcolonial approaches to illuminate the interlinked production of different identity categories and associated power relations. In addition, further research is planned on the role of essentialized gender identities, masculinities and forms of violence, radicalization, and terrorism.

3.5 Environmental change and conflict

Environmental change is not a new subject for peace and conflict research. However, the risks to peace and security posed by environmental change have increased in the recent past, and this trend is expected to continue in the future. Climate change and the risk of extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity and fertile soils, and reduced access to water and food are examples of environmental risks that can under certain conditions pose risks to peace and stability at local, regional, and global scales. Yet, environmental changes do not necessarily lead to crises and conflicts but can also trigger cooperative responses between various actors. At the same time, environmental policies, such as climate mitigation and adaptation measures—or the lack thereof—can become a source of conflict. The relation between environmental change and conflict as well as the environmental dimensions of peacebuilding need to be better understood. Peace and conflict research also contributes relevant insights on the securitization of environment-related instability and migration and its adverse impacts, on the role of the environment in radicalization processes, and on the environmental impacts of war and militaries.

PRIF research in this area is dedicated to a broad range of topics. These include geopolitical rivalry and environmental protection in the polar regions (Antarctic and Arctic), governance challenges through geoengineering/climate interventions, and sustainability efforts by military forces (RD I); the climate-conflict nexus, cooperative governance of environmental crises and environmental peacebuilding, the effects of armed conflict on the environment and on global environmental regimes, environmental governance by non-state armed

actors, radicalization of climate activism/activists and anti-climate discourse (RD III); and the conflictual dimensions of the decarbonization/transformation of the global economy and violence against environmental activists (RD III, IV, V).

At PRIF, the field of environmental change and conflict is explored in different departments and projects, in particular in RD III and in the Research Group "Ecology, Climate, and Conflict", which brings together scholars from different departments. This latter Research Group is also coordinating activities in this research area. Investigations are also embedded in the Leibniz Research Network "Environmental Crisis—Crisis Environments" and the working group "Societal Resilience in the Earth System" within the Leibniz research network "Integrated Earth System Research", both of which are coordinated by PRIF. The environmental dimension of peace and conflict is also considered and included as a topic in the annual Peace Report.

Contact

Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)

Prof. Dr. Jonas Wolff

Board Member // Head of Research Department

Email: wolff@prif.org

Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)

Dr. Jonas J. Driedger

Researcher // Chair of the PRIF Research Council

Email: driedger@prif.org

Imprint/Disclaimer

Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)

Darmstädter Landstr. 112

60598 Frankfurt am Main, Germany