Department of Political Science

Double Master's Degree in International Relations

Chair on Security Policies

Building Peaceful Pathways: Analysis of United Nations' Approaches to the prevention of Violent Conflicts

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INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly interconnected global landscape, the prevention of violent conflict remains one of the most critical challenges faced by international organizations. The consequences of conflicts are profound, not only for the immediate regions affected but also for the global community at large, influencing economic stability, migration patterns, and international security. The United Nations (UN), since its inception, has played a pivotal role in conflict prevention, working to foster peace and security across the world. However, its efforts are particularly significant in Africa, a continent that has been plagued by a multitude of conflicts, both inter-state and intra-state, fueled by a combination of historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, ethnic tensions, and political instability.

This thesis is guided by the central research question: "**How effective are the United Nations' conflict prevention strategies in Africa, what factors influence their success or failure, and how can these strategies be improved?**". This question seeks not only to evaluate the impact of the UN's interventions in preventing the escalation of conflicts within the African continent but also to identify actionable improvements that can enhance their effectiveness in the future. To explore this question, the research is based on the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: The effectiveness of UN conflict prevention strategies in Africa is significantly enhanced when they are implemented in close collaboration with regional organizations such as the African Union and sub-regional bodies like ECOWAS and IGAD. This hypothesis posits that local knowledge and regional involvement are critical to the success of these strategies, ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate.

- Hypothesis 2: The success of UN-led missions is often limited by inadequate resources, both in terms of funding and personnel, which hinders their ability to fully implement mandates and respond effectively to evolving conflict dynamics. This hypothesis suggests that addressing resource constraints could significantly improve the UN's capacity to maintain peace and prevent conflict recurrence.

- Hypothesis 3: The increasing complexity of conflicts in Africa, characterized by the involvement of non-state actors, ethnic divisions, and the intersection of terrorism with local grievances, challenges the traditional peacekeeping models and calls for more adaptive, context-specific strategies. This hypothesis argues that moving towards more

flexible and innovative approaches could improve the effectiveness of UN interventions in these modern conflict scenarios.

By testing these hypotheses, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the UN's conflict prevention efforts in Africa, while also offering practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of these strategies in the future.

This thesis undertakes a comprehensive examination of the United Nations' approaches to conflict prevention, focusing specifically on its interventions in Africa. The study is rooted in the understanding that conflicts are complex and multifaceted phenomena, requiring equally nuanced and multifaceted strategies for prevention and resolution. By critically analyzing the UN's frameworks, strategies, and interventions, particularly in the African context, this thesis aims to identify both the strengths and limitations of current approaches, and to propose improvements that could enhance the efficacy of future efforts. The primary objective of this thesis is to critically examine the United Nations' approaches to conflict prevention, with a specific focus on its interventions in Africa. Africa presents a unique case study for exploring the efficacy of the UN's conflict prevention strategies due to the continent's historical and ongoing struggles with armed conflicts. These conflicts are often multifaceted, involving a combination of ethnic tensions, political power struggles, competition over resources, and external influences. The thesis aims to dissect these complexities and evaluate how effectively the UN has navigated them in its peacebuilding efforts.

This study begins by laying the theoretical groundwork necessary for understanding the anatomy of conflicts. Chapter 1 provides a detailed exploration of conflict dynamics, including definitions and theoretical models that have been developed to explain the root causes and catalysts of conflict. For instance, the Chapter introduces key concepts such as Galtung's conflict triangle, which emphasizes the interplay between attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions in the development of conflict, and Lund's conflict cycle, which maps the progression from peace to war and back to peace. The chapter highlights the importance of understanding conflicts not just as isolated incidents of violence but as processes influenced by a range of factors, including historical legacies, economic inequalities, and political governance.

The UN's framework for conflict prevention, which is the subject of Chapter 2, is scrutinized in detail. It begins by tracing the evolution of the UN's approach to conflict prevention from its early days focused primarily on peacekeeping to the more comprehensive and proactive strategies that have developed over time. It also discusses the tools and mechanisms at the UN's disposal, such as early warning systems, preventive diplomacy, and peace enforcement, and evaluates the effectiveness of these tools in different conflict scenarios. The Chapter also addresses the challenges the UN faces, such as the limitations imposed by state sovereignty, the need for consensus among member states, and the operational difficulties in implementing preventive measures on the ground. This discussion is crucial for understanding the practical constraints that the UN faces in its conflict prevention efforts. Moreover, Chapter 2 explores the partnership between the UN and regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), highlighting how these collaborations have evolved and the critical role they play in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and examines specific initiatives and frameworks that have been developed to enhance this partnership, such as the Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security.

To provide empirical evidence for the analysis, the thesis presents case studies in Chapter 3, focusing on specific regions in Africa where the UN has been actively involved in conflict prevention. The Western Sahara, Abyei region, and Mali are selected as case studies due to their distinct conflict dynamics and the varied approaches the UN has employed in these contexts. Each case study is examined in detail, evaluating the strategies used, the outcomes achieved, and the lessons learned. The concluding chapter of the thesis synthesizes the findings from the theoretical analysis and case studies, offering recommendations for enhancing the UN's conflict prevention strategies.

The chapter begins by analyzing the UN's role in the long-standing conflict in Western Sahara, focusing on its efforts to mediate between Morocco and the Polisario Front. It discusses the challenges the UN has faced in implementing its mandate, including the intractable nature of the conflict, the geopolitical interests of major powers, and the limitations of its peacekeeping operations.

The second case study examines the conflict in the Abyei region, a disputed area between Sudan and South Sudan. The chapter analyzes the UN's intervention through its peacekeeping mission, UNISFA, and evaluates its effectiveness in preventing the escalation of violence. It also discusses the broader implications of the conflict for the stability of the region and the challenges of managing peace in a complex and volatile environment.

The third case study focuses on Mali, a unique and particularly challenging case where the UN has been involved in conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts following the 2012 crisis. The chapter evaluates the effectiveness of the UN's multidimensional approach, which includes peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and development initiatives. However, it also highlights a significant and unique development: the Malian government's request for the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This request underscores the complex relationship between host governments and international peacekeeping missions and raises critical questions about the future of UN interventions in sovereign states.

The existing body of literature on conflict prevention by the United Nations, particularly in Africa, is extensive and multifaceted, reflecting the complexity and challenges of peacekeeping and conflict management in the region. Despite these significant contributions, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the adaptation of UN conflict prevention strategies to the increasingly complex and non-traditional nature of modern conflicts in Africa. While much has been written about the operational challenges and the importance of partnerships, there is a relative paucity of research that directly addresses how the UN can systematically improve its strategies to better respond to conflicts involving non-state actors, ethnic tensions, and the intersection of terrorism with local grievances. Furthermore, the implications of host government resistance to UN missions, such as the recent withdrawal request by the Malian government, have not been thoroughly examined in terms of their impact on the future of UN peacekeeping and conflict prevention strategies. The innovation of this thesis lies in its integrated approach to these challenges. By combining a detailed analysis of specific case studies with a critical evaluation of the UN's existing frameworks, this research not only identifies the strengths and weaknesses of current strategies but also proposes actionable improvements. These improvements focus on enhancing the adaptability and responsiveness of UN interventions, strengthening partnerships with regional organizations, and developing more context-specific, sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

This thesis employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of the United Nations' conflict prevention strategies in Africa. The qualitative component involves detailed case studies of three specific regions: Western Sahara, the Abyei region, and Mali. These case studies are selected based on their distinct conflict dynamics and the varied approaches employed by the

UN in these contexts. The case study method allows for an in-depth examination of the effectiveness of UN interventions, the challenges faced, and the lessons learned. It includes the analysis of primary sources such as UN reports, mission mandates, resolutions, and statements from key stakeholders, as well as secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and expert analyses. In addition to qualitative case studies, the research incorporates quantitative data analysis to assess trends in conflict prevention effectiveness, resource allocation, and mission outcomes. Furthermore, this thesis employs a comparative analysis to evaluate the role of regional partnerships, specifically examining how collaborations between the UN and regional organizations have influenced the success of conflict prevention efforts. The combination of these methods allows for a robust analysis of the UN's conflict prevention strategies, offering both a detailed examination of specific cases and broader insights into patterns and trends. This methodological approach ensures that the research is grounded in empirical evidence while also being reflective of the complex realities of conflict prevention in Africa.

By examining the United Nations' conflict prevention strategies in Africa, this thesis ultimately aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to refine and improve international approaches to peacebuilding. Through an in-depth analysis of the UN's frameworks, case studies, and the evolving dynamics of conflict, this study aims to shed light on the successes, challenges, and potential future directions of UN interventions in Africa. In conclusion, this thesis argues for a shift towards more inclusive, context-specific, and long-term strategies that address not only the symptoms but also the root causes of conflict. It emphasizes the importance of empowering local stakeholders and regional organizations, reducing the dependency on UN-led missions, and fostering sustainable peace through decentralized efforts. The evolving nature of global conflicts demands a UN that is not only reactive but also proactive, with a focus on sustainable peacebuilding efforts that involve local communities, regional organizations, and global partners.

CHAPTER 1 - *THE ANATOMY OF CONFLICTS*

1.1 Understanding conflict dynamics: definitions and theoretical models

The word "conflict" comes from the Latin word *conflictus*, which means collision or clash. Nevertheless, considerable disagreement exists over how to define conflict. Indeed, there are a multitude of different definitions, each focusing on a particular aspect of the conflict: while some scholars focus on resources and economic gains, others define conflicts as a destructive interaction between value systems based on incompatible interest, competitive goals or behavioral tendencies. From a theoretical point of view, since individuals are objective utility maximisers and will always choose the option that best satisfies them, if conflict is the best option given their goals, then this will be chosen. Therefore, conflict can be described as a goal-directed activity designed to improve the position of one party at the expense of the other[1]. Moreover, it should be noted that in many cases a conflict is based on subjective perceptions, as values, needs, expectations or ideologies, rather than on behavior.

The phenomenon of violent conflict can be analyzed through Galtung's conflict triangle (*figure 1*), where each vertex contains one of the three elements that characterize a conflict: behavior, attitudes, and contradictions[2].

According to this theory, at the basis of any conflict there is the awareness of the parties on incompatible needs or, in other words, a contradiction[3]. In this regard, Galtung defined a contradiction as "*incompatible goal-states in a goal-seeking system*"[4]. The goals may relate to absolute or relative considerations of the distribution among actors of resources (territory, money, goods and resources), power, identity and values[5]. However, the contradiction of goals or interests is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict. In the case of contradictions without observable conflict behavior, conflicts are defined as latent or silent. Conflict becomes manifest when these contradictory goals are recognized and expressed through threats and/or hostile behavior.

Conflict may also originate from negative attitudes among actors or their hostile behaviors that create a conducive environment for conflict when a real (or perceived)

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[1] Boulding, K. E. (1977). Conflict and Defense: A General Theory. University Press of America.

[2] Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. Journal of Peace Research, 6(3), 167-191.

[3] Ibidem

[4] Galtung, J. (1996). Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization. SAGE Publications, p.71.

[5] Ibidem

contradiction of goals arises. In other words, a conflict could also begin in the behavior corner of the triangle (B), that is when one party does something to the other that has negative intentions behind it, or when one party does something which is not appreciated or fully understood by the other. The same goes for the attitude corner (A): a negative attitude may be transmitted through ideology or tradition. Indeed, to justify this negative attitude, and to confirm their assumptions, the actor will search for a contradiction (C). Later on, this adverse attitude will generate negative behavior that, in turn, will increase the chances of conflict.
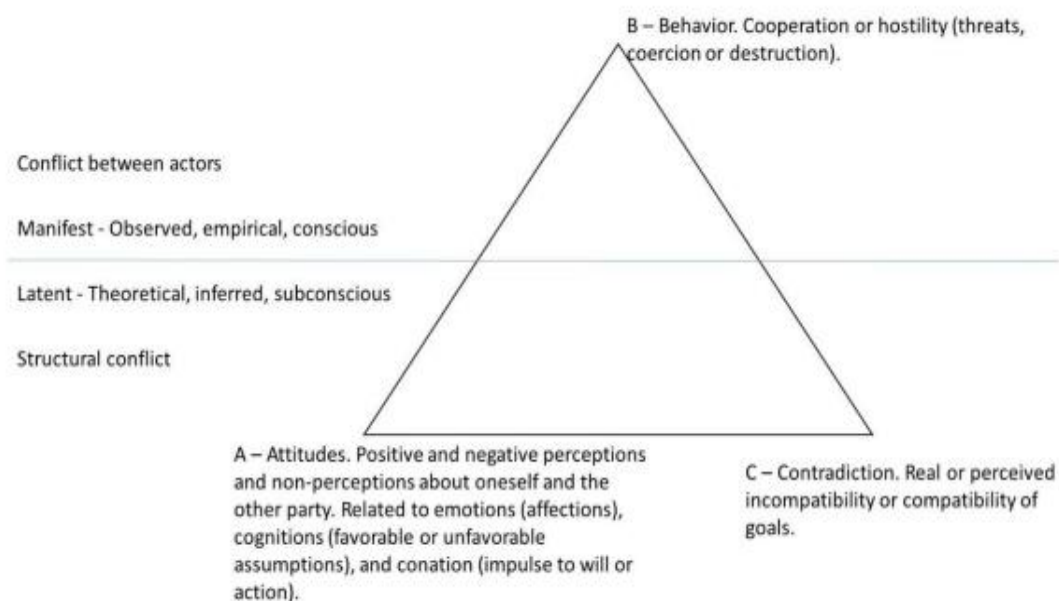

B – Behavior. Cooperation or hostility (threats, coercion or destruction).

Conflict between actors

Manifest - Observed, empirical, conscious

Latent - Theoretical, inferred, subconscious

Structural conflict

A – Attitudes. Positive and negative perceptions and non-perceptions about oneself and the other party. Related to emotions (affections), cognitions (favorable or unfavorable assumptions), and conation (impulse to will or action).

C – Contradiction. Real or perceived incompatibility or compatibility of goals.

