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The Internationalization of Armed Intrastate Conflict: A Systematic Assessment of the State of Research, Data, and Explanations

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Abstract:

When it comes to current changes in the global patterns of armed conflict, one observation stands out: The first two decades of the 21st century are characterized by a significant trend of internationalization. Scholars have noted a sharp increase in the number and share of internationalized intrastate armed conflicts, a heightened role of transnationally oriented armed groups, and an increase in the forms, actors, and intensity of external support in armed conflicts. Overall, therefore, it seems we are witnessing an important transformation of one of the most prevalent forms of organized political violence, namely: that civil wars – and intrastate armed conflicts below the threshold of war – are becoming ever less a purely domestic affair.

This working paper unpacks the internationalization trend by first disaggregating existing data and assessing the trend across various definitions and measures of internationalization. It shows that we are indeed witnessing an internationalization trend characterized by an increasing number of internationalized intrastate conflicts affecting a growing number of countries, as well as a diversification of supporters that increasingly provide troop support to governments, often in the form of coalitions. Second, by means of bibliometric analysis, we map the existing literature on internationalization of civil wars and identify a research gap regarding explanations for the global trend toward the internationalization of intrastate armed conflicts. Accordingly, in Section four, the working paper proposes a network-based framework to study potential explanations for this trend. We illustrate the application of the framework by drawing on several explanations discussed in the literature for why intrastate conflicts are becoming internationalized. Relating these explanations to the global trend, our analysis suggests that the interplay between the increasing role of Islamist rebel groups in intrastate conflicts and the so-called War on Terror has plausibly contributed to internationalization.

Table of Content:

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1. Introduction[1]

Contemporary academic research on current changes and continuities in organized violence and armed conflict point to one important trend: The first two decades of the twenty-first century seem to be characterized by a significant internationalization of conflict. Studies emphasize a rising number and share of internationalized intrastate conflicts (Bellamy 2023; Davies et al. 2024; Harbom and Wallensteen 2005; Pettersson and Öberg 2020), a heightened role of transnationally oriented, Islamist[2] rebels (Crenshaw 2017; Hegghammer 2010; Kalyvas 2018; Salehyan 2007), and an increase in the forms, actors, and intensity of external support in armed conflicts (Meier et al. 2023). This observation of a significant trend of internationalization is relevant because wars with external involvement tend to be longer, deadlier for civilians, and more resistant to international efforts at resolution (Balch-Lindsay and Enterline 2000; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). Overall, it seems we are witnessing an important transformation of political violence: Civil wars – and intrastate armed conflict below the threshold of war – are becoming ever less of a domestic affair. But is this so? And what precisely is behind this supposed trend of internationalization?

Studies that investigate what lies behind this recent trend and attempt to explain why intrastate conflict increasingly attracts external involvement remain limited. To be sure, there is a long tradition of research on various subtypes of internationalization, especially on military interventions into civil wars as well as various forms of external support that states, but also non-state actors, provide to parties in an intrastate conflict (Pfeifer et al. forthcoming). But this literature discusses causes and consequences of specific forms of external support and interventions without situating them within the broader phenomenon of internationalization. Consequently, there are few studies examining macro trends in the internationalization of intrastate conflict that assess overall dynamics across different forms of external involvement and review potential causes shaping general increases or decreases in internationalized intrastate conflicts.[3]

Therefore, in this TraCe Working Paper, we take stock of the evidence on the internationalization of intrastate conflict, review the literature that deals with this topic, and discuss potential explanations for the internationalization trend. We focus on internationalization as an outside-in dynamic in which external actors become involved in an armed conflict predominantly waged within another state's borders.[4]

Box 1: The article

This working paper is an extended preprint version of a paper published by Sage in the Journal *Cooperation and Conflict*:

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[1] Acknowledgements: This working paper is the result of years of joint discussions and research efforts by a group of colleagues from Goethe University and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) in the context of TraCe. Previous versions were discussed at several TraCe workshops and research colloquia, and we thank all our colleagues within the TraCe network as well as workshop participants Margit Bussmann, Sara Daub, Stathis Kalyvas, Anastasia Shesterinina, and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl for their most useful comments. In the first phase of the project, Jonas Driedger participated in our group and contributed important ideas and suggestions. Revised parts of this working paper will be published as a chapter in the TraCe Handbook on the Transformations of Political Violence (Pfeifer et al. forthcoming) as well as in a journal article (Schissler et al. 2026).

[2] In this paper, we use the term "Islamist" as an umbrella term for a variety of groups ranging from Islamists in the narrow sense to Salafi jihadists. In particular, we refer to actors that seek to establish an Islamic state. For a critical discussion, see Pfeifer (2024, 53–5).

[3] Bellamy (2023) is one of the very few exceptions in this regard. Empirically, though, he focuses on one year only, namely 2021.

[4] We, thus, leave aside the inside-out perspective, meaning intrastate conflicts that spread beyond state borders. This type of internationalization is

Traditionally, internationalized civil wars have been defined by the involvement of military troops from another country (Small and Singer 1982, 219). In a broader understanding, however, internationalization can also be understood as involving any kind of militarily relevant support to the parties to an intrastate conflict, including contributions that remain below the threshold of active troop deployment. Internationalization, then, captures a whole range of external actors – from state to non-state – and forms of support – from military intervention and troop deployment to providing weapons, training, or intelligence – in an ongoing conflict between a government and at least one rebel group.

This contribution is structured as follows. In Section 2, we examine what existing data tells us about the changing patterns and trends of internationalized intrastate conflict. In Section 2, we analyze whether the observation of a recent trend in internationalization holds across different forms and indicators, which countries and conflicts account for it, and whether the trend is driven by new instances of external involvement or is the cumulative result of longer-lasting internationalized conflicts. In Section 3, we systematically review the academic literature on this phenomenon by means of a bibliometric analysis. Section 4, then, synthesizes existing research on external involvement in intrastate conflicts and outlines under which conditions the arguments in this literature may explain internationalization. To organize this latter analysis, we propose a framework of conflicts occurring in a network. The basic idea is to understand intrastate conflicts as occurring in a network that comprises not only the direct parties to a given conflict but also a range of other actors. These other actors are located outside the state at hand, have varying ties to the conflict parties and, possibly, also with each other. From such a network perspective, conflicts can transform due to changes in actor characteristics, changes in the ties between actors, and/or because changing context conditions alter the relevance of actor characteristics or ties.

Our analysis points to several changes in actor characteristics and ties, as well as in international context conditions that plausibly have contributed to the recent trend in internationalization: the increasing presence of Islamist rebels in intrastate conflicts; the rising motivation to help fight Islamist rebels on the part of external actors in the context of the so-called War on Terror; and changes in the international system that, on the one hand, facilitate interventions justified by humanitarian purposes and/or the fight against terrorism and that, on the other, intensify interstate rivalries at the global and regional levels. Whether and how precisely these factors shape dynamics of external involvement in intrastate conflict and, thereby, drive internationalization requires systematic, comparative research. With this paper, we hope to lay the groundwork for such future analyses.

2. The Internationalization Thesis in Data: Descriptive Evidence

2.1 Is there a Trend of Increasing Internationalization?

The UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Davies et al. 2024; hereafter UCDP) presents a clear picture: intrastate conflicts have become increasingly internationalized. UCDP distinguishes "internationalized intrastate conflict" as a separate conflict category, in addition to intra- and interstate conflicts. Figure 1.1 (see p. 6) depicts how this conflict category increased markedly since 2008. In 2013, UCDP recorded more than ten internationalized intrastate conflicts for the first time, and the highest number was reached in 2020 with twenty-seven conflicts. This rise of internationalized intrastate conflicts is mirrored by a decline in intrastate conflicts. Based on this data, authors have identified a strong internationalization trend and a considerable shift in the nature of intrastate conflicts (Wenger and Mason 2008; HSRP 2011; Szayna et al. 2017). Figure 1.1 shows a slight reverse trend for the years 2020 to 2023. However, the overall number of internationalized intrastate conflicts, as measured by the UCDP, still remains historically unprecedented, with twenty conflicts in 2023 (see also Davies et al. 2024, 676).

How robust is this trend, however, when comparing the evidence for different types and indicators of internationalization? Using the UCDP data and the UCDP External Support Dataset (ESD), in this section, we explore whether similar trends are evident in alternative conceptualizations of internationalized intrastate conflict. While many more datasets could be considered, our focus on these particular data sources aims to maximize temporal coverage and comparability. For instance, the International Military Intervention (IMI) dataset covers an important dimension of the internationalization phenomenon but only spans the period until 2005 (Pickering and Kisangani 2009).[5] This shorter temporal coverage makes it difficult to assess a phenomenon that unfolded predominantly during the first two decades of the

analyzed explicitly in the scholarship on conflict diffusion and contagion (see, for instance, Reid et al. 2021; de Groot et al. 2022).

[5] The IMI and the UCDP datasets both show similar patterns during the period both datasets cover. The IMI data shows that the number of interventions increased as the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s; however, there was still a 'substantial degree of fluctuation' (Pickering and Kisangani, 2009, 596). The UCDP data displays a similar pattern (see Figure 1.1). For an overview of other relevant datasets, see Meier et al. (2023, 548). Also, there has been a more general debate on the accuracy of event-based conflict. Scholars have identified reporting biases as a problem affecting the quality of the data (see, for example, Weidmann 2014). Despite these shortcomings, event-based collection is often the only way to create large-n, comparable data on political violence, and UCDP's data is of a high quality compared to other datasets (Eck 2012).

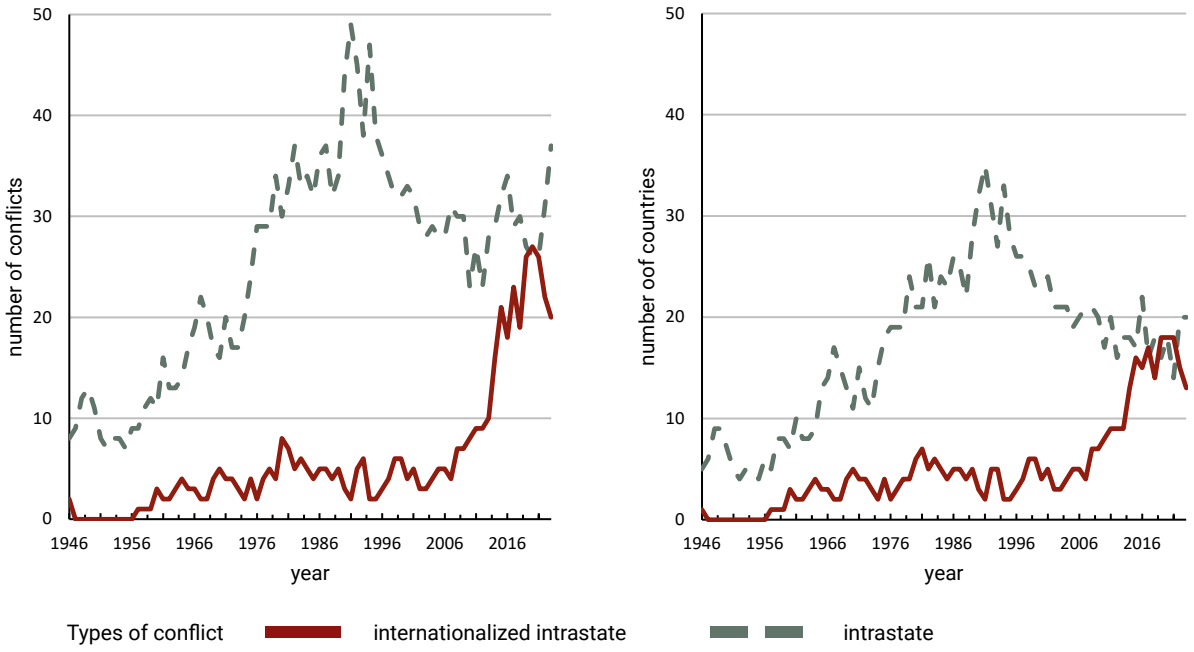

Figure 1: *Intrastate conflicts 1946–2023. Figure 1.1 (left) showing number of intrastate conflicts, Figure 1.2 (right) showing number of countries in intrastate conflict.*

twenty-first century. Moreover, the datasets we use rely on comparable samples, allowing us to evaluate various conceptualizations of internationalization while holding the universe of cases constant.