Figure 1. Galtung's Conflict Triangle

In sum, the conflict scenario arises from a situation whereas goals, behaviors and attitudes interact with one another, creating a vicious cycle that may amplifies both the complexity and the intensity of the situation. Therefore, a conflict is not a static condition, but a dynamic one that changes over time.

The escalation in conflict finds a good representation in the so-called Conflict Cycle (*figure 2*), an ideal model where a period of escalation is followed by a period of de-escalation, delineating phases from Stable Peace, Unstable Peace, Conflict, Crisis, and War[6]. The Conflict Cycle was introduced by Michael Lund in 1996 and since then has undergone revisions and enhancements. According to this model, conflicts are cyclical and evolves over time "*in*

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[6] Lund, M. S. (1996). Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy. United States Institute of Peace Press.

relation to two dimensions: the intensity of conflict (the vertical axis) *and the duration of conflict* (the horizontal axis)"[7]. Identifying the dispute's position within the cycle is crucial for developing effective strategies that effectively prevent, manage, or end conflict. Following each phase, Lund described the tools for dealing with them, namely peacetime diplomacy or politics, preventive diplomacy, crisis diplomacy, peacemaking, peace enforcement, peacekeeping, post-conflict peacebuilding.
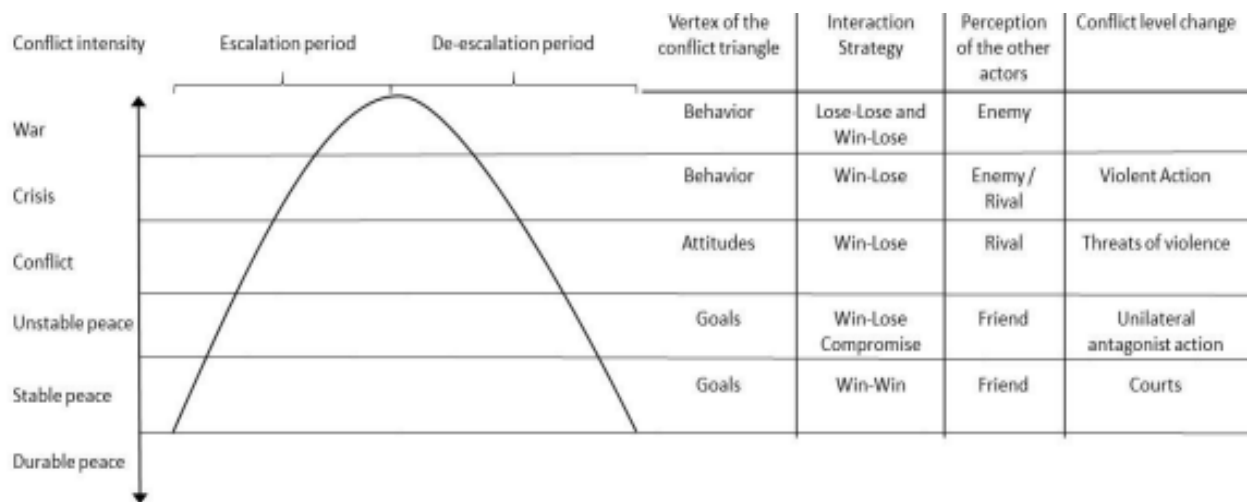

Figure 2. Conflict Cycle and characteristics of levels of conflict intensity

The first part of the curve represents the Durable Peace phase, characterized by long-lasting peace. As Lund explains, "*Durable Peace involves a high level of reciprocity and cooperation, and the virtual absence of self-defense measures among parties, although it may include their military alliance against a common threat. A 'positive peace' prevails based on shared values, goals, and institutions and rule of law, economic interdependence, and a sense of international community*"[8]. In a state of durable peace, while disagreements may occur, they are typically resolved through diplomatic means.

The second phase, Stable Peace, describes relations with a slightly higher degree of tension than in the Durable Peace phase. However, even in this phase, the likelihood of conflict remains minimal. Lund states, "*Stable Peace is a relationship of wary communication and limited cooperation within an overall context of basic order or national stability. Value or goal differences exist, and no military cooperation is established, but disputes are generally worked out in nonviolent, more or less predictable ways. The prospect for war is low*"[9]. This phase is

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[7] Ibidem
[8] Ibidem
[9] Ibidem

marked by cooperative mechanisms where actors maintain a positive outlook towards resolving potential conflicts, often seeking win-win solutions, and perceiving themselves as "friends".

If disputes remain unresolved and tensions escalate, the conflict may progress to the Unstable Peace phase. Lund describes this as, "*Unstable Peace is a situation in which tension and suspicion among parties run high, but violence is either absent or only sporadic. A 'negative peace' prevails because although armed force is not deployed [or employed], the parties perceive one another as enemies and maintain deterrent military capabilities. A balance of power may discourage aggression, but crisis and war are still possible*"[10]. At this level, tensions between objectives become apparent, and peace can no longer be taken for granted. Cooperation is limited to mutual interests that do not threaten each actor's sense of security, and attitudes deteriorate with the emergence of negative emotions and unfavorable cognitions. A shift from Stable Peace to Unstable Peace often involves a transition from seeking win-win solutions to compromise or zero-sum outcomes. A "negative peace" prevails because although armed force is not deployed, the parties perceive one another as enemies and maintain deterrent military capabilities. Therefore, conflict prevention ideally applies here.

A clear identifier of escalation from the level of Unstable Peace to Conflict is that actors' interactions are no longer focused on their goals but rather on the set of attitudes of each actor, which are the result of a conception of the other as a "rival" in interactions with the logic of a win-lose game. At this stage, actions are driven by the desire to gain a position of dominance. Consequently, the actors engage in antagonistic measures, though still short of military means. Increasing concern about the other party's intentions leads to a focus on power distribution, prompting the search for alliances. The tendency is for each party to adopt a competitive winning posture (zero-sum games), with increased antagonism between the parties, where negative feelings and effective communication deteriorates. Actors may engage in punitive behavior while maintaining plausible deniability to avoid overt diplomatic breaches. Escalation is marked by radical shifts in perception, intensification of political discourse, suspension from multilateral organizations, non-compliance with international bodies, revocation of agreements, and unilateral actions affecting economic and social relations. Hard power mechanisms and coercion, including sanctions and deterrent capabilities, become prominent.

If preventive diplomacy and crisis prevention fails, the situation may escalate reaching the phase of Crisis. As Lund explains, "*Crisis is tense confrontation between armed forces that*

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[10] Ibidem

are mobilized and ready to fight and may be engaged in threats and occasional low-level skirmishes but have not exerted any significant amount of force. The probability of the outbreak of war is high"[11]. Indicators of escalation to this level include a predisposition for violent action and the use of threats. At the Crisis level, the risk of violent conflict is imminent, with military means being considered as an option. The deepening of negative attitudes and emotions towards the other actor fosters a desire for violent action, reinforcing the perception of the other as an "enemy". Coercive diplomacy, subversive actions, and military posturing become more pronounced.

If efforts to restore peace are yet not successful, there may be an outbreak of violence, and the conflict may enter the phase of War. An identifier of escalation from the Crisis to War level is the carrying out of violent actions to destroy the opposing actor. As Lund explains, "*War is sustained fighting between organized armed forces. [...]. Once significant use of violence or armed force occurs, conflicts are very susceptible to entering a spiral of escalating violence. Each side feels increasingly justified to use violence because the other side is*"[12]. Therefore, the destructive behavior is dominating. Actors seek to seize one-off opportunities derived from mutual fear, suspicion, insecurity, or arms races, and there is a temptation for pre-emptive war. Moreover, non-negotiable political objectives of vital importance are more likely to lead to total wars when the means exist to achieve them.

In an ideal model of the conflict curve, conflicts progress trough all stages until resolution. However, in reality the wave pattern is far more complex, with numerous sub-conflicts over a wide array of issues. Often, conflicts are multi-layered systems where different conflicts interact, necessitating diverse measures to manage them effectively[13]. Each sub-conflict requires tailored prevention, management or resolution measure, appropriate to both its conflict intensity level and conflict phase, as well as to the characteristics of the particular sub-conflict. Thus, different types of measures might be required to maximize the ability to handle a conflict[14].

In conclusion, the integration of Galtung's conflict triangle and Lund's conflict cycle provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and preventing violent conflict. Galtung's

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[11] Ibidem
[12] Ibidem
[13] Kriesberg, L. (2003). Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution. Rowman & Littlefield.
[14] Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., & Miall, H. (2016). Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts. Polity Press.

model highlights the interplay between direct, structural, and cultural violence, emphasizing the need for addressing underlying causes and not just the visible symptoms of conflict. Lund's conflict cycle complements this by outlining the dynamic phases of conflict, from latent tensions to escalation and potential resolution. Together, these frameworks underscore the importance of proactive and multifaceted strategies in conflict prevention. Therefore, by combining these two theoretical models, policymakers and practitioners can adopt a holistic approach to conflict prevention. This approach involves not only addressing the immediate triggers of violence but also tackling the deeper structural and cultural factors that sustain conflict. It calls for comprehensive strategies that encompass conflict-sensitive development, inclusive governance, and the promotion of social justice and reconciliation. Ultimately, this integrated framework fosters a more sustainable peace by ensuring that interventions are multifaceted, context-specific, and attuned to the complex realities of the societies they aim to transform.

1.2 Root causes and catalysts of conflict

The recent surge in the number of armed conflicts reversed a 20-year decline[15]. Conflicts have become more complex and multifaceted, driven by numerous internal and external factors and actors. They often involve a multitude of actors with non-traditional conduct and low respect for international humanitarian law and are characterized by irregular warfare or terrorism. These new dynamics and the growing complexity of the conflict environment have significant implications for preventing violent conflict and building sustainable peace. Identifying and understanding the root causes of a conflict is fundamental to the organization of an appropriate intervention to combat violence. However, it should be considered that it is often not a single cause that triggers a conflict, but rather numerous interrelated and interconnected causes that develop in specific contexts and are influenced by several factors characteristic of a given political, economic and social context. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between proximate or immediate causes, i.e., the events that can trigger violence, and underlying causes, which create the conditions in which conflicts occur.

In the field of international relations, the role of inequality in conflicts is a complex and well-established phenomenon that frequently acts as a primary catalyst for tension and turmoil on a

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[15] United Nations. (2020). Report of the Secretary-General on the state of global peace and security (A/74/786).

global scale[16]. Inequalities, whether socio-economic, political, or cultural in nature, engender a sense of injustice and exclusion among marginalized groups and individuals, fueling grievances that can lead to violent confrontations and conflicts.

Inequalities in wealth, resources, and opportunities are often the root cause of conflicts, exacerbating pre-existing tensions and fostering resentment among the underprivileged, marginalized or oppressed[17]. Economic inequalities, for instance, not only widens the gap between the rich and the poor, but it also feeds the hatred and disappointment of the disadvantaged, creating cycles of resentment and disillusionment.

In this regard, the term structural violence, as conceptualized by Johan Galtung[18], means that violence is embedded in unequal and unjust social structures, within which some individuals are deprived of their rights and the means to satisfy their needs, thus creating inequality and discrimination between different groups.

Additionally, cultural inequality, which takes the form of ethnic, religious, or linguistic divisions, often acts as a fault line along which conflicts erupt, as competing identities clash over recognition, autonomy, and territorial control. The continuation of these conflicts not only fuels discontent but also erodes social cohesion and trust, weakening the foundations of peaceful coexistence and paving the way for violent upheavals and civil strife.

On the concept of inequality, it can be distinguished into vertical inequality, i.e., between individuals, and horizontal inequality, i.e., between groups. There is evidence from numerous studies that horizontal inequality is closely linked to a risk of violent conflict[19]. Horizontal inequality refers to all differences in opportunities or, more generally, socio-economic living conditions, defined between different social or cultural groups, thus based on identity elements[20]. The theory that horizontal inequality incentivizes the outbreak of conflict stems from the idea that when collective identity is strong, a sense of group inequality is created,

[16] Nafziger, E. W., Stewart, F., & Väyrynen, R. (Eds.). (2000). War, Hunger, and Displacement: The Origin of Humanitarian Emergencies. Oxford University Press.

[17] Cramer, C. (2005). Inequality and Conflict: A Review of an Age-Old Concern. Identities, Conflict and Cohesion Programme Paper Number 11. Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Retrieved from http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/d2a23ad2d50cb2a280256eb300385855/0501d4f6b3083076 c12570b4004f0d5b/$FILE/cramer.pdf

[18] Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. Journal of Peace Research, 6(3), 167-191.

[19] Østby, G. (2008). Polarization, Horizontal Inequalities and Violent Civil Conflict. Journal of Peace Research, 45(2), 143-162.

[20] Ibidem

which creates grievances and a sense of injustice that, in turn, can lead to collective mobilization[21].

In this regard, the theory of relative deprivation formulated by Gurr constitutes a fundamental conceptual model for understanding cases in which this type of inequality drives individuals to resort to violence[22]. He argues that, on its own, inequality between groups does not necessarily lead to violence but, nevertheless, can create a fertile ground on which to build collective grievances based on frustration related to feelings of injustice and exclusion[23]. In other words, relative deprivation theory states that an imbalance between the social, economic or political goods that people expect or feel they are entitled to, on the one hand, and what they are able to obtain and maintain, on the other, creates feelings of grievance and injustice, increases frustration and leads to violent conflict. This is particularly the case when that particular group blames another group or, more generally, the state for their condition. In this context, perceptions play a powerful role in the development of these kinds of feelings. Emotions, collective memories, frustration at unfulfilled expectations and a narrative that drives the group to violence can play a role in this mobilization. In short, the development of the collective motive to justify violence requires not only the perception of an unjust condition, but also the attribution of responsibility for this situation to a specific actor and/or group.

The resulting risk of violence is even more likely if individuals' identification with the group is strong and if the group itself is clearly demarcated and distinct from the others[24]. Indeed, collective framing is the phenomenon whereby a collective uses a common narrative to explain a given circumstance. In the context of violent conflicts, collective framing is often enacted by a group to frame some sort of grievance, real or perceived, as the fault of a certain entity, rationalizing participation in the conflict[25].