As a point of departure, we follow the UCDP definition and conceptualize internationalization as an increasing number of intrastate armed conflicts involving at least one foreign government with troops (Gleditsch et al. 2002, 619). When counting the number of individual conflicts as identified by UCDP, we see the dramatic increase in internationalization depicted in Figure 1.1 (left). However, this dataset allows for more than one conflict per country. This might lead to an overestimation of the trend, as several related internationalized conflicts taking place in the same country are counted as separate entities. An example is the 2014 conflict between the Ukrainian government and the Russian-supported separatist groups in Eastern Ukraine. While this can plausibly be considered a single conflict, UCDP records three separate internationalized intrastate conflicts since each was fought by a different separatist group and over different territories (Donetsk, Lugansk, and Novorossiya). In Figure 1.2 (right), we therefore count the number of countries whose governments have been a primary warring party and that have witnessed at least one internationalized intrastate conflict. Indeed, the internationalization trend remains consistent for this alternative measure.

Nevertheless, both the number of conflicts and the number of countries may be less relevant if internationalized conflicts are comparatively minor in terms of conflict intensity. We, therefore, compare the number of fatalities in internationalized and non-internationalized intrastate conflicts. The data shows a rapid increase from about 14,000 battle-related deaths in internationalized intrastate conflicts in 2013 to nearly three times that number a year later. From 2004 to 2022, internationalized conflicts accounted for the majority of casualties in all intrastate conflicts. There are large variations over the years, which are due to a relatively small number of extremely violent conflicts, such as the one between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. But even when accounting for these outliers, as Davies et al. (2024, 676) emphasize, the "average number of battle-deaths per [internationalized intrastate] conflict year is over four times higher compared to intrastate conflicts that are not internationalized." In addition, data shows that, from 2005 to 2022, high-intensity intrastate conflicts that claimed more than 1,000 lives in a year (i.e., civil wars) were predominantly internationalized. This contrasts with the 1980s and 1990s, when most civil wars did not involve external troops.

While the data appears to show that the international dimension of intrastate conflicts has become more prevalent and lethal, the UCDP definition is limited in terms of means and actors of external involvement. It focuses on foreign state actors that intervene militarily in an intrastate conflict by providing troop support to either a government or a non-state actor (Davies et al. 2024, 676). In doing so, it excludes other forms of intervention, such

as by economic or diplomatic means (see, e.g., Regan 1996, 342; Regan, Frank, and Aydin 2009; Skoll 2025). Furthermore, the UCDP definition excludes external involvement by non-state actors like rebel groups, transnationally operating networks, or private military companies (see, e.g., Finnbogason and Svensson 2018).

Military interventions by states are just one phenomenon in a whole repertoire of external involvement in armed conflicts. Dunér (1983, 60) distinguishes between different instruments and levels of intervention, ranging from combat involvement to support through military advisors, arms supply, or financial support to supporting activities such as military warning. This recognizes that external involvement is much broader than the state provision of troops. In the literature, interventions and support are sometimes used interchangeably, although intervention implies a much larger and more fundamental form of involvement that can but does not have to rely on military means (Skoll 2025).

Research only very recently has started to distinguish systematically between different forms of external support and cover the whole repertoire of different actors, most notably in the form of the above-mentioned ESD dataset on varieties of external support (Meier et al. 2023).[6] Unlike other datasets on state-rebel support (see, e.g., San-Akca 2016; Byman et al. 2001), it also includes support provided by non-state actors. The ESD focuses on external support that is "intentional, direct, and aimed at enhancing military capabilities" (Meier 2022, 10). Apart from direct support (troop support and troop presence) it also covers indirect forms ranging from providing intelligence or expertise to supplying weapons to the warring parties. Furthermore, it also includes support provided by non-state actors.

Based on the ESD dataset, we can distinguish between different actors and means of external involvement and, thus, between various forms of internationalization, understood broadly as any form of militarily relevant external support. As Figure 2.1 (left) shows, doing so results in a different picture. Throughout the period covered, an overwhelming majority of intrastate conflicts received some form of external support. This difference to Figure 1 is mainly driven by the indirect support provided by foreign states, which historically has been much more widespread than either direct support by states (with troops) or any form of non-state support (Meier et al. 2023, 549–50). Unlike the UCDP data above, the ESD only covers a period from 1975 to 2017. This excludes the 1960s as an important period in which the so-called Cold War turned hot

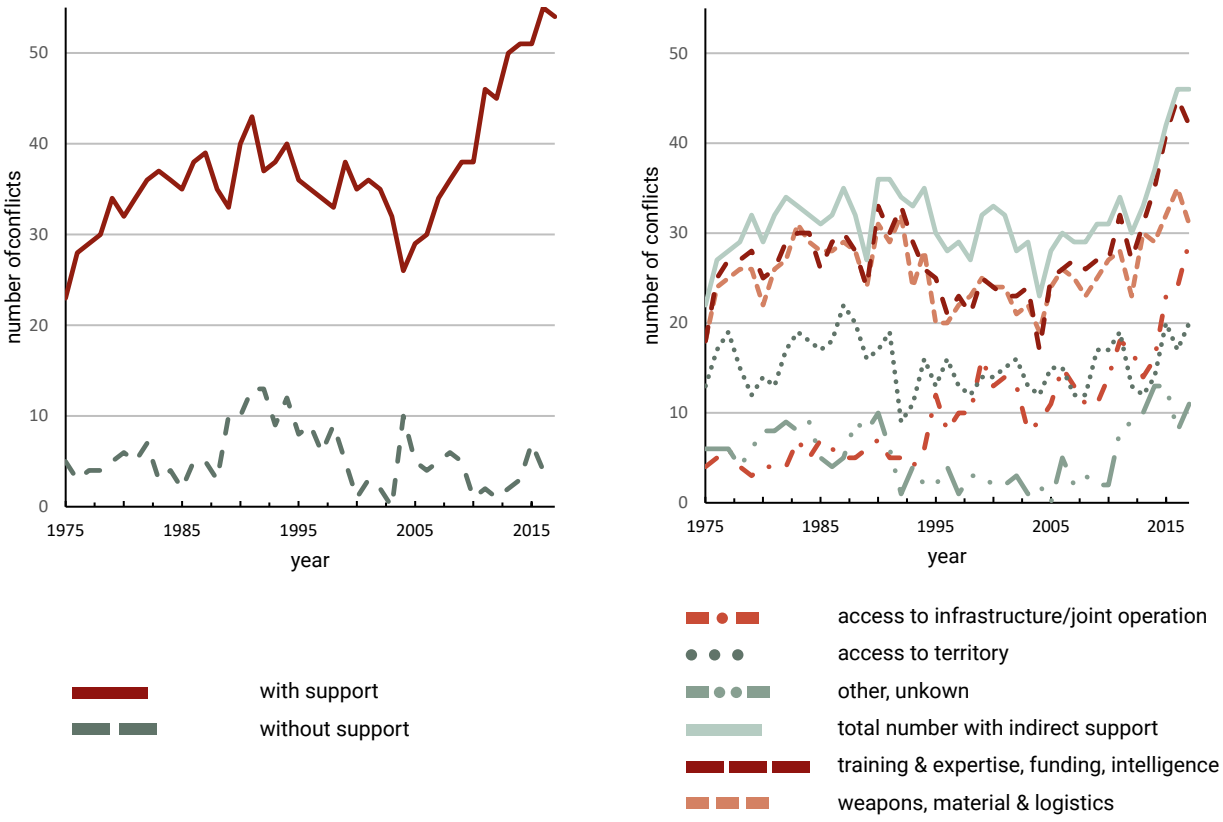

Figure 2: *External support in intrastate conflicts 1975–2017. Figure 2.1 (left) showing number of conflicts with support (direct and indirect in intrastate conflicts, Figure 2.2 (right) showing number of conflicts with indirect support in intrastate conflicts.*

[6] The ESD builds on Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér (2011) and extends the timeframe to cover the years from 1975 to 2017.

in various places across the Global South (Berger 2008). However, our aim in this section is to examine whether the trend toward internationalization, which the UCDP data shows for the early 2010s, holds across different forms and indicators. These relevant years are covered in the ESD. Figure 2.1 confirms the recent trend in internationalization: In 2011, the total number of militarily supported intrastate conflicts rose to forty-six, surpassed its previous peak of forty from 1994, and continued to rise up to fifty-five conflicts in 2016.

Figure 2.2 (right) reveals that this trend is not only driven by increasing troop support. Support in the form of delivering weapons and other materials, as well as providing training, intelligence, or funding, make up the largest share. The category of access to infrastructure and joint operations, which includes support by non-state actors, has also seen a steady increase, becoming an increasingly important form of indirect support.[7]

As shown in this section, the trend of internationalization is most pronounced for direct foreign military interventions, or the deployment of foreign troops. When looking at other forms of external involvement, such as weapons supplies, and non-material forms of support, such as providing intelligence or expertise, recent trends look less unprecedented. However, the observation of a marked increase in internationalization since 2011 still holds. Taken together, existing data suggests a trend of increasing external involvement in intrastate conflicts during the first decades of the twenty-first century.

2.2 How Global Is this Trend?

The prior section established a clear trend of internationalization, but how global is this phenomenon really? Are a few states getting involved in more and more conflicts? Or is it just a specific region or a subset of intrastate conflicts experiencing internationalization?

Figure 3.1 (left) shows that the number of states providing troop support remained relatively stable throughout the 1980s and 1990s but has increased sharply since the beginning of the new millennium. The internationalization trend is thus not driven by a heightened activity of a few. Given that, recently, up to one hundred different countries have provided foreign troops in at least one conflict per year, it seems justified to talk about a global trend of states becoming more willing to intervene militarily in intrastate conflicts. Additionally, recent years have also seen an increase "in the number of rebel groups that provide support" (Meier et al. 2023, 551), albeit on an altogether lower level.[8]

We might consider whether the trend is due to a few conflicts attracting the involvement of an increasing number of external actors. In 2004, the number of states providing troop support rose to forty-three. However, in that year, there were only four internationalized intrastate conflicts in total.

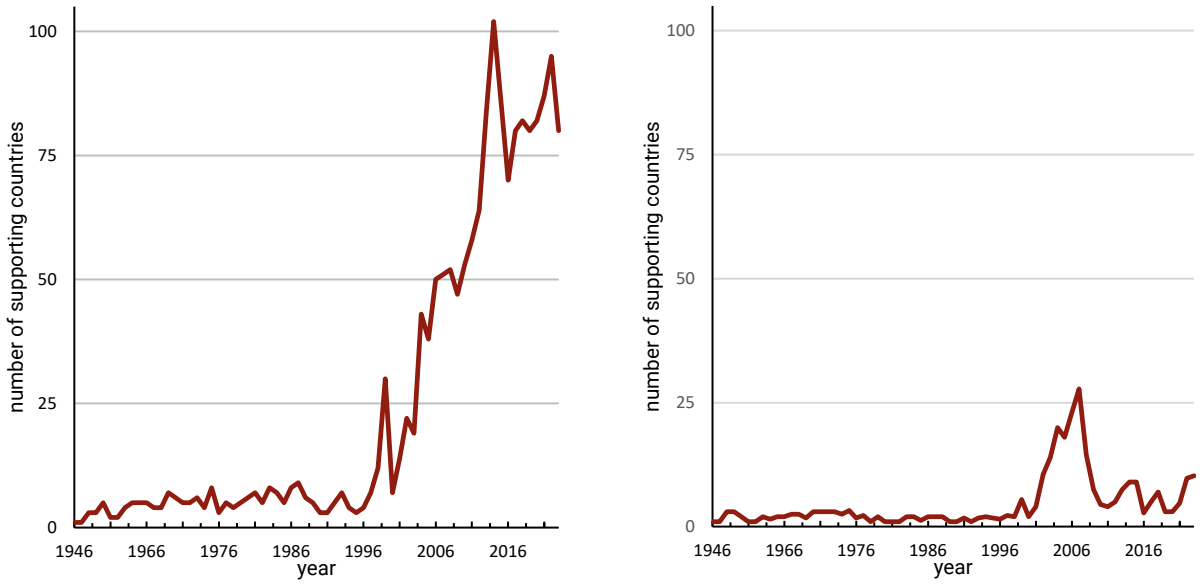

Figure 3: *Providers of troop support in intrastate conflicts 1946–2023. Figure 3.1 (left) showing number of governments providing troop support, Figure 3.2 (right) showing 75th percentile value of number of governments providing troop support.*

[7] In contrast, Meier et al. (2023, 551) suggest that the recent internationalization trend is driven entirely by direct support, while the number of conflicts with indirect support even seems to have gone down over the last decades. This, however, is due to their decision to code conflicts in which both direct and indirect support is provided as cases of direct support only (Meier et al. 2023, 551, footnote 8).

[8] According to the ESD, the number of non-state supporters reached a peak "in 2012 with 38 rebel groups providing external support" and "has stayed above a count of 20 ever since" (Meier et al. 2023, 550).

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the global conflict between the US government and al-Qaida, were all supported by more than fourteen states, while the Algerian government was supported by three other governments in its local fight against al-Qaida. However, the increase in supporters since 2010 cannot be attributed to a few support-intensive conflicts. There were sixteen internationalized intrastate conflicts in 2014, the year with the highest number of supporters so far. Four of these counted more than ten supporters, and in ten conflicts there were more than three supporters per conflict. This stands in contrast to 1980, the year with the highest number of internationalized intrastate conflicts before the 2000s. In seven of the eight conflicts, there was only one supporter per conflict this year.

We thus observe two trends: Looking at internationalized intrastate conflicts, we see that the number of supporters per conflict increases. Second, the number of governments providing military support in internationalized conflicts has increased significantly, thus diversifying the field of supporters. In the 1980s, there were ten governments that provided troop support in the eleven internationalized conflicts that were active during this time. With involvement in four different conflicts, Cuba was the most active intervener. In the 2010s, however, proportionally more states have supported fewer conflicts. Forty-seven different governments intervened in thirty-four intrastate conflicts, excluding the extreme cases of Afghanistan, Mali, and the Central African Republic, with more than thirty supporters per conflict. Data on indirect forms of support create a very similar picture (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

When turning to recipients, the first observation is that their absolute number is much lower. The highest number of recipients so far has been twenty-one in 2020 and 2022. However, the number of conflict parties receiving troop support more than doubled between 2004 and 2011 and has since remained at a historically high level, with around twenty recipient actors.[9] This upward trend was preceded by other peaks, albeit on a lower level.

While there has been a long-term increase in both the number of troop providers and the number of recipients, the former has grown faster. In 1990, there was an average of one supporter for every recipient. Today, there are five supporters per recipient.[10] This development goes hand in hand with the increase in coalitions, as depicted in the ESD data. Until 1998, troop support was provided exclusively on a bilateral basis. With seven coalition-based[11] internationalized conflicts and six with bilateral support, the number of coalition-based conflicts exceeded the number of bilaterally supported conflicts in 2013 and continued to do so until 2017. In conflicts with indirect support, coalitions play a less prominent role, but the data still shows a corresponding trend since the beginning of the twenty first century (see Figure A2 in the Appendix).[12] According to ESD, there are basically two types of coalitions behind this trend: Ad hoc coalitions such as the United States-led coalition in Iraq (2003–2011), the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in Iraq (2014–2017), or the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (2015–2017), and multilateral interventions such as the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (2006–2014), the United Nations Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo (2013–2017), the African Union Mission in Somalia (2012–2017), or the European Union Training Mission in Mali (2009–2017) (Meier 2022, Appendix 2, 22).[13]

This set of coalitions also suggests that the internationalized intrastate conflicts currently observed tend to cluster in specific contexts and regions. Indeed, of the internationalized conflicts identified by UCDP since 2010, 64 percent occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa and 18 percent in the Western Asia and Northern Africa (WANA) region. This regional concentration is roughly in line with the argument that transnationally oriented, Islamist rebels, including the international responses to them, constitute a key driver of the current trend of internationalization (see Introduction). We will come back to this potential explanation in Section 4.

In sum, internationalization emerges as a global phenomenon in terms of external actors' involvement in intrastate conflicts. However, the primary settings for such internationalization appear to be concentrated in specific regions.

2.3 Do New Instances of Internationalization Drive this Trend?

The previous analyses suggest that intrastate conflicts attract increasing external involvement. However, this upward trend in internationalization might also be the result of an accumulation effect: As internationalized intrastate conflicts last longer (Sawyer et al. 2017), the number of active internationalized intrastate conflicts can be expected to increase over time. We

[9] Please note that while only one government can be a primary warring party in an internationalized conflict, more than one non-state actor can be coded as a primary conflict actor.

[10] As Leenders and Giustozzi (2022) demonstrate for the case of pro-government militias in Syria, situations in which agents can choose among various principals challenge hitherto dominant understandings of "proxies." Among others, such constellations lead to competition among sponsors and heightened agency for the recipients of external support.

[11] According to ESD, a coalition is the coordinated provision of support by at least three states (Meier 2022, 10).

[12] Note that ESD does not differentiate between the types of indirect support that are provided by coalitions.

[13] ESD only considers multilateral operations as external military support if their mandate is to support a party with the intention of strengthening its military capabilities against its adversary (Meier et al. 2023, 546). A peacekeeping operation such as the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), which is mandated to monitor a border and facilitate humanitarian aid but does not support one side and

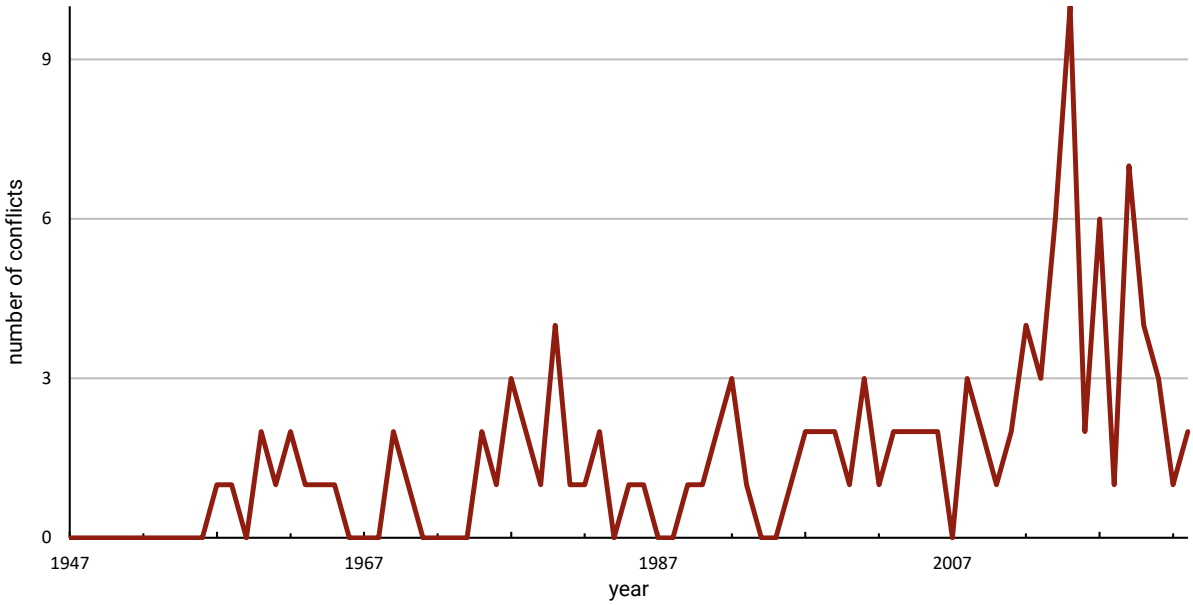

Figure 4: *Annual events of internationalization of intrastate conflicts.*

might, therefore, observe an increasing trend through accumulating numbers of conflicts with external involvement even if the rate at which internationalization occurs may actually remain constant.

To assess this objection, Figure 4 displays the number of annual events of internationalization, that is, the instances in which either an intrastate conflict became internationalized or in which an internationalized conflict (re)emerged (based on UCDP data). To disprove the accumulation thesis, the number of new or recurring internationalization would have to increase. The figure shows that the 2010s were indeed characterized by an unusually high number of processes of internationalization.[14] This suggests that the recent trend towards internationalization is not the cumulative result of a constant process but that internationalized intrastate conflicts do seem to occur more frequently than in the past.[15] Hence, we can proceed to examine to what extent scholars have taken up and dealt with this topic, before we identify possible explanations for why external actors increasingly involve themselves in intrastate conflicts.

3. Internationalized Intrastate Conflict in Academic Research: A Bibliometric Analysis

In this section, we assess whether and how scholars have taken up the empirical trends reported above. We do so by means of a bibliometric analysis, a systematic and quantitative approach to examining the scholarly literature. By analyzing the patterns of publication, citation, and collaboration in this field, bibliometrics allows us to identify key trends, seminal works, influential authors, and emerging research themes.

To analyze how scholars have addressed the topic of internationalized civil wars, we collected two samples of research articles for bibliometric analysis. The first sample is a collection of all articles published between 1990 and 2024 on the topic of civil war/intrastate conflict. With this sample, we try to identify when and how civil war research addressed the topic of internationalization. The second sample includes only articles that specifically focus on internationalized civil wars. Here, we try to identify key debates and seminal works and thematic trends within our specific research field.

3.1 The Underrepresentation of Internationalization in Intrastate Conflict Research

To explore the question of whether and how the topic of internationalization emerged and evolved in the academic subfield of civil war research, we collected a bibliometric dataset containing all articles that were published on the topic between 1990 and 2024 from the Web of Science (WoS).[16] The query resulted in

does not have a robust mandate, is not considered a multilateral intervention.

[14] Three of the internationalized conflicts that are categorized as newly emerging in 2014 were between the Ukrainian Government and the Russian-supported Eastern Ukrainian rebel groups. See Bellamy (2023, 391) for the argument that "Russian revanchism" is another underlying cause of the internationalization trend.

[15] However, the internationalization of conflicts is often not linear in the sense that it has a clear starting and ending point. For instance, the conflict between the Iraqi government and the Islamic State (IS) was first recorded by UCDP as an internationalized conflict in 2004. During the first five years, troop support was provided by a large multilateral coalition of more than twenty states. In the sixth year, however, the number of supporters dropped to five, and in 2010 and 2011 only the United States provided troop support. In 2012 and 2013, the parties to the conflict did not receive any direct military support. The conflict re-internationalized in 2014, when again support was provided by a large coalition.

[16] Our specific search query was: civil war (Topic) OR intrastate conflict (Topic). Focusing the search query on "Topic" means

21,374[17] publication records. After removal of duplicates and deletion of non-article publications (i.e., book chapters), our main sample is composed of 18,898 articles.[18] Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of the sample characteristics. For further descriptive data see Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix.

Figure 5 illustrates the evolution of annual scientific productivity in the research field of civil war. As can be seen, the productivity of civil war research only increased slowly during the 1990s. The yearly number of publications ranges from fifty-three in 1990 to 159 in 2000. However, there has been a rapid increase in productivity since 2004. Within five years the number of articles per year almost tripled, reaching 552 in 2009. This positive trend continued during the last decade and in 2024 yearly publication reached more than 1,419 articles.

Next, we explore the topics that civil war research covers. Specifically, we investigate the prevalence of keywords associated with the phenomenon of internationalized intrastate conflict within the sample of articles that represent overall civil war research. In this regard, Table 2 describes the ten most frequently used keywords in our sample.[19] Keywords assigned by Web of Science are described in the right panel and Author keywords are reported in the left panel. As can be seen, the most frequent keywords depict causes, consequences, actors, and locations of civil wars in a very general way. The keywords "INTERVENTION" and "SUPPORT", that indicate that these works might deal with internationalization of intrastate conflicts, are far beyond the top ten with intervention occurring 170 times as WoS keyword and support 150 times. In the same vein, articles with the author keywords "TERRORISM" or "SYRIA" may, but do not necessarily have to, deal with issues related to the internationalization of intrastate conflict.