The non-fulfilment of basic human needs is another possible cause of conflict. In this regard, John Burton proposed the so-called theory of basic human needs[26]. According to this theory, there are a number of universal needs of a primordial nature that are non-negotiable and whose

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[21] Østby, G. (2013). Inequality and Political Violence: A Review of the Literature. International Area Studies Review, 16(2), 206-231.

[22] Gurr, T. R. (1970). Why Men Rebel. Princeton University Press.

[23] Ibidem

[24] Cederman, L.-E., Gleditsch, K. S., & Buhaug, H. (2013). Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War. Cambridge University Press.

[25] Gamson, W. A. (1995). Constructing Social Protest. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), Social Movements and Culture (pp. 85-106). University of Minnesota Press.

[26] Burton, J. (1997). Violence Explained: The Sources of Conflict, Violence and Crime and Their Prevention. Manchester University Press.

satisfaction is essential for human development and social stability. These needs are not only material, such as food, shelter and health, but also cultural and social, such as the right to freedom to profess one's religion, respect and human dignity. In general, these are factors of survival and development for every individual.

Needs theorists defined in particular four needs that are universal, nonnegotiable and not hierarchical: security or safety, meaning both stability and freedom from fear; identity, defined by needs theorists as a sense of self in relation to the outside world; recognition, including the recognition of one's identity and recognition from the others; family and community; and personal development, which includes a dimension of personal fulfillment. However, if these needs are unfulfilled because the state fails to properly address them, or if a group feels that these needs are unmet, or perceives a threat to these needs, violence can emerge[27].

The perception, rational or not, of any injustice regarding the distributive system can quickly lead to an identity-based struggle. Therefore, collective fears, which are fueled by the denial of basic needs, can lead to violent reactions, as an ultimate attempt of a people to secure the necessities of life and rectify the perceived injustice. In addition, violent actions are reinforced by massive mobilization: the larger the group that takes up arms, the more legitimate the violence appears to be to the rest of the population. This can create a rapid domino effect and provoke large-scale struggles.

The relationship between inequality and conflict is non-linear and indirect but, as mentioned, inequality can lead to conflict when it overlaps with differences in access and opportunities across groups defined around specific identities[28].

A large percentage of today's violent confrontations stem from group complaints over exclusion, which create ingrained sentiments of unfairness and injustice. Whether based on facts or perceptions, groups who feel marginalized, comparatively disadvantaged, or left out are far more prone than those who do not to view violence as a legitimate reaction.

Whether or not a society goes in the direction of violence or peace is mostly determined by the accumulation of complaints about exclusion and the decisions made by leaders and organizations about how to address them. People who perceive themselves as particularly

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[27] Ibidem

[28] World Bank and United Nations, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict, Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2018.

deprived are more prepared to fight and take personal risks only if they truly believe that their problems will be solved by a victorious uprising.

Some of the greatest risks of violence today stem from the mobilization of perceptions of exclusion and injustice, rooted in inequalities across groups[29]. When an aggrieved group assigns blame to others or to the state for its perceived economic, political, or social exclusion, then emotions, collective memories, frustration over unmet expectations, and a narrative that rouses a group to violence can all play a role in mobilization to violence.

Inequalities do not solely serve as underlying causes of conflicts but also exacerbate their intensity and duration, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability. Socio-economic disparities, for instance, create fertile ground for recruitment by extremist groups and criminal networks, exploiting grievances and offering disaffected individuals a sense of purpose and belonging through violence. Moreover, unequal access to resources and opportunities often fuels competition and resentment among rival factions, heightening the stakes and prolonging the duration of conflicts as parties vie for control and dominance. Political inequalities, on the other hand, undermine the legitimacy of governing institutions, fostering widespread disillusionment and eroding public trust in the ability of existing structures to address grievances and promote justice. In such contexts, conflicts become entrenched as disenfranchised groups resort to violence as a means of redressing grievances and challenging entrenched power dynamics. Cultural inequalities similarly contribute to the perpetuation of conflicts by deepening divisions and fomenting inter-group animosities, as competing identities vie for recognition and supremacy. These inequalities not only exacerbate existing conflicts but also hinder efforts at conflict resolution and reconciliation, perpetuating cycles of violence and perpetuating human suffering.

In conclusion, inequalities serve as a pervasive and potent driver of conflicts, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability across the globe. As Jonathan Goodhand argued, it is both greed (opportunity for accumulation) and grievance (generated by poverty and social exclusion) that cause and perpetuate violent conflict[30]. Whether rooted in socio-economic disparities, political marginalization, or cultural divisions, inequalities breed grievances and

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[29] Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and Grievance in Civil War. Oxford Economic Papers, 56(4), 563-595.
[30] Goodhand J. Enduring Disorder and persistent poverty: a review of the linkages between war and chronic poverty. World Dev 2003;31: 629-46

resentment, fueling the flames of conflict and undermining prospects for peace and stability. Addressing inequalities, therefore, stands as a crucial imperative in the pursuit of conflict prevention and resolution, necessitating concerted efforts to promote equity, justice, and inclusive governance on both local and global scales. Only through addressing the root causes of inequalities can the international community hope to build a more peaceful and prosperous world for all.

- **The influence of group identity on conflict dynamics**

Identity is one of the most crucial needs identified by the basic needs theory because it is an extremely strong catalyst for social mobilization[31]. Identity can encompass ethnicity, religion, spatial affiliation, race, and more. These exclusive identity loyalties are often reinforced by socio-economic, cultural, or political grievances.

According to Daniel Rothbart and Rose Cherubin, identity relies on a common set of narratives, symbols, and a shared sense of group differences[32]. This sense of identity can forge a strong societal bond, but it also creates a clear distinction between "us" and "them", which can potentially fracture society. In this framework, conflict emerges as a result of intense competition among distinct groups.

However, attributing civil conflict solely to the prominence of identity would be an oversimplification. On one hand, identity acts as a catalyst, mobilizing people by tapping into their deepest concerns and collective fears. On the other hand, identity serves as an effective tool for leaders to achieve their political goals and legitimize their actions. Mobilizing a population using identity is much quicker and more efficient than mobilizing through political convictions, either because people have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group, or because they are seen as de facto members of the enemy's group[33].

Groups mobilized around identity narratives find a powerful resonance in discourses that highlight shared values and collective anxieties. This makes identity a crucial element in conflict analysis due to its mobilizing capacity and its strong interaction with violence and security concerns.

In regions with deep ethnic divisions and widespread political discrimination against minority groups, ethnicity becomes a potent catalyst for separatist activities. Ethnic cleavages have

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[31] Rothbart, D., & Cherubin, R. (1999). Philosophical Analysis of Social Identity and Its Relevance to Conflict Resolution. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 43(4), 469-483.

[32] Ibidem

[33] Horowitz, D. L. (1985). Ethnic Groups in Conflict. University of California Press.

fostered suspicion, hatred, and distrust among different groups, hindering political integration across Africa. This is evident in numerous internal conflicts, such as those in Nigeria, Liberia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Sudan, and the Congo. These conflicts illustrate how deeply entrenched ethnic rivalries can destabilize nations and impede their political and social development. In fact, as a result of the colonization of Africa by European powers in the 19th century, boundaries of most Africa states were arbitrarily drawn without regard to ethnic and cultural affinities[34]. The impacts of these borders were felt to varying degrees from one country to the other throughout Africa. Indeed, in many Africans states, as a legacy from the colonial period, and the subsequent co-option of groups by external powers or by internal mismanagement and power struggles, identity has become politicized in many cases, with some identities privileged and others marginalized[35]. The resulting grievances can give way to identity-based conflict or transform into other types of conflict such as civil unrest or resource-based conflict.

- **Poverty and economic grievances as drivers of conflict**

The correlation between poverty and violent conflicts has been a focal point of extensive academic research, revealing a multifaceted and reciprocal relationship. Empirical studies underscore that poverty significantly heightens the risk of violent conflicts. Nations with lower GDP per capita are statistically more likely to experience civil wars and internal strife[36]. Indeed, numerous studies indicate that greater wealth diminishes the probability of civil wars, while economic growth reduces risks and recessions exacerbate them[37].

The point is that if from one side poverty exacerbates the risk of conflict, conflict, in turn, deepens poverty. Indeed, the cyclical nature of poverty and conflict is evident as economic decline caused by conflict entrenches poverty further, perpetuating a vicious cycle[38].

Global economic inequalities and the consequences of globalization have exacerbated conflict risks. Global economic disparities further compound the issue. The uneven benefits of globalization have led to growth in some regions while others have experienced economic

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[34] Herbst, J. (2000). States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control. Princeton University Press.
[35] Ibidem
[36] Litchfield, J. (2013). Poverty, Livelihoods, and Violent Conflict. In P. Justino, T. Brück, & P. Verwimp (Eds.), A Micro-Level Perspective on the Dynamics of Conflict, Violence, and Development, Oxford University Press.
[37] Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2002a). On the Incidence of Civil War in Africa. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 46(1), 13-28.
[38] World Bank Group, Conflict and Poverty, Poverty and Shard Prosperity 2020, working paper n.9455, October 2020, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/519741603804458786/pdf/Conflict-and-Poverty.pdf#:~:text=URL%3A%20https%3A%2F%2Fdocuments1.worldbank.org%2Fcurated%2Fen%2F51974 1603804458786%2Fpdf%2FConflict

stagnation and increased conflict incidences. Africa, in particular, has experienced negative growth rates and high conflict rates. Consequently, conflicts are increasingly concentrated in poorer regions, with the income gap between conflict-affected and non-conflict countries widening over time.

In this regard, three crucial aspects of national income distribution are central to policy debates: the average of the distribution, the spread of the distribution, and the "lower tail" of the distribution. The rate of change of the first is simply the rate of growth; the second is captured by various measures of inequality such as the Gini coefficient[39]; the third tries to delineate "poverty line"[40].

Poverty metrics can be broken down into subgroup components, revealing that a national decline in poverty might mask complex patterns, with some groups experiencing reductions in poverty while others see increases. This dynamic can lead to heightened group tensions as disparities in poverty reduction emerge. Indeed, according to the World Bank, global poverty has decreased overall, though this trend masks opposing regional patterns. While poverty in Africa has increased, significant reductions in India and China, due to their large populations, have overshadowed these increases at the global level[41]. This disparity fuels grievances, particularly when poverty aligns with ethnic, religious, linguistic, or regional divisions.

Moreover, high unemployment and inequality rates, coupled with low education and development levels, facilitate recruitment, and provide reasons for conflict. Violent conflict inevitably hampers state functionality, trapping nations in a vicious cycle of poverty, conflict, and underdevelopment, each exacerbating the other, thus increasing vulnerability and hindering economic growth and development. Weak economic conditions often limit the provision of essential public goods and services, fostering an environment where violence becomes a more attractive or necessary option for marginalized groups. At the state level, poverty may undermine resilience by weakening institutions, reducing public goods provision, and limiting governmental authority.

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[39] The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality within a population, ranging from 0 to 1. A value of 0 indicates perfect equality (everyone has the same income), while a value of 1 indicates perfect inequality (one person has all the income). It is calculated based on the Lorenz curve, which plots the cumulative income against the cumulative population. The Gini coefficient is widely used to assess economic inequality and guide policy decisions, although it has limitations such as sensitivity to population size and income distribution patterns.

[40] Ravallion, M. (1992). Poverty Comparisons: A Guide to Concepts and Methods. Living Standards Measurement Study Working Paper 88, The World Bank.

[41] Chen, S., & Ravallion, M. (2004). How have the World's Poorest Fared Since the Early 1980s?, World Bank. Retrieved from http://www.worldbank.org/research/povmonitor/MartinPapers/How_have_the_poorest_fared_since_the_early_1980s.pdf

Therefore, holistic development strategies that focus on economic, social, and political dimensions are essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and conflict. Addressing poverty is thus integral to conflict prevention and resolution. Policies aimed at reducing poverty, improving economic opportunities, and addressing inequalities are crucial. Measures such as promoting inclusive economic growth, strengthening institutions, and ensuring equitable access to resources can mitigate the risk of conflicts.

- **Resource wars: how competition for resources fuels conflict**

The correlation between natural resources and violent conflicts is a multifaceted issue that has garnered extensive scholarly attention, revealing a complex interplay of economic, political, and social factors. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) report found that in the past years natural resources have been linked to at least 40% of intra-state conflicts in the world and these conflicts are twice as likely to recur within five years compared to conflicts unrelated to resources[42].

There are several theoretical explanations for why territory becomes a contested issue[43]. First, territory often holds a strategic value. Livelihoods, economies, and societies, directly or indirectly, depend on many natural resources. Indeed, 70% of the global population directly depends on natural resources extracted from a drastically changing natural environment[44]. Second, territories rich in resources like minerals, oil, and fertile land provide material gains, motivating conflicts. The intrinsic value of these territories also enhances the opportunity for violent mobilization, serving as both a motivating and enabling factor for armed conflicts[45]. Finally, territory can have a symbolic value based on cultural or historical significance.

There are several mechanisms that could explain the relationship between natural resources and war onset and duration. Natural resources could provide a way to finance rebellions that have been started for other reasons, thereby increasing the prospects of success. If natural resources are concentrated in a particular region of a country this may ground beliefs among dissatisfied groups that a seceding state could be viable or even prosperous. Natural resource dependence could in fact be associated with grievances. Economies that are dependent on natural resources may be more vulnerable to terms of trade shocks. These could cause

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[42] United Nations Environment Programme. (2009). From Conflict to Peacebuilding: The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment, p.30.
[43] Toft, Monica Duffy (2014) "Territory and War." Journal of Peace Research 51, no. 2, March, 185–98
[44] United Nations Environment Programme. (2019). Annual Report 2019. UNEP.
[45] Ibidem

instability and dissatisfaction within groups that suffer from the shocks. Moreover, factors as environmental degradation, population growth, urbanization, and climate change intensify competition over land and other resources.

Not only land is a possible driver of conflict, but also an obstacle to recovery as it might contribute to protract crisis, jeopardizing peace and stability.

Several studies show a significant correlation between resource abundance and wars, particularly in countries with weak governance structures[46]. Accordingly, the resource curse theory, also known as the paradox of plenty, posits that countries endowed with abundant natural resources often experience less economic growth and more frequent conflicts than resource-poor countries. This paradox can be explained through several mechanisms. Economically, the influx of revenue from natural resources can lead to an overvalued currency, known as "Dutch Disease", which makes other export sectors less competitive and hinders economic diversification[47]. Additionally, resource-dependent economies are often subject to price volatility in global markets, leading to economic instability. Politically, the concentration of resource wealth can foster rent-seeking behavior, corruption, and weak governance, as political elites and interest groups vie for control over lucrative resource revenues, undermining state institutions and democratic processes. Socially, the uneven distribution of resource wealth can exacerbate existing ethnic and regional inequalities, fueling grievances and social tensions that can lead to violent conflicts[48]. The resources under contestation are often non-renewable and have a high economic value. Empirical findings further show that resource abundance attracts foreign support in the form of troop involvement. In turn, this type of third-party military involvement in intrastate conflicts tends to intensify and prolong armed conflicts[49]. Abundance may have both a direct and an indirect effect on conflict risk[50]. Research that has found a direct link between abundance and conflict focuses on the fact that resource wealth enhances groups' opportunity to finance costly wars (mobilization opportunity) and that this can contribute to decision to initiate conflict. Research arguing for an indirect link between

[46] Koubi, Vally, Gabriele Spilker, Tobias Böhmelt, and Thomas Bernauer. (2014) "Do Natural Resources Matter for Interstate and Intrastate Armed Conflict?" Journal of Peace Research 51, no. 2, March: 227–43, pp: 228
[47] Auty, R. M. (1993). Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse Thesis. Routledge.
[48] Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and Grievance in Civil War. Oxford Economic Papers, 56(4), 563-595.
[49] Weinstein, Jeremy M. (2005) "Resources and the Information Problem in Rebel Recruitment." The Journal of Conflict Resolution 49, no. 4 598–624.; Karlén, Niklas. (2016) "Historical trends in external support in civil wars". Sipri Yearbook 2016: 117-128.
[50] Le Billon, (2004) "The Political Ecology of War"; Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." Oxford Economic Papers 56, no. 4: 563–95.

resource abundance and conflict argue that resource abundance weakens state institutions, which in turn increases the risk of conflict[51].

In the coming decades, global challenges such as population growth, urbanization, rural-urban migration, increasing food insecurity and climate change will generate more competition over land, which will increase the number of land-related conflicts at global, regional and national level[52]. As a result, the international community has mobilized to try to counter these trends. For instance, in 2008, two large international programmes were initiated with the aims to build the capacity of countries and organizations alike to understand, prevent, and resolve natural resource conflicts: the EU-UN Partnership on Land, Natural Resources and Conflict Prevention and the Environmental Cooperation for Peacebuilding Programme.

- **The role of climate change in exacerbating conflicts**
Climate change is increasingly recognized as a significant factor that can exacerbate existing social, economic, and political tensions, potentially leading to violent conflicts[53]. Furthermore, because armed conflict also increases vulnerability, not only do disasters fuel violence, but violence further increases disaster risks[54].

The specific ways these effects impact violent conflicts are, however, determined by local social, political and economic dynamics. Governance is a critical variable in climate vulnerability, as it can create or accentuate inequalities that worsen the effects of climate change on specific groups.

While climate change is not the only cause of violence and conflict, it can have both direct and indirect consequences for security[55]. For instance, based on the 2007 impact assessments of climate change from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we identify three major processes expected to follow from climate change that

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[51] Fearon, James D. (2005) "Primary commodities and civil war". Journal of Conflict Resolution 49(4): 483– 507; Humphreys, Macartan (2005) Natural resources, conflict, and conflict resolution. Journal of Conflict Resolution 49(4): 508–537.
[52] HIIK, HIIK Dataset 2022. Heidelberg, Germany: Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research. https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en
[53] Mobjörk, M., Gustafsson, M. T., Sonnsjö, H., van Baalen, S., Dellmuth, L. M., & Bremberg, N. (2016). Climate-related Security Risks: Towards an Integrated Approach. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
[54] Ide, T., Brzoska, M., Donges, J. F., & Schleussner, C.-F. (2020). Multi-method Evidence for When and How Climate-related Disasters Contribute to Armed Conflict Risk. Global Environmental Change, 62, 102063.
[55] Mach, K. J., Kraan, C. M., Adger, W. N., *et al.* (2019). Climate as a Risk Factor for Armed Conflict. Nature, 571, 193–197.

is likely to have security implications: degradation of farmland, freshwater scarcity, and population displacement[56].

Climate change impacts the availability and distribution of water resources, leading to scarcity and intensifying competition over them, potentially sparking conflicts. Transboundary water resources, such as rivers and lakes shared by multiple countries, are particularly contentious. Moreover, changes in temperature and precipitation patterns negatively affect agricultural productivity, potentially leading to food shortages.

Climate change exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities, leading to grievances that drive conflict. Vulnerable communities, such as those living in poverty or marginalized groups, are disproportionately affected by climate change impacts, increasing their susceptibility to conflict.

Climate change-induced extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, and hurricanes, disrupt livelihoods, particularly in vulnerable communities. Large-scale migration strains resources and infrastructure in receiving areas, leading to tensions and conflicts. The loss of livelihoods leads to displacement, creating competition for resources in areas where displaced populations settle. In the absence of alternative livelihoods, there is greater risk of people using violence to protect or access natural resources[57]. Climate-induced displacement is expected to increase, with the United Nations predicting that climate change could displace up to 200 million people by 2050[58].

Disasters resulting from natural hazards are posing threats to human security and economic development globally. Climate change exacerbates governance challenges, particularly in fragile states with limited capacity to respond to environmental stresses. Weak governance leads to ineffective responses to climate-related crises, increasing the likelihood of conflict. The lack of effective governance structures can result in the mismanagement of resources, corruption, and the inability to adequately support vulnerable populations, thereby heightening the risk of conflict. Poor governance can also exacerbate existing inequalities and grievances, further fueling tensions and increasing the likelihood of violent conflicts.

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[56] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2007). Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press.
[57] Van Baalen, S., & Mobjörk, M. (2018). Climate Change and Violent Conflict in East Africa: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Research to Probe the Mechanisms. International Studies Review, 20(4), 547-575.
[58] United Nations Environment Programme. (2009). From Conflict to Peacebuilding: The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment.

Thus, diversity of the roots of the conflicts results in the differences in the approaches towards conflict prevention, conflict settlement and conflict resolution. These differences necessitate tailored strategies that address the unique characteristics and underlying causes of each conflict. The subsequent sections of this paper will explore these varied approaches in greater detail, analyzing how specific strategies can be effectively applied to different conflict scenarios.

1.3 Foundations of conflict prevention: definitions and key concepts

Armed conflicts remain a characteristic feature of the international system and its costs, in both financial and human terms, remains staggering. Consequently, nowadays preventing the outbreak of violent conflict remains a difficult challenge. At the most basic level, conflict prevention means to hinder or prevent violent conflict. It involves a variety of strategies and actions, both immediate, short-term actions as well as longer-term, structural actions.

To better understand this concept, the definition provided by Michael Lund is the most comprehensive one. More specifically, he defined conflict prevention as: "*any structural or intercessory means to keep intrastate or interstate tension and disputes from escalating into significant violence and use of armed forces, to strengthen the capabilities of potential parties to violent conflict for resolving such disputes peacefully, and to progressively reduce the underlying problems that produce these issues and disputes*"[59].

Conflict prevention requires a holistic approach that involves understanding the root causes of conflict, identifying key actors, forecasting potential scenarios, and planning strategic responses.

The first step involves a comprehensive context and situation analysis. This includes identifying issues that underpin and drive conflicts, such as political instability, economic distress, social inequalities, and human rights violations. Equally important is recognizing conditions that reduce conflict and can form the basis for peace, such as strong governance, social cohesion, and economic opportunities. This dual focus ensures that both negative and positive factors are considered, providing a balanced view of the conflict landscape.

The second step is mapping key actors and stakeholders. This involves identifying individuals or groups who fuel conflict, including political elites, insurgent groups, and other stakeholders with vested interests in continued instability. At the same time, it is crucial to

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[59] Lund, M. S. (1996). Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy. United States Institute of Peace Press.

recognize actors who mitigate conflict and promote peace, such as civil society organizations, community leaders, international organizations, and mediators. Understanding the motivations and capacities of these actors helps in designing targeted interventions.

The third step is developing scenarios of possible situations. Creating scenarios that range from the worst-case to the best-case outcomes helps in understanding potential developments and preparing for various contingencies. Strategic forecasting through these scenarios allows stakeholders to anticipate potential flashpoints and areas requiring immediate attention, facilitating proactive rather than reactive responses.

The fourth step involves planning effective responses. This includes identifying actionable steps that can be taken to reduce tensions, such as diplomatic efforts, economic sanctions, development aid, and other preventive measures. Fostering dialogue and negotiation, strengthening institutions, and promoting policies that address root causes and grievances are essential for non-violent conflict resolution. Planning effective responses ensures that conflict prevention strategies are not only reactive but also proactive, addressing both immediate and long-term needs.

The methods for engagement are often categorized in two broad categories: direct prevention and structural prevention[60].

Direct prevention, also referred to as "operational" or "light" prevention, refers to immediate and often short-term measures aimed at preventing the imminent outbreak or escalation of violence. Early warning systems are central to direct prevention, involving the monitoring and identification of signs that indicate potential conflict, allowing for timely intervention. These indicators can include political unrest, economic instability, and social tensions. Preventive diplomacy is another crucial aspect of direct prevention. It involves engaging in diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions between conflicting parties, including dialogue, negotiations, and mediation facilitated by neutral third parties. Preventive diplomacy seeks to resolve disputes peacefully before they lead to violence. Immediate humanitarian aid also plays a vital role in direct prevention. Providing humanitarian assistance to address urgent needs can reduce the impact of crises that could lead to conflict, such as food, water, shelter, and medical care to populations affected by natural disasters, economic crises, or political instability. In some cases, the rapid deployment of peacekeeping forces can help stabilize a

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[60] Ibidem

situation, prevent violence, and protect civilians, acting as a buffer between conflicting parties and helping to maintain order.

In contrast, structural prevention focuses on long-term measures aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict to prevent its recurrence and foster sustainable peace. This approach involves creating and strengthening social, economic, and political structures that reduce the likelihood of conflict. Economic development is a key component of structural prevention, promoting economic growth and equitable distribution of resources to reduce poverty and economic disparities. Economic stability and opportunities for employment can alleviate grievances that may lead to conflict. Strengthening governance structures and promoting the rule of law are also essential for structural prevention. Effective governance ensures accountability, transparency, and inclusivity, reducing the likelihood of grievances. Legal frameworks that protect human rights and provide mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution can prevent the escalation of disputes. Encouraging social cohesion and integrating diverse groups within society are crucial for preventing conflicts. Policies that promote equality and protect the rights of minorities can mitigate social tensions and prevent conflicts. Education and capacity building are also important elements of structural prevention. Investing in education and building the capacities of individuals and institutions to manage conflicts peacefully promotes critical thinking and tolerance, which are essential for a peaceful society.

Conflict and its consequences are not limited to one country and its boundaries, therefore, a third concept gradually emerged as part of the evolving discourse on conflict prevention, influenced by documents like the Agenda for Peace[61] in 1992 and developed further in academic and policy literature throughout the 2000s. This approach recognizes that conflicts are not isolated phenomena but there are some transboundary risks and conflict drivers. In contemporary discussions, systemic prevention often refers to addressing global and regional dynamics that influence conflicts, such as economic inequalities, migration, social integration, environmental sustainability, and transnational organized crime. In this regard, systemic prevention concerns issues that can be dealt with efficiently only collectively through global partnerships and frameworks on an international scale.

Combining a thorough understanding of ground realities with a comprehensive overview of available conflict prevention tools enhances the effectiveness of long-term international

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[61] Boutros-Ghali, B. (1992). An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping. United Nations.

development cooperation. This integration strengthens the potential for conflict prevention by ensuring that responses are context-specific, timely, and aligned with broader developmental goals. A deep analysis of the context and careful mapping of actors allow for tailored strategies that can adapt to the evolving nature of conflicts. Moreover, effective conflict prevention measures require coordination and collaboration between various entities, including international, regional, sub-regional, national, and local actors.

1.4 International organizations and conflict prevention: a liberal institutionalism perspective

International organizations play a critical role in the prevention of violent conflicts through a combination of early warning systems, diplomatic efforts, peacekeeping missions, development aid, and the promotion of good governance and human rights. Liberal institutionalism, a prominent theory in international relations, provides a robust framework for understanding how these organizations contribute to global peace and stability. According to liberal institutionalism, international institutions help mitigate the anarchic nature of the international system by promoting rules, norms, and cooperation among states[62].

Liberal institutionalism emerged as a response to the realist perspective, which emphasizes the competitive and conflictual aspects of international relations. According to realist and neo-realist scholars, the international arena is perceived as a battleground characterized by perpetual competition and conflict, where anarchy reigns supreme, hindering the prospects of cooperation among sovereign states[63]. Within the neo-realist paradigm, scholars like John Mearsheimer contend that international institutions are inherently ineffective, incapable of curbing the self-interested pursuits of states engaged in power politics[64]. Mearsheimer posits that institutions wield only marginal influence, merely reflecting the power dynamics inherent in the international system[65]. In contrast, liberal institutionalists acknowledge anarchy as a formidable obstacle to interstate cooperation, yet they diverge in their assessment of its inhibiting effects. While recognizing the challenges posed by anarchy, liberal institutionalists

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[62] Milner, H. V. (1992). International Theories of Cooperation Among Nations: Strengths and Weaknesses. World Politics, 44(3), 466-496.
[63] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). Anarchy and the struggle for power. In: The tragedy of great power politics. New York and London: W W Norton & Company
[64] Mearsheimer, J. J. (1994). The False Promise of International Institutions. International Security, 19(3), 5-49.
[65] Ibidem

maintain that cooperation remains attainable through sustained efforts[66]. They emphasize the importance of fostering long-term relationships among a select group of states, underpinned by reciprocity and shared interests conducive to cooperative gains[67]. Institutions, according to liberal institutionalists, serve as mediators, fostering trust among states and mitigating cheating behaviors, thereby facilitating effective cooperation on the international stage[68]. International institutions can help overcome the challenges of collective action and promote cooperation by providing a framework for dialogue, reducing transaction costs, and increasing transparency.