Table 1: Characteristics of the full sample of articles on civil war

Documents	18,898
Timespan	1990–2024
Sources	4393
Authors	25,118

Keywords more explicitly or closely related to the phenomenon are rarely used neither by authors nor by WoS. The term "INTERNATIONALI*ATION" occurs only four times in author keywords ("INTERNATIONALIZED" twice) and once in WoS keywords. The keyword "EXTERNAL SUPPORT*" is used

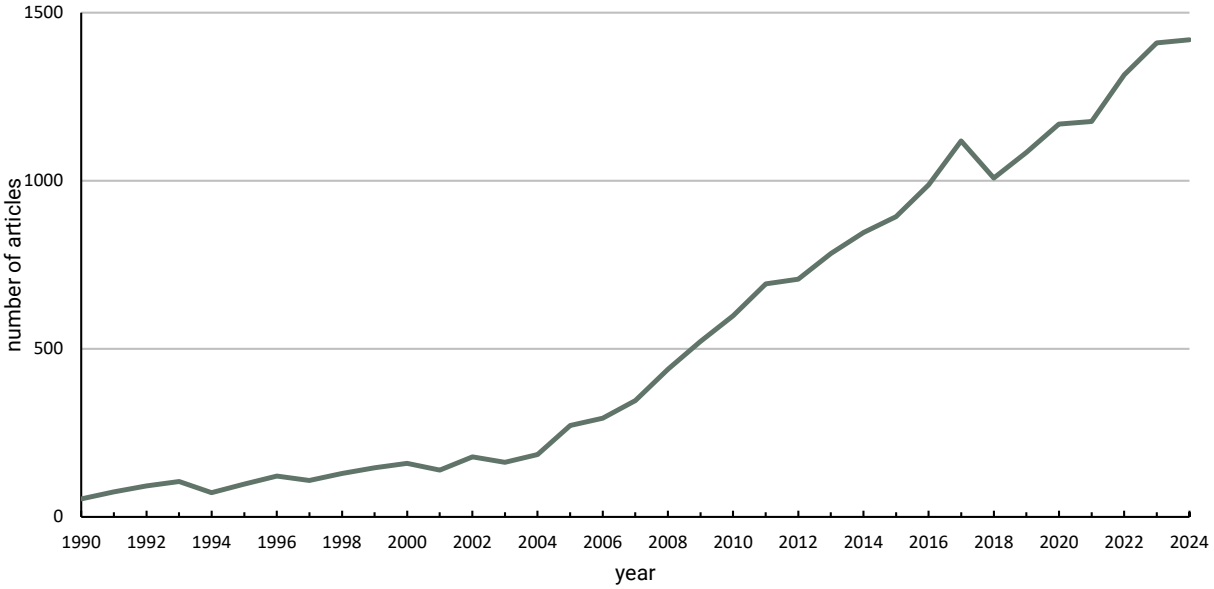

Figure 5: *Annual Scientific Production showing number of articles on civil wars published each year.*

that the terms were searched in titles, abstracts, and keywords of publication records.

[17] Only considering publications in English.

[18] We decided to focus our analysis on journal articles for three main reasons. First, Web of Science provides comprehensive standardized metadata for journal articles, including citation data, author affiliations, and keywords, which facilitates systematic bibliometric analysis. Such a comprehensive data source is until now not available for books and other sources. Second, journals are typically the primary outlet for new and emerging research trends. By focusing on journal articles, our analysis can better identify recent developments and areas of growth within the field of (internationalized) civil wars. Third, limiting the analysis to journal articles provides a consistent basis for comparing trends and patterns across different journals, authors, institutions, and countries. This consistency may be compromised when including books and other heterogeneous sources.

[19] Note that we excluded generic terms such as "War", "Civil War", "Violence" and "Conflict" from the analysis.

Table 2: Top-10 keywords of articles on civil wars (1990–2024)	
Author keywords (full sample)	**WoS keywords (full sample)**
Spanish civil war	Politics
Africa	Democracy
Terrorism	State
Syria	Duration
Democracy	Impact
Civil society	Power
Spain	Insurgency
Refugees	Growth
Gender	Ethnicity
Memory	Consequences

Table 3: Top-10 keywords of articles on civil wars (1990–2011)	
Author keywords (1990–2011)	**WoS keywords (1990–2011)**
Spanish civil war	Democracy
Civil society	Peace
Africa	Politics
Democracy	Growth
Terrorism	Duration
Spain	Africa
Memory	United States
American Civil War	Natural resources
History	Ethnicity
Ethnic conflict	Ethnicity

Table 4: Top-10 keywords of articles on civil wars (2012–2024)	
Author keywords (2012–2024)	**WoS keywords (2012–2024)**
Spanish civil war	Politics
Syria	Peace
Terrorism	Democracy
Africa	State
Democracy	Duration
Refugees	Impact
Spain	Power
Gender	Insurgency
Human rights	Consquences
Civil society	Institutions

twenty or twenty-five times, respectively, depending on the keyword category. Finally, the terms "PROXY WAR*" and "PROXY WARFARE" are used twenty-two times as author keywords and only twice as WoS keywords.

However, to identify the most important keywords both in absolute and relative terms, we relied on the full sample of articles for the full time-period from 1990 to 2024. Thus, many articles in the sample were written before the empirical trend of internationalization of civil wars was observed. To address this issue, we split our sample into two time periods, before and after the increasing trend of internationalization starts in 2012. Table 3 depicts the top-10 keywords during the time-period 1990–2011. In this period, none of the prominent keywords are associated with the phenomenon of internationalized intrastate conflict. However, looking at Table 4, which describes the most prominent keywords for the time-period of 2012–2022, there are also no keywords directly associated with internationalized intrastate conflict in the top ten. Still, in the author keywords, the prevalence of "TERRORISM", and "SYRIA" may be considered as indicating an interest in some dimensions of internationalization.

In sum, our exploratory bibliometric analysis of civil war research, while indicating some potential research strands that may tackle specific dimensions of the internationalization of intrastate conflict, suggests a significant research gap when it comes to explicit and systematic research on the phenomenon at hand (see also Figure A3 in the appendix).

3.2 Trends within Research on Internationalized Civil Wars

Given the relative dearth of research on internationalized civil wars, we collected a second sample for bibliometric analysis, which specifically focuses on articles that deal with the topic. We use this sample to better understand the evolution of research on internationalized intrastate conflict and identify the seminal works, trends, and debates around this topic.[20]

Again, we only consider articles published between 1990 and 2024 from the WoS. The query resulted in 1,641 publication records. After removal of duplicates and deletion of non-article publications (i.e., book chapters) our main sample is composed of 1,504 articles. Table 5 provides a descriptive overview of the sample characteristics. The most relevant journals in our sample of research on internationalized civil war are described below in Table 6.

Table 5: Characteristics of the sample of articles on internationalized civil wars

Documents	1,504
Timespan	1990–2024
Sources (Journal)	784
Authors	2775

As shown in Table 6, compared to the general sample on civil war research (see Table A1 in the appendix), the most productive journals in the sample on internationalized civil wars more narrowly come from the domain of peace and conflict research. Only few general International Relations journals and no Area Studies journal appear in the top ten (for further descriptive information, see Table A3 in the appendix).

Table 6: Top-10 of most relevant journals featuring articles on internationalized civil wars

Rank	Journal	Articles
1.	Journal of Peace Research	50
2.	Journal of Conflict Resolution	39
3.	International Studies Quarterly	33
4.	Small Wars and Insurgencies	29
5.	Conflict Management and Peace Science	27
6.	Civil Wars	26
7.	International Interactions	25
8.	Defence and Peace Economics	16
9.	International Affairs	13
10.	Studies in Conflict & Terrorism	13

[20] To identify research specifically related to the phenomenon of internationalized civil wars, we used the following WoS-search-query: military intervention AND intrastate conflict (Topic) OR military intervention AND civil war (Topic) OR foreign involvement AND intrastate conflict (Topic) OR foreign involvement AND civil war (Topic) OR external support AND civil war (Topic) OR external support AND intrastate conflict (Topic) OR proxy war (Topic) OR military aid AND civil

The evolution of internationalized civil war research over time in terms of published articles is reported in Figure 6. There appears to be only a slow increase in the production of articles on the topic during the 1990s. The number of publications accelerated moderately in the 2000s, with a significant increase after 2014. In recent years there has been a further sharp increase in publications. This very recent increase in academic attention corresponds very neatly to the increase in the internationalization of intrastate conflict reported in section 2.[21]

Next, we explore the keywords used in research on internationalized civil wars. Table 7 describes the ten most frequently used keywords in our sample. Keywords assigned by WoS are noted in the left panel and author keywords are reported in the right-panel.

As shown in Table 7, the most frequent keywords depict the defining features of internationalized civil wars, namely "MILITARY INTERVENTION", "EXTERNAL SUPPORT" and "PROXY WARS", but also relate to specific dynamics of these conflicts and their settlement, as indicated by the prevalence of keywords such as "DURATION", "TERRORISM", and "POWER". Finally, the top keywords also feature the countries and regions that featured some of the most prominent internationalized civil wars in recent times (e.g., ."SYRIA", and "AFRICA").

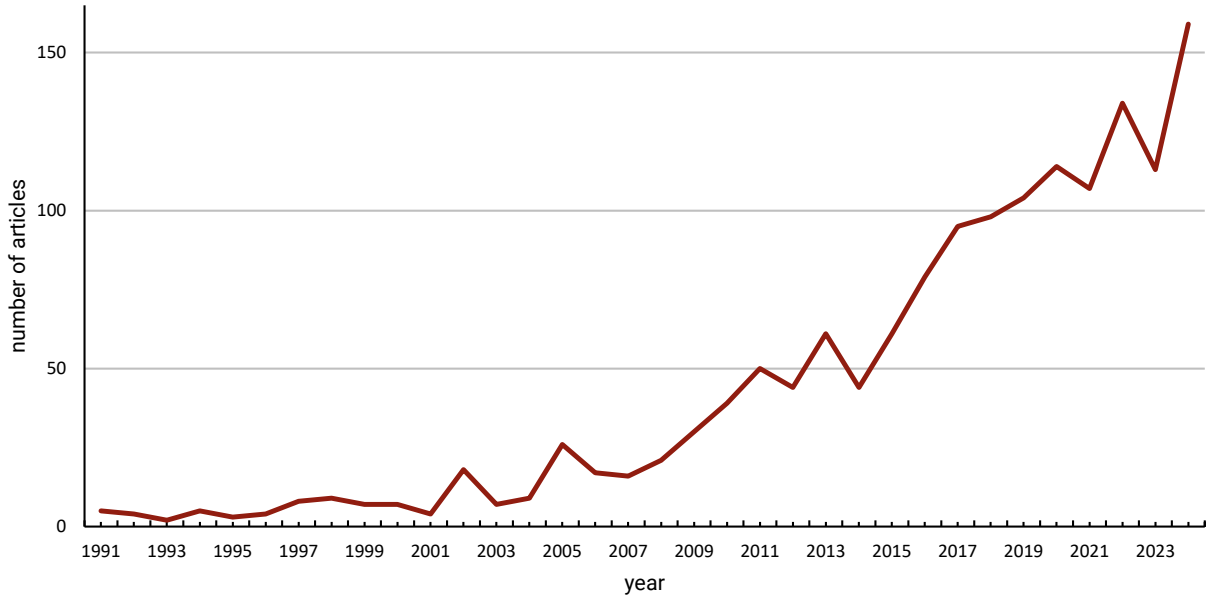

Figure 6: *Annual Scientific Production showing number of articles on internationalized civil wars published each year.*

Table 7: Top-10 keywords of articles on internationalized civil wars (1990–2024)	
Author keywords (full sample)	**WoS keywords (full sample)**
Intervention	Peace
Syria	Duration
Terrorism	Democracy
Military intervention	Politics
Africa	Intervention
Proxy war	States
Military	Power
Foreign policy	Impact
Cold war	State
Iran	Growth

war (Topic) OR military aid AND intrastate conflict (Topic) OR internationali*ation AND intrastate conflict (Topic) OR internationali*ation AND civil war (Topic).

[21] While absolute numbers are certainly low, the increase since the early 2000s (as reported in Figure 6) also means an increase in the relative share of articles on internationalization as compared to the overall trend for civil war research (as reported in Figure 5).

Table 8: Most cited publications (internationalized civil wars)	
1.	Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. 2003. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." *American Political Science Review* 97 (1): 75–90.
2.	Gleditsch, Nils Petter, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta, Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand. 2002. "Armed conflict 1946–2001: A new dataset." *Journal of Peace Research* 39 (5): 615–37.
3.	Regan, Patrick M. 2002. "Third-party interventions and the duration of intrastate conflicts." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (1): 55–73.
4.	Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. 2004. "Greed and grievance in civil war." *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (4): 563–95.
5.	Salehyan, Idean, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham. 2011. "Explaining external support for insurgent groups." *International Organization* 65 (4): 709–44.
6.	Cunningham, David E., Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan. 2009. "It takes two: A dyadic analysis of civil war duration and outcome." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (4): 570–97.
7.	Balch-Lindsay, Dylan, and Andrew J. Enterline. 2000. "Killing time: The world politics of civil war duration, 1820–1992." *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (4): 615–42.
8.	Fearon, James D. 1995. "Rationalist explanations for war." *International Organization* 49 (3): 379–414.
9.	Regan, Patrick M. 2000. *Civil wars and foreign powers: Outside intervention in intrastate conflict.* University of Michigan Press.
10.	Cunningham, David E. 2010. "Blocking resolution: How external states can prolong civil wars." *Journal of Peace Research* 47 (2): 115–27.