Keohane and Martin assert that institutions evolve in response to state interests, their character shaped by prevailing power dynamics[69]. Institutions, acting as facilitators of interaction, mediate between states, promoting cooperation by aligning mutual interests and minimizing disparities. They argue that states, as rational actors, prioritize absolute gains through cooperation, thereby mitigating concerns over relative gains vis-à-vis other states[70]. In this regard, economic interdependence, facilitated by international organizations, is a significant factor in reducing the likelihood of conflict according to liberal institutionalism. Organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promote global economic integration and cooperation, making conflicts less likely by increasing the costs of war. Economic stability and growth fostered by these institutions can reduce grievances and economic disparities that often underpin conflicts.

Establishing norms and rules is another critical function of international organizations. These norms, such as respect for sovereignty, human rights, and peaceful conflict resolution, create a predictable and stable international environment. Consequently, neo-liberal institutionalists contend that international organizations play a crucial role in reducing uncertainties surrounding agreement enforcement, enhancing opportunities for collective gains[71]. By addressing distributional concerns and ensuring equitable gains, institutions alleviate fears of exploitation and encourage cooperation among states.

Institutional responses to conflicts also confer legitimacy to interventions, shifting responsibility from individual states to collective entities, thereby minimizing fears of entrapment. Liberal institutionalism advocates for multilateralism as a means of managing

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[66] Keohane, R. O. (1984). After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy. Princeton University Press.
[67] Ibidem
[68] Ikenberry, G. J. (2001). After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars. Princeton University Press.
[69] Keohane, R.O., Martin, L.L. (1995). The Promise of Institutionalist Theory. International Security, 20(1).
[70] Ibidem
[71] Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition. Little, Brown

international relations and preventing conflicts. By encouraging states to work together through multilateral frameworks, international organizations reduce unilateral actions that can lead to conflicts. Cooperation, when institutionalized, engenders confidence among states through legal regulations and procedural frameworks, thereby enhancing the credibility of commitments and fostering reciprocity[72]. Furthermore, institutionalized cooperation, particularly through international organizations, enables coordinated responses to intra-state conflicts through comprehensive conflict management programs.

Neo-liberal institutionalists posit that despite inherent challenges, states, driven by shared interests, can engage in cooperative relationships facilitated by institutions, thereby contributing to a more stable and secure international order[73]. Thus, while acknowledging the persistence of power realities, institutions serve as pivotal mechanisms for fostering cooperative relationships and mitigating conflicts in the anarchic realm of international relations.

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[72] Ibidem
[73] Martin, L. L. (1992). The Rational State Choice of Multilateralism. In J. Ruggie (Ed.), Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form (pp. 91-121). Columbia University Press.

CHAPTER 2 - THE UN' FRAMEWORK FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION

2.1 The role of UN in conflict prevention: institutional framework and principles

The United Nations was established in 1945 with the primary objective of maintaining international peace and security. The foundational principles set forth in the UN Charter, along with subsequent resolutions and initiatives, have shaped the UN's approach to preventing conflicts and fostering sustainable peace.

The UN Charter, signed on June 26, 1945, in San Francisco, is the cornerstone of the UN's legal and institutional framework. Article 1 of the Charter outlines the purposes of the UN, emphasizing the maintenance of international peace and security through effective collective measures and the peaceful resolution of disputes[74]. Conflict prevention is a fundamental principle enshrined in the UN Charter. Specifically, Paragraph 1, Article 1 of the UN Charter underscores one of the United Nations' primary purposes: "*to maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace*"[75].

Being endowed with unique powers to maintain international peace and security, the UN Security Council possess a wide range of tools for prevent, manage, and respond to violent conflict. Indeed, Chapter VI of the UN Charter provides a framework for the Security Council's engagement in conflict prevention, such as fact-finding, negotiation, mediation, conciliation, judicial settlement, and arbitration.

The UN General Assembly also plays a crucial role in conflict prevention through its mandate. In fact, it serves as a platform for member states to discuss and convenes high-level conferences and special session dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These meetings provide a forum for member states, regional organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders to debate on possible effective strategies. Moreover, the General Assembly adopts resolution and declarations that set normative frameworks for conflict prevention.

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[74] U.N. Charter, art.1.
[75] Ivi, para.1.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in 1961, was the first to explicitly emphasize the importance of conflict prevention. Hammarskjöld is widely recognized for his proactive approach to diplomacy and conflict resolution, advocating for the use of preventive diplomacy to address potential conflicts before they escalated into violence. For instance, in 1953 Hammarskjöld played a crucial role in the resolution of the Suez Crisis by facilitating negotiations and deploying the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), which was the first-ever peacekeeping force. Not only Dag Hammarskjöld articulated the concept of preventive diplomacy, but he also often spoke about the necessity of preventing conflicts through timely and decisive action.

Since then, efforts to introduce the concept of conflict prevention within the UN system have been constant. This is evident from the large number of documents in which it is mentioned, projects and meetings devoted to it, and statements and resolutions in which its importance is recognised.

The end of the Cold War marked a transformative period for the UN, enabling it to adopt more proactive and comprehensive approaches to conflict prevention. The UN's agenda expanded to include not only traditional peacekeeping but also preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. This shift was underscored by the landmark report *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping*[76], introduced by UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali in 1992, which advocated for a broader concept of peace and security, emphasizing the importance of addressing root causes of conflicts through preventive measures. The document was particularly significant for institutionalizing a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution within the UN framework. This pivotal document outlines a comprehensive strategy encompassing preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding, with a strong focus on measures to prevent disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of conflicts when they occur, emphasizing early intervention through dialogue, mediation, and negotiation[77].

However, compared to today, Boutros-Ghali's approach to prevention was significantly constrained: the Agenda for Peace never addressed the "root causes approach" to prevention, which started to become increasingly prominent in the late 1990s. The evolution of the UN's conflict prevention strategies reflects a growing recognition of the complex and multifaceted nature of modern conflicts.

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[76] Boutros-Ghali, B. (1992). An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking, and Peacekeeping, United Nations.
[77] Ibidem

Later, more precisely in 1995, the UN's Geneva-based Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) published a report entitled *Strengthening of the United Nations System Capacity for Conflict Prevention* which examines the effectiveness of the existing mechanisms and proposes some recommendations for enhancing the UN capacity in conflict prevention[78]. Within the document the emphasis is on the need to develop a "comprehensive conflict prevention strategy", i.e., a strategy that aims to address the root causes of conflicts in a pre-conflict situation[79]. In addition, great emphasis is placed on so-called structural prevention, with poverty and underdevelopment listed as the two main causes of conflict[80].

Especially one of the last Secretary-Generals, Kofi Annan, can be considered one of the major proponent of conflict prevention in the UN system. In fact, since the beginning of his mandate in 1997, he immediately recognized the important of it. In one of the first published reports of his term, he stated: "*Humanitarian actions today go beyond the saving of lives through relief operations and involve a wide range of efforts covering early warning, prevention, provision of emergency assistance, advocacy of humanitarian and human rights principles, protection and monitoring, with a view to ensuring a smooth transition to longer-term development*"[81]. Furthermore, in the annual report of 1999, the Secretary-General encouraged a transition from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention[82].

The growing awareness of conflict prevention in the UN system paved the way for two open debates on conflict prevention in the Security Council in November 1999 and July 2000. Indeed, the Security Council statement issued on November 30, 1999, emphasizes the importance of preventing armed conflict and calls for a concerted effort from all principal UN organs to achieve this goal. The statement outlines the Security Council's intention to consider various preventive measures, recognizing that "*early warning, preventive diplomacy, preventive deployment, preventive disarmament and post-conflict peace-building are interdependent and complementary components of a comprehensive conflict prevention strategy*"[83].

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[78] Hernández, H. L., & Kuyama, S. (1995). Strengthening of the United Nations System Capacity for Conflict Prevention (JIU/REP/95/13). Joint Inspection Unit.
[79] Ivi, para.105
[80] Ivi, para.144
[81] Annan K.A. (1997). Renewing the United Nation: A programme for reform, Report of the Secretary-General, A/51/950, para.180.
[82] Annan K.A. (1999). Secretary-General presents his annual report to General Assembly, Press Release SG/SM/7136-GA/9596
[83] United Nations Security Council. (1999). Statement by the President of the Security Council (S/PRST/1999/34).

The importance of conflict prevention was later reiterated on numerous occasions, for example in the Millennium Report[84] and during the Millennium Summit in September 2000, where the so-called Brahimi report was presented[85], in the Secretary-General's remarks before the Security Council's second open meeting on conflict prevention in July 2000[86], or in an address by Kofi Annan to the Foreign Policy Association in New York in March 2001[87].

The June 2001 report on the prevention of armed conflict was the first comprehensive report produced by a Secretary-General on the topic[88]. It offered a total of twenty-nine recommendations for different parts of the UN system, Member States, NGOs, and the donor community to promote and improve conflict prevention. The report distinguished between operational prevention, which refers to measures applicable in the face of immediate crisis, and structural prevention, longer-term efforts that strive to address the potential root causes of conflict (e.g., socio-economic inequality, ethnic discrimination, lack of participatory politics, human rights abuses, etc.). It stated that "conflict prevention lies at the heart of the mandate of the United Nations in the maintenance of international peace and security" and that "*an effective preventive strategy requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses both short-term and long-term political, diplomatic, humanitarian, human rights, developmental, institutional and other measures taken by the international community, in cooperation with national and regional actors*"[89]. The subsequent report published in 2006 on the same subject expands on the concept of conflict prevention, introducing systemic prevention, which refers to "measures to address global risk of conflict that transcend particular States"[90].

These are also the years in which the idea of gendered violence became widespread. Consequently, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in October 2000, acknowledges the significant impact of armed conflict on women and girls and the essential role they play in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction[91]. It also emphasizes the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence in conflict situations, and the incorporation of gender perspectives in peace and security efforts. On this issue, specific

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[84] Annan K.A. (2000). We the peoples: the role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century, The Millennium Assembly of the United Nation, Report of the Secretary-General, A/54/2000
[85] United Nations. (2000). Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (A/55/305-S/2000/809)
[86] Annan K.A. (2000). Secretary-General says conflict prevention should be cornerstone of collective security in twenty-first century, Press Release SG/SM/7491-SC/6893
[87] Annan K.A. (2001). Statement of the Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Foreign Policy Association in New York on 21 March, Press Release SG/SM/7747.
[88] United Nations. (2001). Prevention of armed conflict, Report of the Secretary-General, A/55/985-S2001/574.
[89] Ibidem
[90] United Nations General Assembly. (2006). Progress report on the prevention of armed conflict, A/60/891, para.8
[91] United Nations Security Council. (2000). Resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security (S/RES/1325).

monitoring and prevention systems for gendered violence were created. For instance, the Matrix of Early Warning Indicators of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence was produced in 2011 by UN Action, which establish a set of indicators that signal potential, imminent, or ongoing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, as well as rapid response to risk factors it.

Another big step was the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) in 2005[92], which marked a significant milestone in the United Nations' efforts to prevent conflict and sustain peace. As a subsidiary organ of both the General Assembly and the Security Council, the PBC was created to address the complex challenges of post-conflict recovery, which are crucial for preventing the relapse into violence. The PBC's mandate includes supporting reconstruction, institution-building, and sustainable development in countries emerging from conflict. By focusing on these areas, the PBC aims to address the root causes of conflicts, such as weak governance, socio-economic inequalities, and lack of rule of law, which if unaddressed, can lead to the resurgence of violence. The Commission plays a crucial role in coordinating international support and ensuring that the diverse efforts of various UN bodies and other international actors are harmonized and effective. Moreover, the PBC helps to mobilize financial resources for post-conflict countries, providing them with the necessary support to build stable and resilient institutions. The creation of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) in 2006 further complements these efforts by offering timely and flexible funding to jump-start crucial peacebuilding activities. Overall, the PBC's establishment underscores the UN's commitment to a holistic and sustained approach to conflict prevention, recognizing that peacebuilding is an integral part of the peace and security continuum, essential for creating conditions for durable peace.

Some years later, in response to the UN's failure to defend human rights and prevent war crimes and crimes against humanity during the civil war in Sri Lanka[93], the Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon launched the Human Rights up Front (HRuF) Action Plan. He concluded that the origin of the UN's failure laid in the refusal of its country-level operations to make the promotion and protection of human rights a guiding principle of its engagement with the Sri Lankan Government[94]. The consequent conclusion was the reaffirmation of the necessity and the importance for Resident Coordinators and Country Teams to place human rights upfront. The

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[92] The Peacebuilding Commission was established through two resolutions, A/RES/60/180 and S/RES/1645
[93] For more information about it, see the Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka, November 2012. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/report-secretary-general%E2%80%99s-internal-review-panel-united-nations-action-sri-lanka
[94] Ibidem

importance of the action plan lies in the repercussions it has had in the UN system. Indeed, the idea of promoting human rights s in the context of their development cooperation with host governments is also a pillar of the current prevention strategy.

Since then, more and more resolutions and reports have been devoted to the topic of armed conflict prevention.

For instance, in 2014 the Security Council passes its first resolution explicitly on conflict prevention, recognizing and recalling the primary responsibility of States[95].

About a year later, the reports of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Peacebuilding Architecture[96] and of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO)[97] were published, both calling for a strong emphasis on conflict prevention and addressing root causes of conflict. While recognising the efforts at the national, regional and international level, numerous criticisms are levelled at the ineffectiveness of current strategies. Indeed, it is state that "*at the 2005 World Summit, and on many other occasions, Member States have stressed the need for a "culture of prevention". That culture has yet to materialize: recommendations and resolutions have largely gone unimplemented. [...] Together with regional organizations and existing groupings of Member [...] the United Nations should build a broad-based coalition, an international prevention forum, to identify and mobilize innovative approaches and capacities for preventing emerging conflicts*"[98].

Building on these 2015 reports, the General Assembly and Security Council articulated a conceptual vision and operational guidance for member states and the United Nations system. This was done mainly through UN twin resolutions on sustaining peace, A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282, which both reaffirm in their preamble paragraphs "*the primary responsibility of national Governments and authorities in identifying, driving and directing priorities, strategies and activities for sustaining peace*" [99] and, therefore, for prevention. For instance, the Security Council Resolution 2282 (2016) emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach to sustaining peace, particularly through the prevention of conflict and addressing its root causes. The importance of strengthening the rule of law at the international and national levels, and promoting sustained and sustainable economic growth, poverty eradication, social

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[95] United Nations Security Council. (2014). S/RES/2150

[96] United Nations. (2015). The challenge of sustaining peace. Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations Peacebuilding architecture.

[97] United Nations. (2015). Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership, and people. A/70/95-S/2015/446

[98] Ivi, paras.64,67

[99] United Nations. (2016). A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282

development, sustainable development, national reconciliation, and unity is underlined, including through inclusive dialogue and mediation, access to justice, accountability, good governance, democracy, accountable institutions, gender equality and respect for, and protection of, human rights and fundamental freedoms[100]. Moreover, the central role of the Peacebuilding Commission and of the Human Rights Council in advising, directing, and supporting the UN's efforts to prevent conflict and sustain peace.is stressed.

The concept of sustaining peace, endorsed by the GA and the Security Council in their twin resolutions, has become central to the new Secretary-General António Guterres' efforts on the subject. For instance, immediately after assuming Office in 2017, he declared that prevention "is not merely a priority, but the priority"[101] and that his aim would be to build an effective prevention agenda at the UN. Guterres' ideas on the subject have always been clear. Indeed, even before becoming Secretary-General, he had already emphasized the centrality of prevention in his Vision Statement[102] published in 2016, promising to transform the well-known "culture of prevention" from an ideal into a reality. Some years later, Guterres published a report on peacebuilding and sustaining peace[103] which contains some important statements. For instance, he declared that preventing crises lies "at the very heart of efforts to sustain peace"[104] and that "prevention of conflict alone saves up to $70 billion per year for the affected country and the international community combined"[105]. Most importantly, he emphasized the importance of human rights, welcoming the efforts of the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms[106].

To conclude, through various initiatives and resolutions the UN has institutionalized conflict prevention as a core element of its mandate. The evolution of the United Nation' conflict prevention strategies reflect a dynamic adaptation to the changing nature of global conflicts and the complexities of modern warfare. Initially, the UN's approach to conflict prevention was largely reactive, focused on peacekeeping operations to manage and mitigate conflicts

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[100] Ibidem
[101] Guterres A. (2017). Remarks to the Security Council Open Debate on "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace".
[102] Guterres, A. (2016). Challenges and Opportunities for the United Nations, "We the peoples". Available at: https://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2016/01/4-April_Secretary-General-Election-Vision-Statement_Portugal-4-April-20161.pdf
[103] United Nations. (2019). Peacebuilding and sustaining peace, Report of the Secretary-General. A/73/890-S/2019/448
[104] Ivi, para.8
[105] Ibidem
[106] Ivi, para.24

after they had erupted. The end of the Cold War marked a significant shift, enabling the UN to adopt more proactive and preventive measures. Overall, in the UN system the idea of the need for a multidimensional approach to conflict prevention has developed, aimed at not only address the root causes of the crisis, but also requiring a long-term strategy and ultimately an investment in sustainable development. On the latter, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes the claim of a link between the SDGs and systemic prevention, stressing the urgency for investment in inclusive and sustainable development. In conclusion, the United Nations has increasingly emphasized the importance of conflict prevention over the years, recognizing that proactive measures are crucial for maintaining global peace and security. By integrating early warning systems, preventive diplomacy, mediation and sustainable development, the UN aims to prevent conflicts before they erupt, demonstrating a long-term dedication to building resilient and peaceful societies worldwide.

2.2 Overcoming institutional challenges: blurred boundaries, lack of consensus and mandate issues

The concept of conflict prevention, while broadly supported in theory, elicits significant concern among UN member states. Therefore, the member states' perspective on its practical implementation varies significantly. Indeed, several states oppose or resist aspects of the UN's conflict prevention strategy due to a combination of political, economic, and sovereignty-related reasons. Examples include the intervention during the Syrian civil war, when both Russia and China used their veto power to repeatedly block resolutions at the Security Council because, they argued, these constituted interference in Syria's internal affairs and concealed a desire for forced regime change. Or even when the government of Myanmar rejected UN reports and resolutions condemning the treatment of the Rohingya minority, calling them biased and a violation of its sovereignty, or when Saudi Arabia lashed out at UN criticism and calls for a ceasefire in the Yemen conflict, arguing that its military actions are justified and that the UN approach does not adequately address the threat posed by the Houthi rebels. Despite its numerous efforts and initiatives, it is clear that the UN faces significant challenges in effectively preventing conflicts.

A recurring theme among these concerns is the fear that prevention measures could be used as a pretext for infringing upon national sovereignty and interfere. This concern is particularly pronounced in countries with a history of colonialism or foreign intervention, where there is a

deep-seated wariness of external involvement. Governments often argue that interventions labeled as preventive measures can undermine their authority and autonomy, questioning the legitimacy and neutrality of the UN's actions. Given that contemporary conflicts often have internal components, member states worry that the international community could gain excessive influence over their internal governance and institutional structures. This concern is deeply rooted in the principle of non-interference, where states insist that external entities should not meddle in domestic matters. They stress that any preventive efforts should involve national governments and be aligned with local contexts and priorities, ensuring that sovereignty and self-determination are respected.

One of the most acute concerns is that armed interventions might be justified under the guise of conflict prevention. In this case, the intervention, which began as a preventive measure, evolved into a full-scale military operation, raising alarms among other states about similar future occurrences. The fear is that the UN Security Council might invoke Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows for enforcement measures, including the use of force, in situations deemed a threat to international peace and security. This possibility is particularly contentious given widespread criticism of the Security Council's representativeness, where the permanent members wield significant power through their veto rights.

The doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P)[107] is also frequently cited in this context. While R2P aims to prevent mass atrocities, some member states view it as a form of interventionism that could be misused to justify unwanted interference. There is a prevailing sentiment that foreign interventions, whether multilateral or unilateral, can exacerbate instability rather than mitigate it, leading to further violence and chaos.

Furthermore, there is apprehension that the conflict prevention agenda could be exploited to impose external visions of governance and development that may not align with national priorities. Indeed, powerful states or coalitions dictate terms to less powerful nations under the auspices of prevention. This concern is amplified by perceived deficiencies in the transparency and inclusiveness of UN mechanisms, particularly regarding early warning systems and the legitimacy of actions derived from them.

Several member states argue that the UN's prevention strategies do not always support national priorities. Instead of strengthening existing institutions, these strategies are sometimes

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[107] The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is a global political commitment adopted to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. The concept of R2P was formally introduced in the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in December 2001. It was later endorsed by all member states at the 2005 World Summit in the Outcome Document, specifically in paragraphs 138-140.

viewed as intrusive, aiming to restructure or replace local governance frameworks. Several member states also expressed concerns that the prevention agenda will be used as an excuse to interfere in their domestic affairs and impose a vision of prevention that is not necessarily in line with their national efforts. This can lead to tensions between the UN and national governments, especially when local authorities feel that their relationships with civil society are being scrutinized or undermined. For example, during the negotiations for the Agenda 2030, there was notable resistance to incorporating references to Security Council resolution 2171 (2014)[108], which outlines the Council's preventive role. Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries[109], in particular, were wary that this resolution could serve as a new form of R2P, disguised under a different nomenclature.

Among the concerns raised by member states regarding the UN's conflict prevention efforts is the perception of bias and selective application. Certain conflicts appear to receive disproportionate attention and resources, while others are neglected. This perceived inequality has led some states to believe that the UN's strategies do not treat all member states equitably, fostering fears of being unfairly targeted or marginalized. Therefore, a significant worry is that the focus on conflict prevention will be biased, predominantly targeting the poorest and most fragile countries, while wealthier or more stable nations are not compelled to address potential fault lines within their own societies. This selective approach could inadvertently stigmatize vulnerable states and overlook the latent issues in more developed countries.

Member states also highlight a substantial knowledge gap between the resolutions adopted at the UN and their implementation on the ground. There is a call for clearer understanding and evidence of what effective conflict prevention entails in practice. The lack of conceptual clarity surrounding "prevention" within the UN has heightened sensitivities and generated a wide range of concerns. Member states agree that more effort should be directed toward preventing violent conflicts, but the ambiguity of the term within UN parlance complicates these efforts.

Another critical issue is the call for greater accountability and transparency in the UN's conflict prevention operations. The decision-making processes are often slow and cumbersome, involving multiple layers of approval and extensive consultations. This can delay

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[108] United Nations Security Council. (2014). Resolution S/RES/2171
[109] The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is a group of states that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc. As of 2024, the NAM comprises 120 member states, 18 observer countries and 10 observer organizations.

the implementation of preventive measures and reduce their effectiveness. The stringent financial regulations and administrative procedures also contribute to inefficiencies. Effective coordination and communication are crucial for the success of conflict prevention initiatives. However, the UN often struggles with these aspects due to its decentralized structure and the autonomy of its various entities. Furthermore, the lack of transparency fuels distrust and skepticism about the efficacy and intentions behind the UN's preventive measures. Understanding conflict prevention in the context of multilateralism presents additional challenges, particularly when information flows are unclear, or access to relevant documents and country discussions is restricted. For instance, when prevention is deliberated within the Security Council, non-member states do not have access to all the pertinent documents. Beyond Secretary-General reports on peacekeeping missions, there are few available documents that elucidate country-level prevention initiatives for member states. This opacity undermines trust and exacerbates concerns about the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the UN's preventive actions. Consequently, several member states have pointed out that improving the transparency of Secretariat initiatives would significantly enhance confidence in the system. By ensuring that all member states have access to comprehensive information and a clear understanding of preventive measures, the UN can foster a more cooperative and trusting environment.

Political and strategic interests are equally pivotal in shaping member states' stances on conflict prevention. Many states prioritize their national interests over collective security, leading to a lack of support for UN initiatives. This is evident in the varying levels of contributions to peacekeeping missions and the reluctance of some countries to engage in preventive diplomacy. For instance, while some member states are proactive in supporting UN peace operations through troop contributions and financial support, others remain hesitant or withdraw their support due to domestic political considerations or shifts in foreign policy priorities. If a conflict prevention measure threatens the geopolitical or economic interests of a powerful state, it is likely to encounter opposition. For instance, major powers like the United States, China, and Russia have, at various times, blocked UN interventions that conflicted with their strategic interests or those of their allies. This opposition is often rooted in a desire to maintain regional influence or to protect economic investments in certain countries. Moreover, international alliances and rivalries play a crucial role. States may resist UN interventions in nations with which they have substantial political and economic ties, aiming to shield their allies from external influence. Conversely, they might obstruct measures that could fortify their geopolitical adversaries, using their influence to manipulate the UN's agenda to align with their national interests. One of the most significant political challenges is the veto power held by the

five permanent members (P5) of the UNSC: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China. This power enables any of these countries to block substantive resolutions, regardless of the majority support among other Council members. The use of the veto has often led to deadlocks, preventing the UN from taking timely and necessary actions in conflict situations. The veto power reflects the geopolitical interests of the P5, which do not always align with the collective interest of maintaining international peace and security. This divergence can lead to selective interventionism, where the UN acts decisively in some conflicts while remaining inactive in others. The inconsistency undermines the credibility of the UN and its ability to function as an impartial arbiter in conflict prevention.

Another significant concern among several member states regarding the UN's conflict prevention efforts is the financial burden these measures entail. States often conduct comprehensive cost-benefit analyses to evaluate the practicality of such initiatives. They may oppose conflict prevention strategies perceived as financially onerous, particularly if the anticipated benefits do not justify the high costs. The economic constraints are especially pronounced for developing countries, which may lack the fiscal capacity to divert resources from pressing domestic needs to fund international preventive measures. Thus, these financial reservations can lead to resistance against extensive and costly UN initiatives. For instance, the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), which is essential for supporting post-conflict recovery and preventing the recurrence of violence, frequently struggles to secure the necessary resources. The reliance on voluntary contributions for many of its initiatives leads to uncertainty and instability in funding, making long-term planning and sustained implementation of preventive measures difficult.

Ideological differences further complicate the consensus on conflict prevention strategies. Member states with varying political ideologies or governance systems frequently disagree on the principles and approaches endorsed by the UN. For instance, countries like China and Russia have historically been wary of UN initiatives that they view as promoting Western liberal democratic values, which they argue could destabilize their political systems. These ideological divides lead to divergent views on the legitimacy and appropriateness of different conflict prevention strategies, creating a significant layer of resistance.

Notwithstanding, there exists some common ground. At the UN, prevention strategies that are consensual and nationally led tend to garner the broadest and deepest support. Approaches that emphasize capacity building over shaming countries or direct interference are more likely to be accepted, as they are perceived to enhance rather than diminish sovereignty.

Furthermore, there is a widespread recognition among member states of the need for more platforms to discuss prevention collectively and to increase technical expertise. There is a call for more evidence-based policy research, training sessions, and field trips on prevention to be made available to policymakers. This would equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively engage in preventive measures.

Additionally, enhancing transparency in these areas would foster better collaboration between governments and the UN, and help build mutual trust. Transparency not only ensures accountability but also promotes the sharing of best practices and lessons learned, which are crucial for effective conflict prevention.

To conclude, the discourse on prevention should be universally applied to all member states, recognizing that no society is immune to conflict. Every country should continuously strive to build peaceful societies. Prevention should be seen as a universal goal, not only for weaker states or recipients of donor assistance. Inviting wealthier countries to discuss their vulnerabilities and methods of addressing them, such as tackling inequalities, improving policing, addressing grievances, and supporting youth development, can help normalize prevention and reduce stigma. This inclusive approach would encourage all countries to participate actively in conflict prevention efforts, thereby promoting a more stable and peaceful international community.