Next, we look at the intellectual structure of research on internationalized civil wars. First, Table 8, describes the publications that are most frequently cited by the articles in our sample. Note that we analyze local citations, meaning the frequency of cited references in the articles in the sample.

Besides some classical studies from general civil war research, such as Fearon and Latin (2003) or Collier and Hoeffler (2004), the most often cited publications include studies that explore some of the defining features of internationalized civil wars, i.e., external interference, military intervention, a dyadic perspective, and the general question of how world politics affects civil wars. Focusing on local citations, we can also trace the historical development of the research topic. We use a method pioneered by Garfield (2004), which produces a chronological network map of most relevant direct citations resulting from a sample of bibliographic records. Figure 7 illustrates the results.

Figure 7 suggests that research on the internationalization of intrastate conflict originated from Patrick Regan's work on military interventions in intrastate conflicts in the 1990s (Regan 1998), with studies with a similar analytical angle following directly from these pioneering publications in the next decade (e.g., Cetinyan 2002; Findley

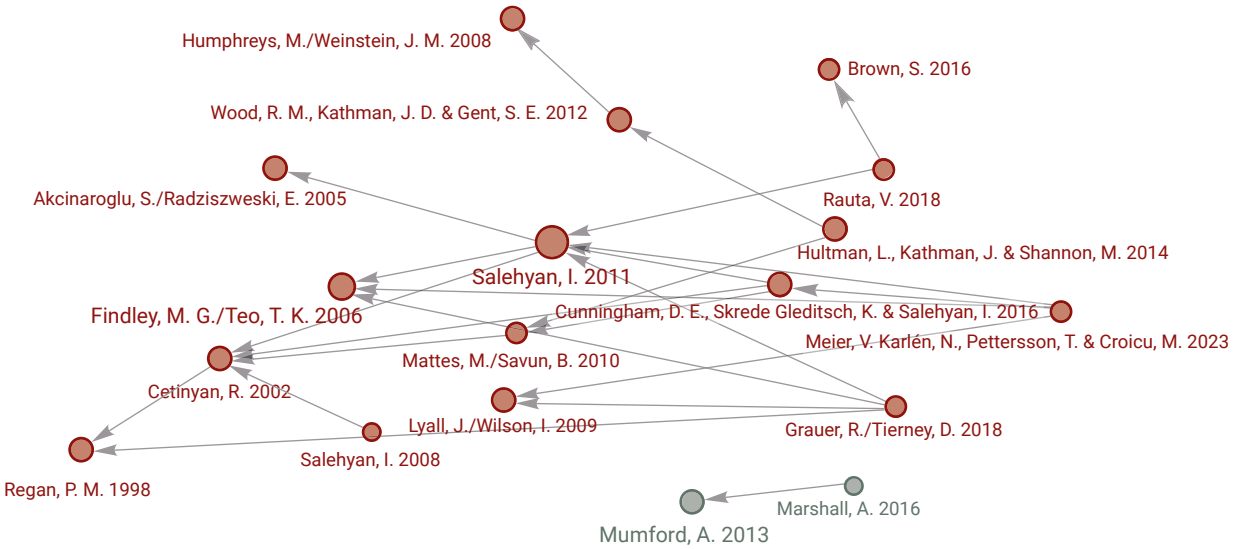

Figure 7: *Historical citation network (internationalized civil war).*

and Teo 2006; Salehyan 2008). In the 2010s, we can see a substantial differentiation of the research field. Some research continued studying the phenomenon of military interventions but advanced better measurements of their consequences (Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012) or focused on specific external actors such as the United Nations and their peacekeeping operations (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2013). In addition, scholars also began to address more indirect ways of external involvement in civil wars (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011), such as external arms support to rebel groups and/or the financing of rebel groups by foreign countries.

In sum, despite an increase in recent years, there is still only limited research on internationalized intrastate conflict. Existing studies seem to focus on specific phenomena associated with internationalization, notably on military interventions, and thus tend to coalesce around widely agreed concepts and theoretical frameworks (for an in-depth discussion of this literature, see Pfeifer et al. forthcoming). Overall, there does not seem to be an explicit research agenda on the internationalization of intrastate conflict, leaving space for innovation in this area as well as for the creation of typologies to structure and systematically assess relevant phenomena at hand.

4. Internationalization from a Network Perspective: Assessing Explanatory Factors

At first sight, explaining macro trends in global conflict time series may seem a futile exercise. Empirical research designs for a relatively short, univariate time series have very low internal validity. Moreover, no encompassing (explanatory) theory exists yet that would allow us to understand the increase of both direct and indirect state as well as non-state-driven internationalization. By adopting a network perspective on internationalized intrastate conflict, however, we propose to systematically derive explanations for the macro trend at hand. Such a network perspective (e.g., Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009; Maoz 2011) has been increasingly applied to conflict studies, and seeks to explain why third parties intervene in conflicts (Hannigan 2019), why states actively engage in different types of conflict (Beardsley 2024), how networks among them affect conflict duration (Aydin and Regan 2012), and how triadic networks of conflict parties and interveners influence whether third parties mediate between belligerents or take sides (Corbetta and Grant 2012).

The two types of explanation we propose integrate existing theory and evidence on the causes of external support and interventions. From such a perspective, the external involvement of outside actors in an intrastate conflict is shaped, first, by the characteristics of the actors involved – both local conflict parties and external supporters – and, second, by the ties between these actors. Both types of explanation can come in three different versions. Internationalization can be caused by either (1) observable or (2) unobservable changes in actor characteristics and ties. In both cases, the direct causes of internationalization become more prevalent. In addition, however, it is also possible that (3) actor characteristics and ties remain unchanged but become more relevant to the actors under observation due to changes in the structural setup or context of the network. In this case, existing actor characteristics and ties become more likely to trigger external involvement than in previous times. Their causal effect size increases because – material or discursive – changes in the international structure cause actors in the network to reassess other actors in the network and their ties toward them.[22]

This section provides an avenue to explain the macro trend of increasing internationalization and structures these explanations along the idea that conflicts occur in a network. This allows us to attribute each potential cause of external involvement to different features of the network (actors and ties, and how actors perceive each other and their ties depending on the structure in which they are embedded) and, thereby, to organize possible explanations for internationalization trends in broader categories. Moreover, as emphasized, the network framework also helps us identify potential explanations that point to changes in less observable features of the network itself. In this section, after briefly outlining the network perspective, we review possible causes of external involvement, discuss how they may drive internationalization, and, to the extent possible, assess their plausibility in light of existing data.

4.1 Internationalized Intrastate Conflict as a Network

The network perspective integrates well with earlier frameworks explaining why external parties become involved in armed conflict. For example, Mitchell (1970) proposes that two perspectives offer insights into why third parties intervene in civil war: patterns in the characteristics of those who intervene, and "linkages between the domestic group seeking assistance and the external parties perceived as potential allies" (Mitchell 1970, 170). From this, he derives four aspects that explain why external military intervention happens: domestic factors (1) in the "disrupted" and (2) in the intervening state; (3) transnational factors tying a conflict party to a potential outside intervener; and (4) factors in the international system that make civil war and/or interventionist behavior more likely (Mitchell 1970, 170; see also Findley and Teo 2006).

[22] In a model that allows for time-varying effects, the effect estimate for a specific variable (actor characteristic or tie) would increase in this scenario.

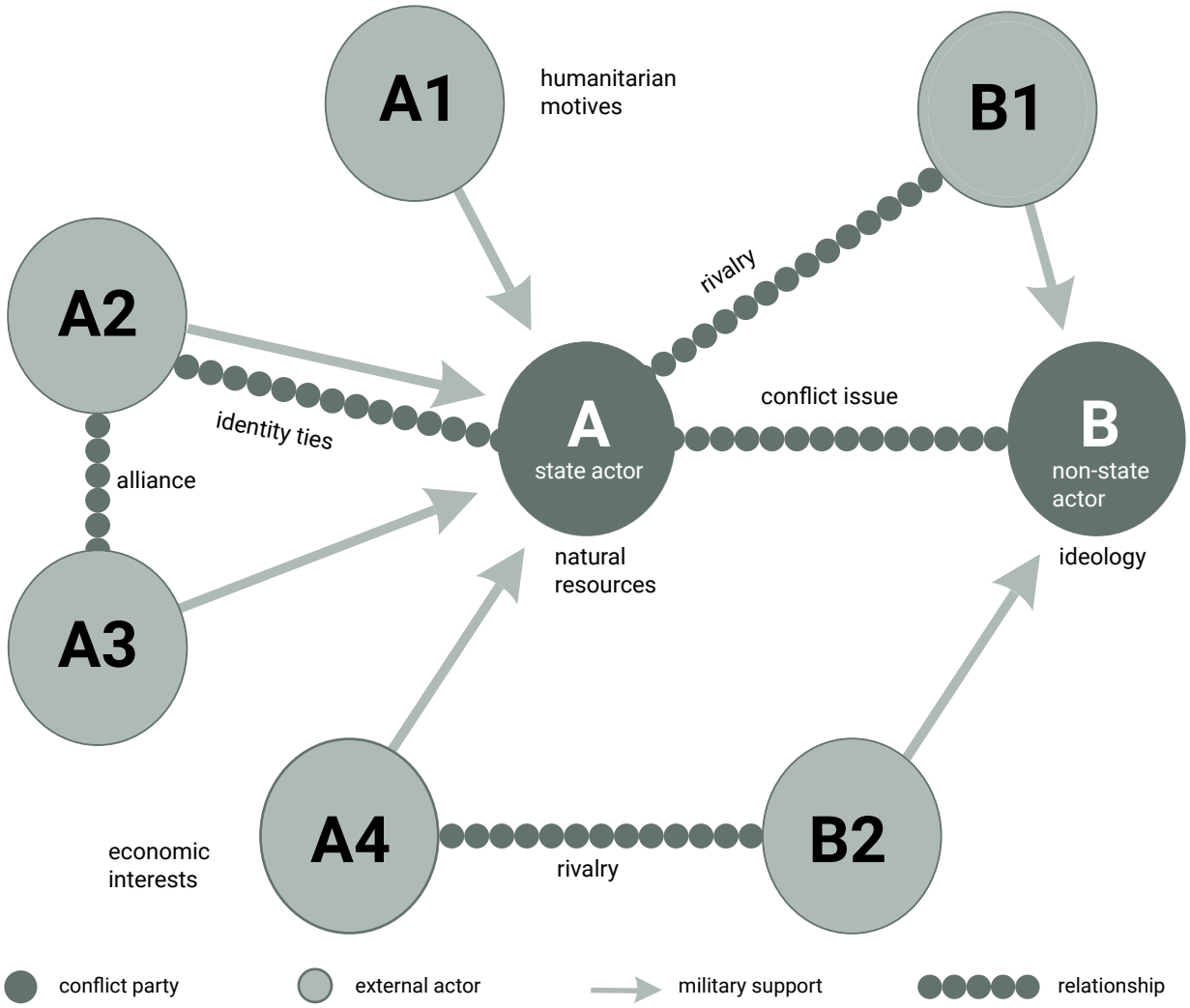

Figure 8: *Network of an internationalized intrastate conflict and possible changes.*

Figure 8 presents a hypothetical conflict network and describes how we may order various explanations of internationalization along the dimensions of actor characteristics (i.e., the nodes in networks) and ties or relationships between actors (i.e., links connecting the nodes). At its core, it depicts a simple conflict between a state actor A and a non-state actor B. In an intrastate conflict, actor A is the incumbent government of the state while actor B is a rebel group challenging this government militarily. The grey arrows indicate that actors A1, A2, A3, and A4 provide external support to actor A, and that actors B1 and B2 are external supporters of actor B.