In summary, while there are challenges and differing views among member states regarding the implementation of the UN's conflict prevention strategy, there are also significant opportunities for collaboration and progress.

2.3 Partnerships to meet the challenges of prevention: focus on Africa

Prevention of violent conflict is fundamentally a nationally driven process which requires the active engagement and leadership of national governments. For instance, national actors possess the necessary knowledge of local dynamics, cultural nuances, and historical contexts that shape conflicts, enabling them to implement tailored and sustainable solutions. This national ownership ensures that preventive measures are not only contextually relevant but also have the political legitimacy and support needed for successful implementation. International organizations, including the United Nations, play a crucial supporting role by providing technical assistance, capacity-building, and resources. However, their efforts are most effective when they align with and reinforce national strategies and priorities.

The United Nations' twin resolutions on sustaining peace, adopted by the General Assembly (A/RES/70/262) and the Security Council (S/RES/2282) in 2016[110], underscore the centrality of nationally driven efforts in the prevention of violent conflict. These resolutions highlight the importance of a nationally owned approach to sustaining peace, emphasizing that national governments bear the primary responsibility for identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict within their territories. The resolutions advocate for inclusive, nationally led processes that involve all segments of society, including civil society organizations, women, and youth, in peacebuilding efforts. By affirming the need for national ownership, the UN acknowledges that sustainable peace cannot be imposed from the outside but must be cultivated from within through robust institutions, good governance, and socio-economic development.

Notwithstanding, partnerships between regional and sub-regional 1organizations and the United Nations are fundamental in the contemporary landscape of international peace and security. These collaborations are grounded in the recognition that global challenges, particularly those related to violent conflicts, are often best addressed through multilateral efforts that leverage both global reach and regional expertise. Regional organizations, with their intimate knowledge of local dynamics, cultural contexts, and geopolitical nuances, are indispensable in crafting tailored and effective solutions. Therefore, partnerships enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of conflict prevention and resolution efforts, ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive, contextually appropriate, and more rapidly deployed.

The UN has increasingly promoted this cooperative approach, particularly in response to complex and multifaceted conflicts where regional insights and involvement are crucial. In the African context, partnerships between regional and sub-regional organizations and the United Nations are particularly crucial and beneficial due to the continent's unique and complex security challenges. Africa faces a multitude of interconnected conflicts, ranging from ethnic and political violence to transnational threats such as terrorism and organized crime. Regional organizations like the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) possess deep-rooted understanding and contextual knowledge that are essential for addressing these issues effectively. These organizations can provide culturally sensitive approaches and immediate responses to emerging crises, which are often beyond the capacity of external actors. Moreover, the collaborative efforts enhance the legitimacy and acceptance of interventions among local

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[110] United Nations. (2016). A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282

populations, fostering trust and cooperation. By pooling resources, expertise, and operational capabilities, these partnerships enable more comprehensive and sustained peacebuilding initiatives. The UN's support, in terms of logistics, funding, and international legitimacy, combined with the regional bodies' local insights and on-the-ground presence, creates a synergistic effect that significantly improves the prospects for lasting peace and stability across the continent.

After the ratification of the Ten-Year Capacity-Building Programme for the Africa Union in 2006[111], the Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security, signed in April 2017, represented a pivotal development in the strategic collaboration between the two Organizations in addressing the multifaceted peace and security challenges across the African continent[112]. This framework is designed to formalize and strengthen the cooperative mechanisms between the two organizations, leveraging their respective strengths, resources, and mandates to more effectively prevent conflicts, manage crises, and support post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts. Historically, the UN and AU have engaged in numerous joint missions and operations, but these efforts often highlighted the need for a more structured and strategic partnership to enhance the effectiveness and coherence of their collaborative peace and security initiatives. The 2017 framework was conceived to address this necessity, building on prior cooperation agreements and operational experiences to create a more integrated and synergistic approach[113]. The Joint UN-AU Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security is underpinned by several core objectives and guiding principles. Firstly, it seeks to enhance coordination and collaboration mechanisms between the UN and AU, ensuring that their respective efforts in peace and security are complementary and mutually reinforcing[114]. This involves joint planning, decision-making, and implementation processes, facilitated by regular consultations and strategic dialogues. Secondly, the framework aims to build the capacity of the AU to independently manage peace and security challenges. This includes providing technical assistance, training, and resources to strengthen the AU's institutional and operational capabilities, thereby enabling it to take a leading role in regional peace initiatives[115]. Another key principle of the framework is the respect for sovereignty and

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[111] Annan K.A. (2006). Letter dated 11 December 2006 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly. A/61/630
[112] United Nations – African Union. (2017). Joint United Nations – African Union Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security. Annual Conference in New York, 19 April 2017. Available at https://papsrepository.africa-union.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/405/AU-UN_joint_framework.2017_en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
[113] Ibidem
[114] Ivi, para.2
[115] Ivi, para.3,4

the promotion of local ownership in peace processes, which aligns with the broader UN philosophy articulated in its twin resolutions on sustaining peace. One significant aspect of the framework is its emphasis on the inclusion of civil society in peace and security initiatives[116]. Recognizing the crucial role that it plays in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding efforts, the UN and AU have organized several initiatives to ensure civil society active involvement, ensuring that peace processes are inclusive, representative, and grounded in the needs and aspirations of local communities. For instance, the AU's "Silencing the Guns by 2020"[117] initiative actively involved civil society by addressing the root causes of conflicts through consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, including youth groups, women's organizations, and other actors. These consultations ensured that diverse perspectives were considered in formulating strategies to prevent and resolve conflicts. Additionally, regular consultative meetings between the UN, AU, and civil society organizations have been institutionalized to ensure continuous dialogue and cooperation, providing a platform for representatives of the civil society to share insights, raise concerns, and contribute to policy discussions on peace and security. Indeed, the Joint Mediation Support Team (JMST), combining the mediation efforts of the UN and AU, often includes civil society representatives in their mediation processes, ensuring that peace negotiations are more inclusive and consider the voices of those directly affected by conflicts. Since its implementation, the Joint UN-AU Framework has led to notable achievements and positive impacts on peace and security in Africa. Enhanced coordination has resulted in more effective and timely responses to conflicts, while the framework's emphasis on local ownership and context-specific solutions has increased the legitimacy and sustainability of peace initiatives. The capacity-building efforts have also strengthened the AU's ability to conduct independent peace operations, thereby reducing the burden on the UN and fostering a more balanced and equitable partnership. However, the framework faces several challenges that need to be addressed to maximize its effectiveness. These include bureaucratic hurdles, funding constraints, and the inherent complexity of coordinating efforts between two large and diverse organizations.

More recently, the Secretary-General' report S/2023/629, titled "Strengthening the partnership between the United Nations and the African Union on issues of peace and security

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[116] Ibidem

[117] African Union. (2014). Silencing the guns, owning the future: realizing a conflict-free Africa. Available at https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/arusha-au-high-level-retreat-report-web.pdf

in Africa, including the work of the United Nations Office to the African Union"[118], submitted pursuant to the statement by the President of the Security Council on 16 December 2014[119], provides an update on the UN-AU partnership on peace and security in Africa. It outlines the peace and security landscape across the continent, addressing key issues that impact the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa, including post-COVID-19 recovery, climate change, and governance challenges. The report includes an update on activities by the United Nations Office to the African Union[120] and other UN system actions in partnership with the African Union, following previous resolutions and statements. Moreover, the report emphasizes the role of joint peacekeeping missions and support operations, such as the collaboration in the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region[121], the UN support to the ongoing activities of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)[122] and the partnership in South Sudan between the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), IGAD, the African Union Mission in South Sudan and the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission[123].

The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2719[124] on December 2023 marks a significant advancement in the UN-AU partnership in peace and security. This resolution establishes a framework for financing African Union peace support operations (PSOs), addressing the long-standing need for sustainable, predictable, and adequate funding for these missions. This initiative is crucial given the decline in traditional UN peacekeeping and the increasing reliance on African-led missions to address the continent's conflicts. Although these missions have achieved some success, they often lack the comprehensive resources, expeditionary capabilities, and civilian infrastructure characteristic of UN operations. UNSCR 2719 seeks to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of African-led PSOs by allowing them to access UN funding. The framework specifies that the UN can cover up to 75% of the annual budget for these missions[125], while the remaining 25% must be jointly raised by the UN and AU from other sources. One of the critical elements of this framework is

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[118] United Nations. (2023). Report of the Secretary-General on Strengthening the partnership between the United Nations and the African Union on issues of peace and security in Africa, including the work of the United Nations Office to the African Union (S/2023/629).
[119] Security Council. (2014). Statement by the President of the Security Council. S/PRST/2014/27
[120] The United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU), established by the UN General Assembly Resolution 64/288 on 1 July 2010, is mandated to enhance the partnership between the United Nations and the African Union in the field of peace and security.
[121] Ivi, para.31.
[122] Ivi, para.34.
[123] Ivi, para.35.
[124] Security Council. (2023). S/RES/2719
[125] Ivi, para.6

the requirement for explicit Security Council authorization for any mission to receive UN funding. This means that each mission's mandate and strategy must be approved on a case-by-case basis[126], ensuring that only operations directly led and operated by the AU are eligible. This stipulation leaves many regional bloc-led operations without access to UN funding, which could potentially limit the overall impact of this resolution. In addition, other expressed concerns relate to the possible funding gap concerning 25% and the AU's financial transparency and compliance with international law. Despite these constraints, the resolution addresses a significant demand from the AU for reliable and sufficient funding, providing access to a substantial pool of financial resources that many African operations have historically lacked. However, several key criteria will influence the effective implementation of UNSCR 2719, including host government consent, the integration of peace operations with political processes, regional consensus, and popular support. In this regard, host government consent is essential to ensure the safety and effectiveness of peacekeepers, while aligning operations with political agreements enhances their legitimacy and impact. Regional consensus and popular support are also crucial for the success and sustainability of these missions.

In conclusion, the partnership between the United Nations and the African Union (*figure 3*) is crucial for addressing the complex peace and security challenges faced by the African continent. This cooperation is exemplified through various consultative mechanisms that focus on early warning, conflict prevention, and mediation. Since 2007, annual joint consultative meetings between the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council have been instrumental in fostering dialogue and coordinating international peace and security efforts, particularly in Africa. These high-level interactions, facilitated by the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), enable the alignment of strategic goals and the exchange of best practices. Moreover, ongoing collaborations at both senior and working levels between the DPPA, the Department of Peace Operations (DPO), and the Department of Operational Support (DOS) and their AU counterparts have significantly enhanced the capacity to manage conflicts. The UN's technical assistance in areas such as elections, gender equality, human rights compliance, and mine action, as well as support for the AU Peace Fund and the AU Initiative on Silencing the Guns, underscores the depth of this partnership. Ultimately, the strategic engagement between the UN and AU demonstrates a shared commitment to enhancing peace and security in Africa. By leveraging their combined strengths, these

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[126] Ivi, para.2

organizations have made significant strides in conflict prevention and resolution. However, challenges such as funding constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the need for stronger political commitment remain. Continued collaboration is essential to overcoming these obstacles and achieving lasting peace and development across the continent.
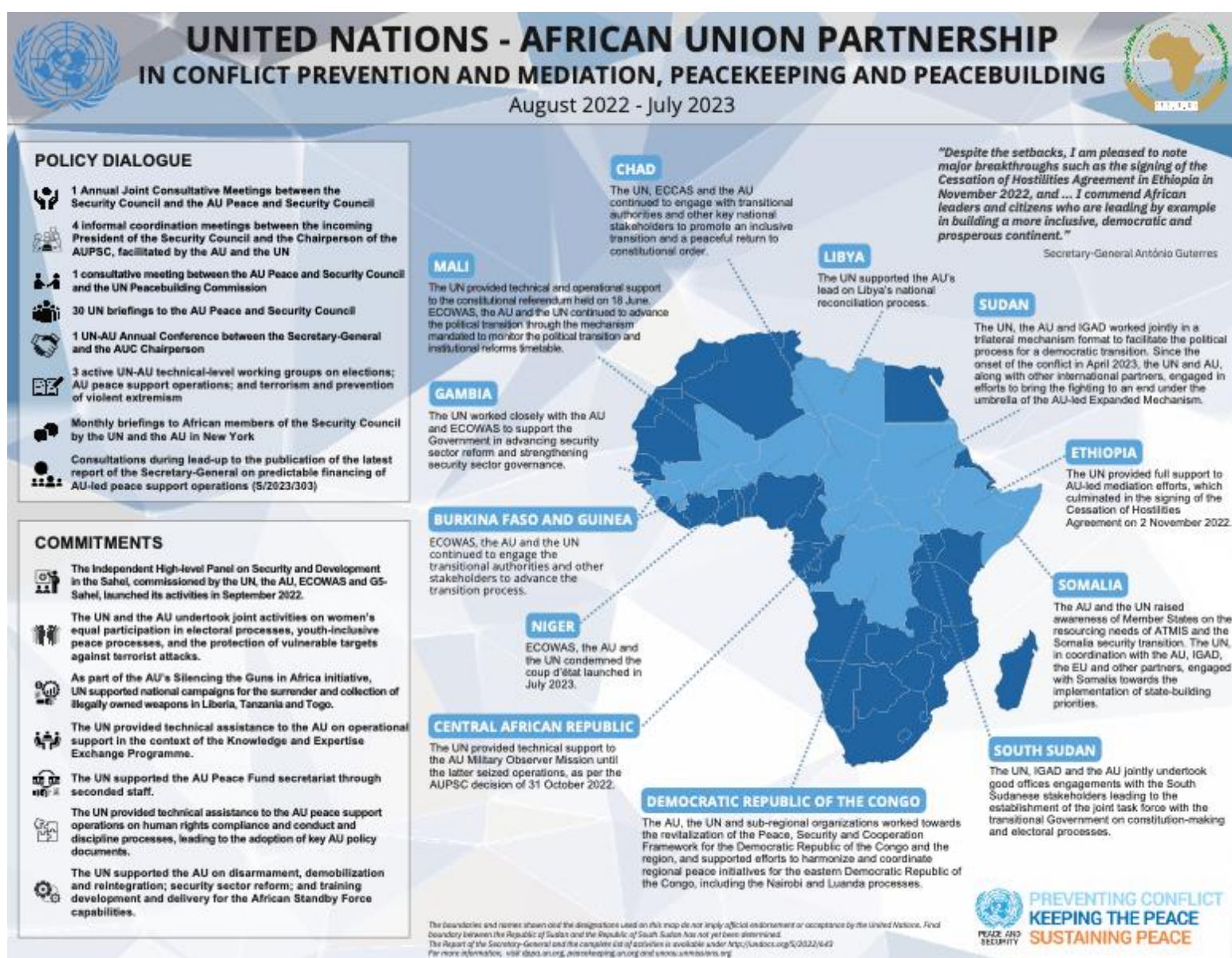

Figure 3. Highlights AU-UN Partnership.