The figure contains various explanations of why we observe support from specific actors to other actors. Each explanation is either rooted in a characteristic of an actor or in a specific tie that two actors share. The dotted lines indicate relationships between actors that exist independent of the specific conflict and that may cause the intervention of an external actor in the conflict between A and B. This includes Mitchell's transnational ties between external supporters and local recipients. Yet, the rivalry between A3 and B2 highlights that a tie can trigger external involvement even when this relationship does not involve the primary conflict parties A and B (see also Beardsley 2024). Furthermore, ties can represent friendly or conflictual relationships. This framework also helps us understand how Mitchell's international factors can contribute to internationalization: As Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) have argued with a view to the impact of the end of the Cold War on civil wars, changes in the international context can alter actor characteristics and ties, as the demise of the Soviet Union meant a cut in its relations to allied regimes and rebel groups. Yet, as in the case of the United States' support of anti-communist regimes, structural changes in the international context – here, the end of system polarity – can also mean that existing ties to unchanged actors become less of a cause for external involvement (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010, 421–22).

In the next two sections, we discuss how existing explanations of external involvement in armed conflicts are either

about actor characteristics or about relationships between actors. Moreover, we derive conditions under which these explanations may be driving the macro trend of the increasing internationalization of intrastate armed conflicts.

4.2 Changes in Actor Characteristics

At the actor level, as with the domestic factors in Mitchell's model, internationalization can be caused by changes in the characteristics of either the primary conflict actors (state and non-state) or the interveners. First, changes in the characteristics of the state conflict party can cause foreign involvement. In Figure 8, state actor A controls natural resources, which is a prominent explanation of external interventions (see below). Resources are a characteristic of the actor who controls them, most often the incumbent regime. Similarly, a country's regime type is a characteristic of the state conflict party that might affect external support in a conflict (Saideman 2002). In general, primary conflict parties may actively seek external support or even invite intervention. Other external involvement occurs against their will based on external actors' characteristics, such as their strategic interests (Kisangani and Pickering 2021, 7–8), as discussed below.

Several explanations of interventions focus on non-state actors' characteristics (Skoll 2025). Insurgent groups that have control over a territory are more likely to receive support (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). Similarly, rebel capacity may be a reason for international engagement. Rebel groups with large capacities are, on average, more likely to receive military support (Szentkiralyi and Burch 2018; Gent 2008). Furthermore, rebel fragmentation may be a cause for intervention (Berlin and Malone 2023). Rebel ideology may also be a reason for external involvement. In Figure 8, actor B may propagate a specific ideology, e.g. Islamism, which may increase the probability that foreign actors intervene against it in a conflict.

The proportion of conflicts with specific actor characteristics may change over time and explain increasing numbers of internationalization. While this can concern the different types of the conflict parties' or recipients' characteristics discussed (resources, regime type, rebel capacity, rebel fragmentation), the rising number of internationalized intrastate armed conflicts has most prominently been attributed to the recent wave of Islamist insurgent groups (Bellamy 2023; Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2022, 597; Walter 2017). If the explanation for the internationalization trend were to be found at the level of conflict party characteristics, we would expect a rising number of internationalized intrastate conflicts in which one conflict actor pursues an Islamist ideology. Using the UCDP Conflict Issue dataset (Brosché and Sundberg 2024),[23] we find that the number of internationalized intrastate conflicts in which the insurgents sought to transform the political system into an Islamic state has indeed increased since 2000 (see Figure 9).[24] However, internationalized conflicts without Islamist actors have also increased at similar

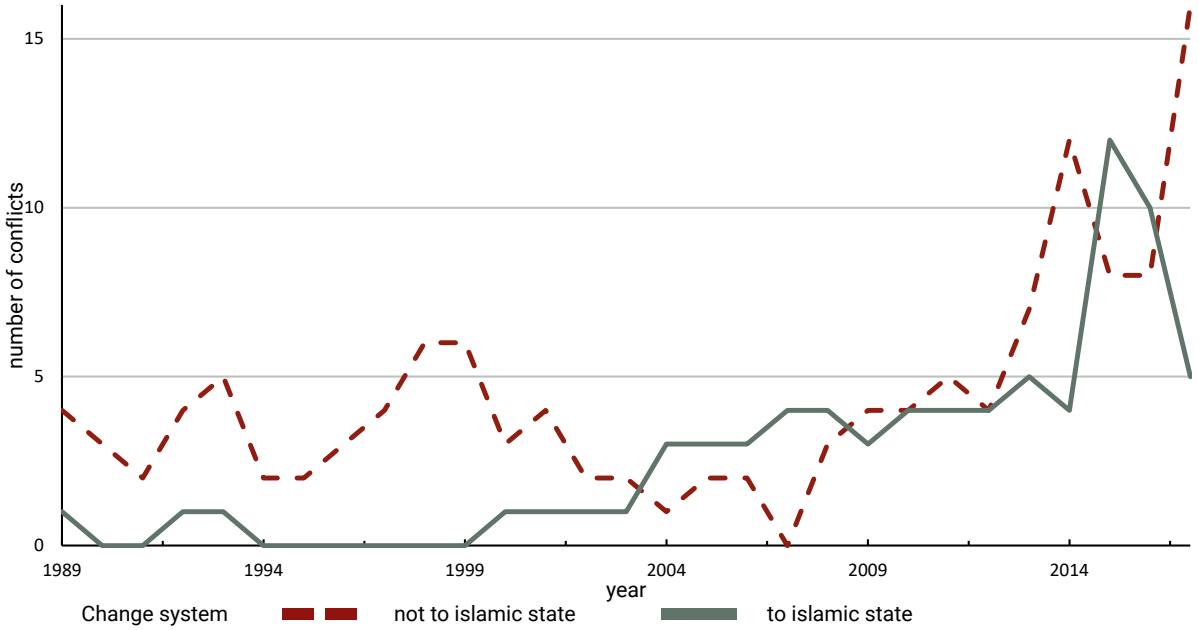

Figure 9: *Internationalized conflicts with conflict parties attempting to change the political system 1989–2017.*

[23] The dataset covers the years 1989 to 2017. It provides a variable coding the intention of a non-state actor to transform the political system into an Islamic state.

[24] When looking at all intrastate conflicts, we see a similar increase in the share that involve Islamist rebels (see Figure A3 in the Appendix).

rates. Therefore, conflicts in which the insurgents sought an Islamic state have not become the dominant type among internationalized conflicts in general.[25] Moreover, the increase in conflicts with Islamists predates the large increase in internationalized conflicts around the year 2011/12, which could be explained, among other things, by events such as the 2003 Iraq war that had a strong mobilizing impact on jihadist groups worldwide (Hegghammer 2006). This suggests that this change in the characteristics of primary conflict parties has plausibly contributed to the internationalization of intrastate conflict but does not drive the trend entirely.

While the global proliferation of Islamist insurgent groups contributes to the explanation, shifting external attitudes toward intervention in conflicts involving such actors, which we tackle further below, represents an equally important factor. Future research should examine both the rise of Islamist actors and the evolving international response to them. This analysis requires distinguishing between different types of Islamist groups, as evidence suggests meaningful variation in their (trans)national aspirations (Stenersen 2020; Schwab 2023).

Explanations based on the characteristics of supporters, or those third state and non-state actors that intervene directly or indirectly into an intrastate conflict, build on the insight that (military) interventions may serve actors' "political, economic, strategic, territorial, or humanitarian objectives" (Kisangani and Pickering 2021, 8; Pickering and Kisangani 2009, 593). For instance, fossil fuels (San-Akca, Sever, and Yilmaz 2020; Bove, Gleditsch, and Sekeris 2016, 1251), as well as other resources, make military support for parties to an intrastate conflict seem attractive for external supporters (Klosek 2018, 344).[26] Supporters may seek to secure access to another state's resources or to avoid contagion that threatens existing supply routes in the vicinity of a conflict (Kathman 2011; Chojnacki 2006, 27, 30).

Other goals range from "changing the domestic politics of a foreign country" (Recchia and Welsh 2013, 5), changing regimes (Henriksen 2022, 15–32), and promoting democracy (Hermann and Kegley 1998), to "saving strangers" (Wheeler 2000) and other humanitarian purposes, to fighting terrorism (Cottey 2003) – and finally, to influencing the outcome of an ongoing civil war (Dunér 1983). For example, in Figure 8, supporter A1 is concerned over humanitarian issues and, therefore, intervenes.

These motivations usually arise from specific characteristics of the intervening actor, such as domestic politics, regime type, and normative goals like protecting human rights or the international order.[27] With regard to domestic politics, states are more likely to intervene when public attention for a conflict in the media is high (Regan 2011, 465). More general theories on the domestic dimension of the decision to use force build on the core assumption that the main goal of political elites' behavior is to stay in power (Tamm 2016). However, elites face constraints when deciding whether or not to get involved in a conflict (Sakstrup and Tolstrup 2020; Weeks and Crunkilton 2017). These constraints depend on regime types and the size of their selectorates (de Mesquita et al. 2004). For example, personalist regimes usually have small winning coalitions and, therefore, get engaged in war more often (Weeks 2014, 7). Regimes may also differ with regard to the role they accord to normative goals when it comes to the decision to get involved in armed conflict. Humanitarian interventions are concerned with the normative goal of safeguarding civilians. This makes humanitarianism seem a typically democratic reason (or justification) for military intervention, as we would not expect the critical public to play an important role in more closed authoritarian regimes. Some even identified a specific "disposition of democracies to intervene militarily" (Chojnacki 2006, 30; see also Geis, Müller, and Schörnig 2013) based on normative considerations.

The characteristics of potential external supporters, such as their regime type or normative motivations can change over time and thereby alter the number of intrastate conflicts with external involvement. For example, although humanitarian intervention has been an issue since the 19th century, the concern for human rights as a reason to consider military intervention has grown over the second half of the 20th century (Finnemore 2013). Moreover, the discourse on humanitarian interventions' legitimacy changed after the end of the Cold War and in the early 2000s (Wheeler 2000; Weiss 2016). The report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty sparked a lively debate on the Responsibility to Protect (ICISS 2001), culminating in the adoption by the 2005 World Summit of the Responsibility to Protect as an international norm. This could have either led to increased internationalization through an increase in actors willing to start humanitarian intervention because public attention to humanitarian crisis increases in potentially intervening countries or through changes in

[25] This may be related to the fact that, globally, the number of Islamist groups compared to all other rebel groups is relatively small.

[26] In Figure 8, actor A4 has an interest in resources, which may explain the external support it provides to actor A, see supporter characteristics further below.

[27] So far, the literature has tended to focus on the existence of such motivations in state actors, rather than non-state actors. Only recently have there been some contributions that focus on order-related motives in non-state actors that account for their inter- and transnational behavior (e.g., Darwich 2021; Pfeifer 2024). Given the lack of systematic empirical studies and accounting for state support being the driver of internationalization trends, we focus on states here.

their regime types (e.g., more countries become democratic). Alternatively, even with unchanged domestic or governmental preferences, states may feel more obliged to respond to the international norm or find it easier to justify an external involvement in terms of a humanitarian agenda. In both cases, we would observe humanitarian interventions becoming more frequent among internationalized intrastate conflicts.

Combining data from the ESD and the Humanitarian Military Intervention (HMI) dataset (Gromes and Dembinski 2019), Figure 10 depicts an increase in humanitarian interventions in internationalized intrastate conflicts from 2005 to 2015. However, the absolute numbers are relatively small and can, at best, explain a limited part of the rapid increase in internationalized conflicts since 2012. Moreover, the most recent increase in non-humanitarian interventions outnumbers those with humanitarian justifications by far (see also Bellamy 2023, 395).

In addition, we have to take into account that motivations, humanitarian or else, are not directly observable. The HMI dataset, therefore, relies on official declarations and, additionally, assesses "whether interveners' activities clearly contradict the declared humanitarian motive" (Gromes and Dembinski 2019, 1035).

Another possible explanation of the recent internationalization trend concerns the so-called Global War on Terror (Bellamy 2023, 395; Meier et al. 2023, 551).[28] Very clearly, an important part of the military interventions and other forms of external involvement in intrastate conflict over the last two decades is related to the fight against organizations designated as terrorist, in particular Islamist rebel groups. This includes the first phase of the global war on terror, which was directed against al-Qaida networks and employed massive military force and boots-on-the-ground missions, as well as the fight against ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and various other countries, and against the spread of Islamist rebels in the Sahel region, which relied more on "light footprint" approaches, means of remote warfare such as drones, and the deployment of special forces (Boyle 2020).

The War on Terror has become a pervasive global security framework (Karlsrud 2019; Moe and Geis 2020), fundamentally altering intervention incentives in intrastate conflicts. Third states now demonstrate heightened willingness to support governments against transnational Islamist groups under the counterterrorism banner, driving the documented increase in pro-government interference (Meier et al. 2023, 551). This shift reflects both changed supporter motivations and evolving international discourse that legitimizes counterterrorism interventions across both Western and non-Western contexts (Dexter 2007; Holland 2012; Ahmad 2016; Khalid 2017).

Figure 11 supports this interpretation and shows the number of internationalized intrastate conflicts in which at least one non-state primary conflict party was labeled a terror organization.[29] There are two points in time when the

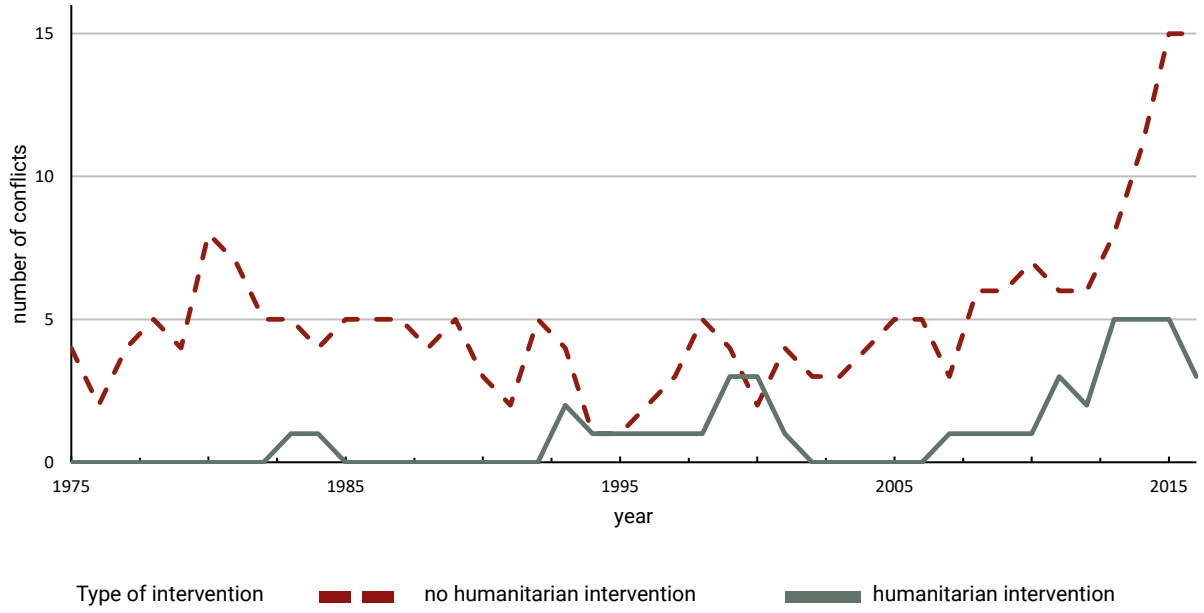

Figure 10: *Types of intervention in internationalized intrastate conflicts 1975–2017.*

[28] Again, what effect the global war on terror has on the decisions of non-state actors to directly or indirectly intervene into a conflict has not yet been studied systematically. From the area studies of West Asia and North Africa, we have some insights with regard to the effects of the war on terror on alliance politics, for instance among the members of the so-called axis of resistance (Matthiesen 2024).

[29] We used the Proscription of Armed Actors Dataset (PAAD) (Lundgren, Janson, and Lundqvist 2024) to determine whether a conflict

numbers increased considerably: in 2003 and around ten years later (see also Josua 2021). The latter rise is remarkable, and since 2015, a clear majority of internationalized intrastate conflicts involve terrorist organizations as non-state primary conflict parties. Note that, since 2011, all of the terrorist conflict parties involved in internationalized intrastate conflict have been labelled Islamist terror organizations. This development is even more noteworthy when considering that the data on non-internationalized intrastate conflict shows a more balanced picture (see Figure A5 in the Appendix). This concentration of terrorist-designated actors within internationalized conflicts suggests that designation status – rather than absolute numbers – drives external intervention. While this points to changed perceptions of Islamist groups as the primary mechanism, the possible role of an actual expansion of terrorist insurgent groups cannot be entirely dismissed either. On this matter, see the previous section, in which we discussed the argument that the increasing prevalence of Islamist insurgents may explain internationalization. A third – though not necessarily competing – argument is that 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror has meant that ties to Islamist rebels changed in relevance for key actors. For instance, during the Cold War the United States supported Afghan mujahideen as allies in the fight against the Soviet Union, perceiving Communism as a threat but not Islamism. This changed after the Cold War and particularly after 9/11.

On a more specific level, data provided by McLauchlin, Seymour, and Martel (2022) shows an expansion of United States foreign military training of other countries' armed forces over the past two decades, in particular, but not only related to activities by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, the aim to fight rebels deemed (Islamist) terrorists might also help explain why foreign states' involvement in intrastate conflict has become predominantly pro-government, while it is non-state actors that tend to "back fellow rebel groups" (Meier et al. 2023, 548). Taken together, this offers some evidence, if hardly conclusive, that the war on terror and its legacy has contributed to the internationalization of intrastate conflict, while certainly not causing it entirely.

4.3 Changes in Ties Between Actors

Moving away from a sole focus on either the primary warring parties or the intervener, the reason for external involvement can also originate from the relationship between the supporter and the supported. According to the logic of the network, this means that while the nodes may remain the same, the ties between supporters and conflict actors may change. There are three types of relationships between the relevant actors: The causes for external intervention can be related to the relationship between (1) one of the primary conflict parties and its supporter(s), (2) the conflict party and the supporter(s) of the other side, or (3) the supporter and another supporter.

A common explanation of intervention is *identity ties between conflict parties and their supporters*. In Figure 8, the friendly relationship between the conflict party A and its supporter A2 is based on their shared identity traits. Religious and ideological links and ethnic ties, whether

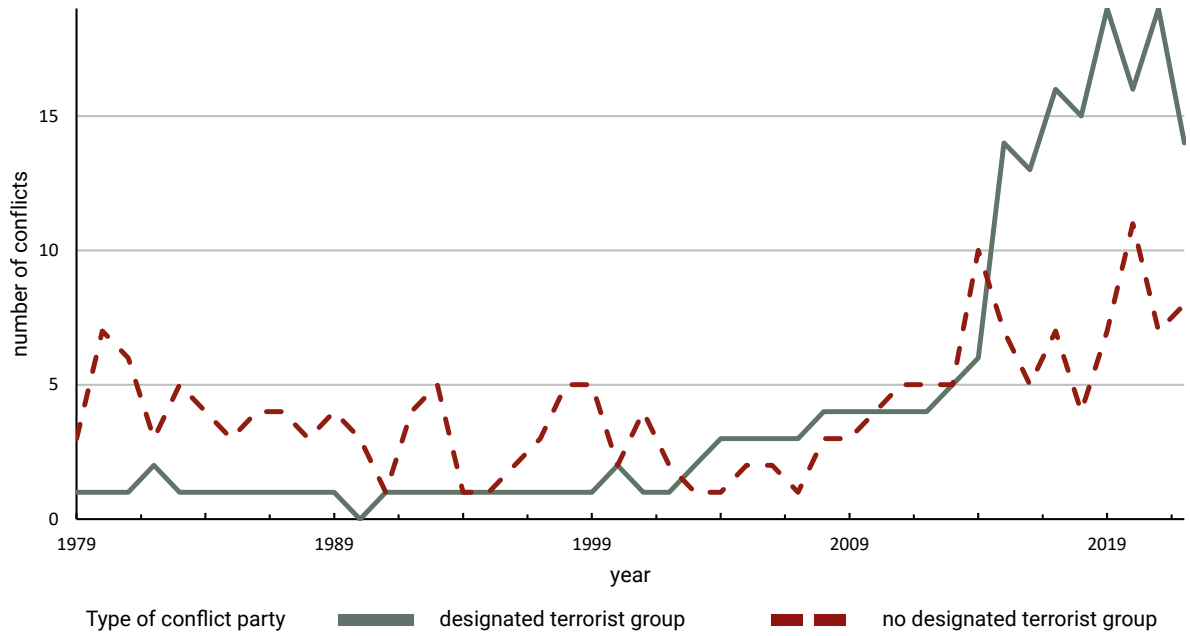

Figure 11: *Types of non-state conflict parties in internationalized intrastate conflicts 1979–2022.*

party was labeled by governments as a terror organization. The PAAD covers the years 1979 to 2022.

between neighbors or across greater distances, affect outsiders' motivation to lend support in a civil war (Bove and Böhmelt 2017; Gleditsch 2007; Carment and James 2000; Ives 2019; San-Akca 2016; Saideman 2002; Heggammer 2010). Moreover, if an insurgent group has transnational constituencies, this increases the probability that they attract outside support (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). Insurgent groups themselves can also be organized transnationally (Salehyan 2011). This may entail interventions by states in which the pertaining group is active. Other examples of relationships facilitating support are geographic proximity (Regan 2011, 465) or a historically grown connection (Berenskötter and Mitrani 2022). A prominent example of the latter case is the colonial history between the intervener and conflict countries. Studies have shown a positive correlation between a historical colonial relationship and intervention potential (Powell 2021; Lemke and Regan 2004; Findley and Teo 2006; Chacha and Stojek 2019).

If general changes in the relationship between supporters and supported were to contribute to the internationalization trend, we would expect to observe an increase or decrease in the number of internationalized intrastate conflicts in which there is a specific link between the intervener and the conflict party. To examine the ethnic relation between supporter and supported we combined the ESD data with the Transborder Ethnic Kin dataset (Vogt et al. 2015).[30] Figure 12 shows that internationalized intrastate conflicts with and without ethnic relations have contributed equally to the increase in internationalized conflicts since the 2010s. While there is an increase in the share of internationalized conflicts characterized by an ethnic relation between intervener and conflict country, it does not explain the rapid rise of internationalized conflicts in the last decade. Data on colonial ties shows a similar picture (see Figure A6 in the Appendix).

In the relationship between a *supporter and the opposite conflict party*, there may also be reasons for military involvement in an intrastate conflict. In Figure 8, the conflict party A and supporter B1 are rivals. Consequently, B1 supports actor B in its fight against A. In essence, the enemy of an enemy is a potential friend and external actors often lend support to one side in order to weaken the other (Maoz and San-Akca 2012; Isoda 2022).

A third explanation of international involvement is the *relationship between two supporters*. Here, external supporters may not even have a very high interest in the war per se but rather become involved because other outside actors are engaged (Schulhofer-Wohl 2020; Elias 2017). In Figure 8, actors A4 and B2 are rivals, and each one may intervene on opposing sides to undermine the other's interests. In such rivalries, the enemy of an enemy's friend may become a friend. Historically, the proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War are prominent examples of this pattern (Findley and Teo 2006; Anderson 2019). The end of the Cold War brought a different pattern of external support structures due to changed power relations in the international system: superpower

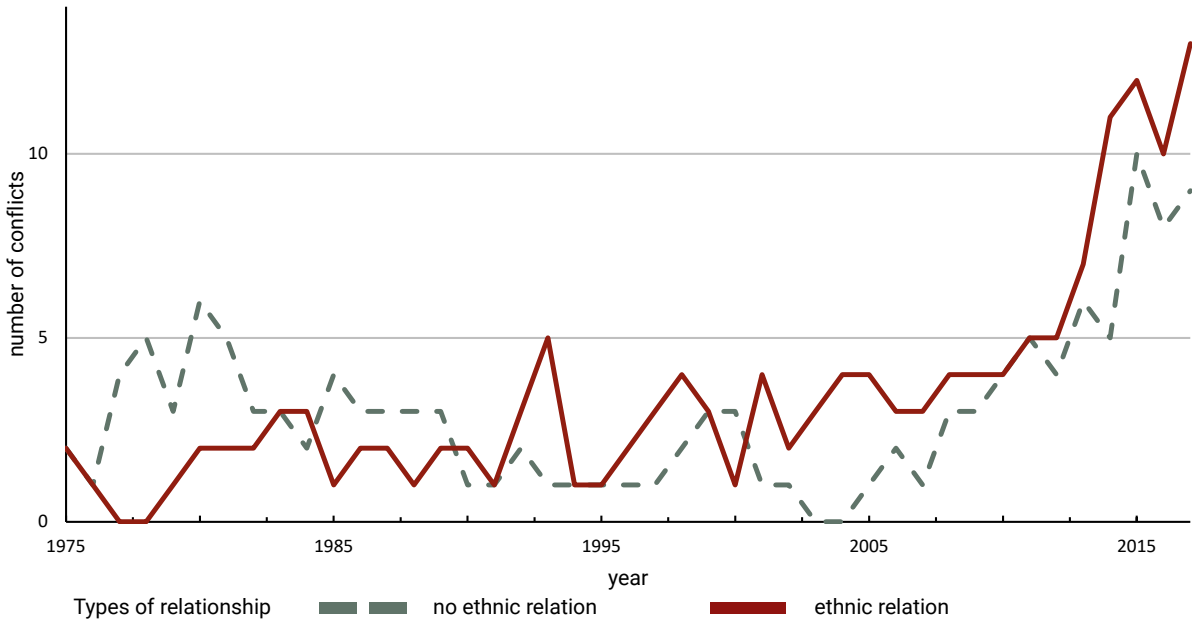

Figure 12: *Ethnic relationship between intervening and conflict country in internationalized intrastate conflicts.*

[30] If at least one identical ethnic group is present in the intervening country and the conflict country, this is counted as an ethnic relation.

support was replaced by support first from lesser states, and then increasingly non-state actors such as other rebel groups, diasporas, religious communities, and/or wealthy individuals (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Byman et al. 2001; Grauer and Tierney 2018).

Some research suggests that interstate rivalries are at work in recent conflicts and might be driving up the number of internationalized intrastate conflicts. A number of interstate rivalries played out as intrastate conflicts on the African continent (Duursma and Tamm 2021), which dovetails with the finding that Sub-Saharan Africa experienced the biggest increase in internationalized intrastate conflicts. More generally, this assessment resonates with earlier warnings that scholars of international war might have underestimated the level of armed conflict in the international system by ignoring indirect conflict strategies, like the provision of aid to rebel organizations (Salehyan 2010). Moreover, structural changes in global power relations and world order during the first two decades of the 21st century have arguably accompanied intensifying interstate rivalries. Bellamy (2023, 389) suggests these changes reflect a new "geopolitical context," characterized by "increasingly militarized competition." In this sense, changing context conditions may make existing rivalries more likely to trigger external support.

In terms of our network framework, such change in the structure of the international system can have three types of effects. First, it shapes (negative) ties between great powers in ways that make (competing) intervention into intrastate conflicts more likely. Second, increasing great-power rivalries can increase the relevance of existing ties between these powers and local conflict parties as the latter may be seen as relevant in the struggle over competing spheres of influence. Third, also at the structural level, the transition to a multipolar order without a clear-cut hegemon can reduce international constraints on regional powers. Existing (negative) ties between intra-regional rivals (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Iran), then, become more likely to escalate into (competing) interventions and proxy wars. Indeed, arguably, such dynamics can be observed in a number of contemporary internationalized intrastate conflicts in West Asia (e.g., Yemen and Syria) (Ahram 2020; Stein 2021).

If increasing interstate rivalries were a cause driving the recent trend in internationalization, we would expect the number of intrastate conflicts in which both sides receive military support to increase. Figure 13.1 (left) shows that conflicts in which both conflict parties received indirect support clearly dominated until the 1990s. After a decline in the 1990s and early 2000s the number of conflicts in which both sides are supported has been increasing again. This lends support to the idea that the ongoing change in the international system might be bringing about a fundamental change in civil war dynamics, similar to the end of the Cold War (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). The picture looks different in the case of troop support. Here, Figure 13.2 (right) shows that conflicts in which the government received troop support have driven the internationalization trend. So far, thus, competing interventions into intrastate conflicts with foreign troops are most pronounced in recent decades.

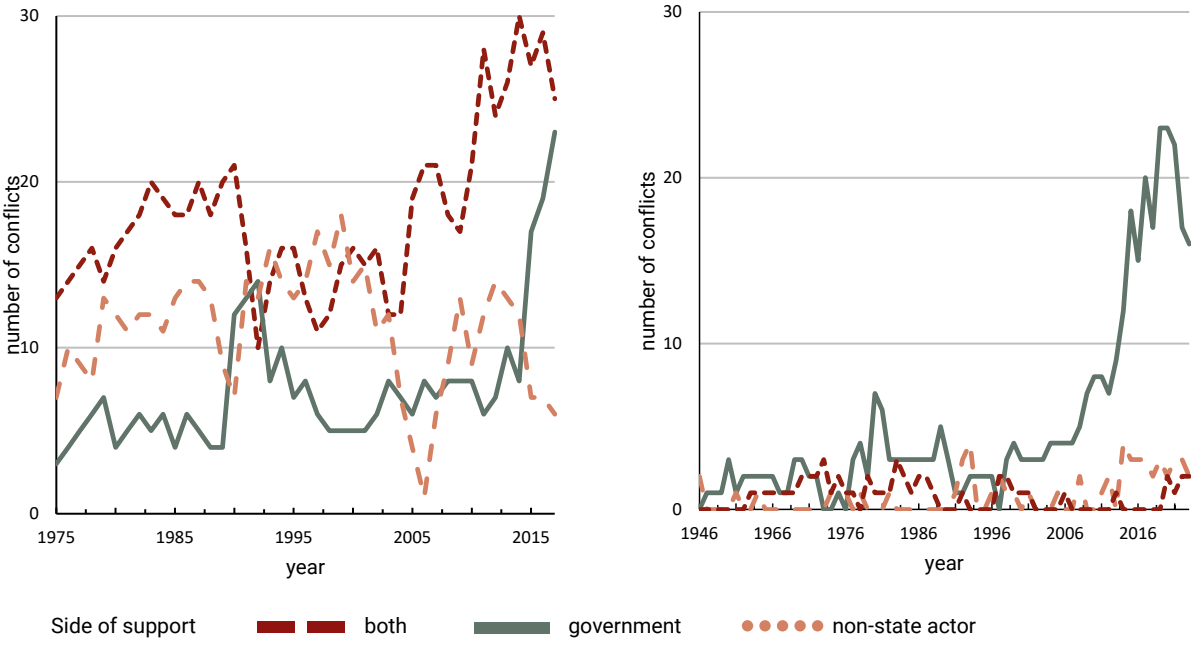

Figure 13: *Conflict parties receiving external support in intrastate conflicts. Figure 13.1 (left) showing indirect forms of support, Figure 13.2 (right) showing trooop support.*

This matches with findings by Cunnigham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan (2016, 53) according to whom support patterns have fundamentally changed: While historically "support to rebels has been more common," with the end of the Cold War "the overall level of support for the rebel side in civil wars has dropped precipitously, despite prominent cases such as Libya, Syria and Ukraine where external support is considered influential." Cunnigham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan rather note a "trend toward growing foreign support of governments," including in the form of "larger multilateral coalitions supporting the government side" (2016, 53). While these authors focus on the first two decades after the end of the Cold War, Figure 13.2, based on ESD data, shows that this trend has accelerated in particular during the 2010s (see also Meier et al. 2023). At the same time, Grauer and Tierney (2018) have found a pattern of rising support for rebels after the Cold War. As the ESD data suggests, however, this trend is mainly driven by non-state support to rebels as well as by indirect forms of (state) support (see above).

An intervention can also result from a friendly relationship between two supporters. In Figure 8, supporter A3 does not have direct ties with the conflict party A. Instead, A3 is an ally of supporter A2. By supporting conflict actor A, A3 is doing a friend a favor or complies with obligations in an international alliance. This pattern helps explain the rising number of conflicts in which troop support has been provided in the form of coalitions since 2000 (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). In fact, the dramatic increase in the number of states sending troops into intrastate conflicts (Figure 3.1) can only be explained when considering the role of such coalitions, which are sustained by many states that only participate to support another state or an international organization.

In this section, we have developed a systematic framework for explaining the observed trend in internationalization by applying our network perspective to existing theory and evidence on external intervention. The framework identified two key dimensions that can drive changes in internationalization: actor characteristics (of both local conflict parties and external supporters) and the ties between these actors, both of which can evolve in quality, quantity, or relevance over time. We found partial support for changes in actor characteristics (i.e., an increase in internationalized conflicts involving designated terrorist organizations as non-state primary conflict parties) and changes in actor ties (i.e., an increase in competing interventions where indirect support is provided to both conflict parties and an increase in troop support to governments).

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have assessed data and academic research on the internationalization of intrastate conflict. Given the political relevance, including the dramatic human costs, of recent internationalized intrastate conflicts, the relative dearth of systematic research on this crucial trend in armed conflict, its main features and causes, is remarkable. Analyzing existing datasets with sufficiently recent coverage and focusing on various conceptualizations and forms of internationalization, our study confirms that the phenomenon of internationalized intrastate conflict has grown and intensified significantly during the 2010s. In general terms, our systematic review of the literature on internationalized intrastate conflict suggests that existing studies tend to focus on a few key topics. As a consequence, the (limited) state of research is quite fragmented, with some specific phenomena – such as military interventions, in particular – receiving more attention than others and with studies using all kinds of different conceptions and operationalizations (see also Pfeifer et al. forthcoming). This hinders drawing broader conclusions on the characteristics and dimensions, causes and consequences of internationalization and, thus, tends to inhibit the accumulation of knowledge. In a third step, we have proposed an analytical framework to assess possible explanations of this trend in internationalization and discuss their plausibility in light of existing data.

Empirically, we observe a clear trend: Intrastate conflicts appear to attract increasing militarily relevant involvement of external actors. We see a rising number of conflicts in which foreign states have intervened with troops over the past two decades. This trend started in the early 2000s and picked up in the years around 2010. Around 2020, this foreign troop involvement affected more countries than at any time for which we have comparable data. As a result, internationalized intrastate conflicts have become the dominant conflict type among high-intensity conflicts. This increase in external involvement is characterized by a diversification in supporters who increasingly tend to provide troop support to the government side and do so in the form of coalitions. Similar but less pronounced developments are observed for more indirect forms of support in intrastate conflicts. Furthermore, although at a lower level, we also see increasing non-state support to rebels, mostly in the form of financial support and light weapons. However, the number of studies on this specific topic is still limited.

Thinking systematically about the possible causes of this trend in internationalization from a network perspective, our discussion in Section 4 of the paper suggests that there is probably not one single explanation. Our analysis suggests that the interplay between the increasing role of Islamist rebel groups in intrastate conflict (i.e., changes in the characteristics of key conflict actors) and the so-called War on Terror, which has increased the motivation on the part of external state actors to intervene and

do so on the part of the government and in coalitions, has plausibly contributed to internationalization. But the data also shows that this is, at best, part of the story. Another change that arguably increases the likelihood of external interventions in intrastate conflict relates to the rise in interstate rivalries associated with the ongoing change in the structure of the international system and the contested transition to a politically fragmented, multipolar order with heightened geopolitical competition. According to the data, recent trends in internationalization are not (yet) characterized by direct (troop) support on both sides of a conflict, but we do (already) see high levels of competing involvement when looking at indirect forms of support.

Overall, our discussion of the possible causes of internationalization is meant as a hypothesis-generating exercise. While our paper does not provide definitive answers, it opens up various promising avenues and questions for future research, most notably with a view to more systematically assessing the extent to and the precise ways in which the various factors identified actually shape the internationalization of intrastate conflict. Furthermore, our explanatory framework for macro-level trends in internationalization may inform and connect with research on macro-level trends in other phenomena. For instance, analyzing the interplay of changing actor characteristics and ties in a conflict network might also help explain the remarkable decline in efforts at international mediation in civil wars since the early 2000s (Howard and Stark 2017; Lundgren and Svensson 2020) or the long-term trends in the use of international sanctions (Mulder 2022).

While the data shows a more general trend of increasing external involvement in intrastate conflicts during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the most recent numbers suggest that this increase has perhaps already reached its apex. In 2023, as seen, the number of internationalized conflicts declined significantly, and the number of battle-related deaths dropped even more drastically. However, it is too early to tell if these recent changes represent a reversal of a remarkable increase or are simply due to random fluctuations. Most recently released UCDP conflict data for 2024 suggests a level of internationalized intrastate conflict that stabilizes on a level that is still very high by historic standards, even if decidedly lower than during the 2020–2022 peak (Davies et al. 2025, 1226). As the ESD data does not cover this most recent period, it is not yet possible to make more detailed statements about this potential trend reversal. Future data collection may allow us to evaluate this recent development more systematically.

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ABOUT TRACE

What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMFTR-funded research center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives.
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