Within this framework also lies the collaboration between the United Nations and the European Union in the context of preventing armed conflicts and crises on the African continent. Indeed, the UN and the EU have collaborated on various initiatives and missions across Africa, addressing a wide range of issues from peacekeeping and security to development and humanitarian assistance.

Not only do several European countries contribute through troops, personnel and financial aid to UN peacekeeping missions and other initiatives aimed at stabilizing African regions, but also, the European Union has launched its own missions that complement and enhance the UN efforts on the continent. These EU missions focus on areas such as security, training, capacity building, and stabilization, and they often operate in tandem with UN initiatives to address complex and multifaceted challenges in conflict-prone regions. The resulting alignment of their efforts not only amplifies their impact but also ensures a more holistic approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

As of today, there are 24 ongoing EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations[127], of which 16 are in Africa (*figure 4*). These operations aim at addressing security threats and promoting stability, rule of law and governance in the region, complementing the work of local authorities and international partners. Their scope is broad, ranging from military training, as in the cases of the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and of the EU Military Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA), to civilian crisis management and support to internal security forces, as for the EU Capacity Building Mission in Somalia (EUCAP Somalia), and to maritime security, as the EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Operation Atalanta.

In conclusion, the European Union's missions play a vital role in complementing the efforts of the United Nations in Africa. By providing essential training, capacity-building, and operational support to local security forces, the EU enhances the ability of African nations to address and mitigate security threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and piracy. This collaborative approach ensures a more comprehensive and coordinated response to the continent's complex challenges. The synergy between the EU and UN not only amplifies their collective impact but also fosters a more stable and secure environment, paving the way for sustainable development and governance reforms across Africa.

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[127] For more information, see https://www.esteri.it/en/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/politica_europea/dimensione-esterna/sicurezza_comune/
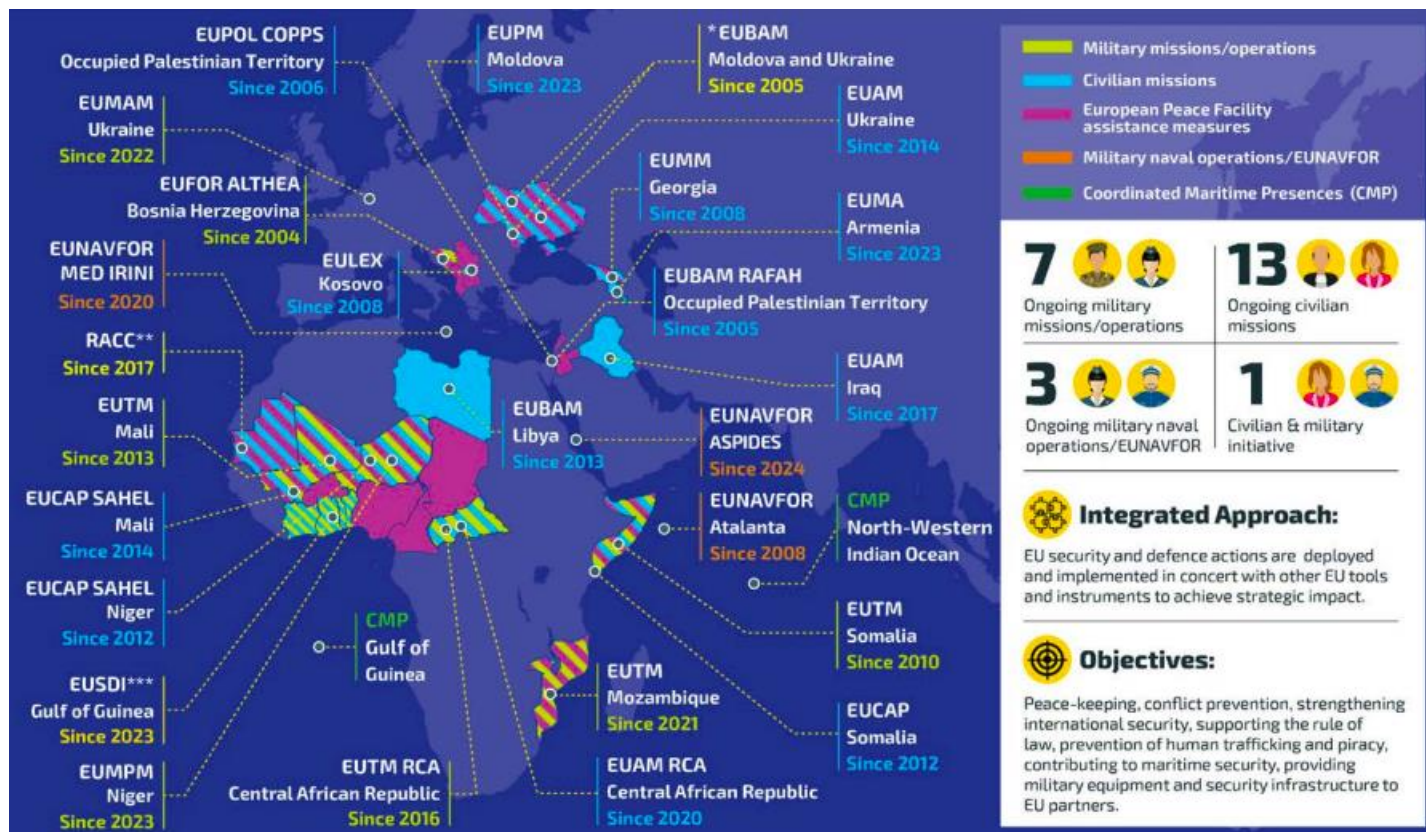
Figure 4. EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations

CHAPTER 3 - EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS: EVALUATING UN INTERVENTION IN THE PREVENTION OF CONFLICTS

3.1 Case-study Rationale: Understanding Conflict Dynamics in Africa

The selection of Western Sahara, the Abyei region, and Mali as case studies in this thesis is based on their unique and diverse conflict dynamics, which together provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the effectiveness of United Nations conflict prevention and peacekeeping strategies in Africa. Each of these regions presents distinct challenges and opportunities that illustrate the complexities of implementing UN interventions in varied geopolitical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts.

Western Sahara represents one of the most protracted and intractable territorial disputes in the world. The conflict, which has persisted for over four decades, involves the contested sovereignty between Morocco and the Polisario Front, a Sahrawi nationalist movement seeking independence for Western Sahara. This dispute has resulted in a prolonged humanitarian crisis, with thousands of Sahrawis living in refugee camps in neighboring Algeria, and a frozen conflict that has eluded resolution despite numerous diplomatic efforts. This case study is particularly significant because it highlights the limitations of UN peacekeeping and mediation efforts in situations where core issues such as sovereignty and self-determination are contested and where there is a lack of political will among the involved parties to compromise. Furthermore, Western Sahara exemplifies the challenges of dealing with a conflict that is deeply entrenched in the geopolitics of the region, involving not only Morocco and the Polisario Front but also Algeria and other international actors. The role of external powers and the broader geopolitical implications make Western Sahara a critical case for understanding the difficulties the UN faces in maintaining neutrality, enforcing international law, and pushing for a peaceful resolution in a highly polarized environment.

The Abyei region, situated on the border between Sudan and South Sudan, is emblematic of the complex interplay between ethnic tensions, resource competition, and national sovereignty. Abyei is a small but strategically significant area, rich in oil resources, and claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan. The region's status was left unresolved during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that led to South Sudan's independence in 2011, leading to continued disputes over its control. The conflict in Abyei is driven by a combination of ethnic rivalries,

particularly between the Ngok Dinka, who are aligned with South Sudan, and the Misseriya, a nomadic group with ties to Sudan, and competition over the region's valuable oil resources. The UN's involvement, particularly through the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), has been crucial in preventing large-scale violence and maintaining a fragile peace. However, the situation remains volatile, with periodic flare-ups of violence and ongoing tensions over the administration and future status of the region. This case was selected because it provides insight into the challenges the UN faces in conflict prevention where ethnic identities and resource control are deeply intertwined. Abyei also serves as an example of how UN peacekeeping missions operate in areas where the sovereignty of the territory is disputed, and how they can help to stabilize regions during sensitive post-conflict transitions, such as those experienced by Sudan and South Sudan.

Mali presents a particularly complex and challenging case, as it involves a mix of internal political instability, ethnic conflicts, and the growing threat of terrorism. The crisis in Mali escalated dramatically in 2012 when Tuareg rebels, exploiting the aftermath of a military coup, declared independence for the northern region of the country, known as Azawad. This rebellion was quickly hijacked by Islamist militant groups leading to a complex insurgency that threatened the entire region's stability. The UN responded with the establishment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), tasked with supporting the Malian government's efforts to restore territorial integrity, stabilize the country, and implement a peace process. Mali was chosen as a case study because it exemplifies the intersection of local grievances, ethnic tensions, and global terrorism, making it a critical case for understanding the limits of traditional peacekeeping in the face of new forms of conflict. Additionally, the recent request by the Malian government for the withdrawal of MINUSMA highlights the delicate balance between respecting state sovereignty and fulfilling the UN's mandate to maintain peace and security. This development raises important questions about the future role of the UN in similar contexts where host governments may resist international interventions, reflecting broader challenges in adapting UN peacekeeping missions to contemporary conflict environments.

The selection of Western Sahara, the Abyei region, and Mali as case studies is intended to provide a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the UN's conflict prevention strategies across different types of conflicts. Each case represents a distinct category of conflict (territorial disputes, ethnic-resource based conflicts, and insurgencies involving terrorism)

which allows for a broad examination of how the UN's strategies are applied in varying contexts. This diversity is crucial for understanding the generalizability of the UN's approaches and for identifying specific challenges and best practices that can inform future interventions. Moreover, these cases collectively illustrate the importance of regional dynamics, the involvement of non-state actors, and the impact of international geopolitics on the success or failure of UN missions. By comparing these diverse cases, this thesis seeks to draw broader conclusions about the effectiveness of the UN's peacekeeping and conflict prevention efforts in Africa, offering insights into how these strategies can be improved and better adapted to the changing nature of global conflicts.

3.2 Case-study 1: Western Sahara

The Western Sahara conflict represents one of the longest-running and most complex territorial disputes in the world. Situated on the northwest coast of Africa, the region has been the subject of contention between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), led by the Polisario Front, since the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1975. This protracted struggle encompasses issues of national identity, self-determination, and regional stability, with significant implications for international law and geopolitics. The unresolved status of Western Sahara has led to prolonged humanitarian challenges and a stalemate that continues to impact North African politics and the broader international community. This analysis seeks to unravel the historical roots, key actors, and contemporary dynamics of the Western Sahara conflict, providing a nuanced understanding of its enduring complexities and the prospects for a peaceful resolution.

Western Sahara, or former Spanish Sahara, located on the northwest coast of Africa, is characterized by its arid desert landscape and strategic geopolitical significance. Spanning approximately 266,000 square kilometers, the territory is bordered by Morocco to the north, Algeria to the northeast, Mauritania to the east and south, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The region is predominantly composed of desert terrain and is characterized by an harsh Saharan climate, with extremely high temperatures during the day, plunging temperatures at night, and minimal annual rainfall. Despite the challenging environment, the territory is rich in natural resources, including significant phosphate deposits and potential offshore oil reserves. These resources have been a focal point in the territorial dispute, contributing to the economic stakes involved.

Western Sahara presents a classic example of how conflicts can remain in a latent stage for extended periods, with occasional escalations that bring the conflict into a manifest stage. According to Galtung's Conflict Triangle, the Western Sahara conflict can be analyzed through its three components: contradictions (the incompatible goals of Morocco and the Polisario Front regarding sovereignty and self-determination), attitudes (mutual distrust and nationalistic fervor), and behaviors (sporadic violence and diplomatic standoffs). The conflict's persistence in a latent stage, characterized by occasional flare-ups and a protracted stalemate, highlights the challenges of achieving a sustainable resolution through UN-led interventions like MINURSO. This case underscores the importance of addressing underlying contradictions and shifting attitudes to prevent the conflict from escalating into more severe violence. In the context of Lund's Conflict Cycle, Western Sahara predominantly oscillates between the stages of Unstable Peace and Crisis, with periodic threats of escalation to open conflict. The inability to move beyond this cycle illustrates the limitations of current peacekeeping efforts and the need for more innovative conflict prevention strategies that can break this deadlock.

The origins of the conflict between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front in Western Sahara can be traced back to the end of Spanish colonial rule. The Polisario Front, officially known as the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro*, was founded on May 10, 1973, with the aim of achieving Sahrawi independence from Spain. Following Morocco's independence from France in 1956, the Istiqlal Party, which had spearheaded Moroccan nationalism, claimed that "Greater Morocco" historically included not only Western Sahara, but also parts of Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali[128].

On December 13, 1974, the United Nations General Assembly asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to provide an advisory opinion on whether the Western Sahara was, at the time of colonization by Spain, *terra nullis* (land belonging to no one) and, if not, what the legal ties were between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and Mauritania[129]. On October 16, 1975, the ICJ concluded that there was no evidence of territorial sovereignty ties between Western Sahara and either Morocco or Mauritania. However, the court recognized that there were "indications of a legal tie of allegiance between the Moroccan sultan and some of the tribes in the territory". Despite the ICJ's emphasis on the principle of self-determination,

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[128] Damis, J. (1983) "The Western Sahara Conflict: Myths and Realities," The Middle East Journal, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 173-174.
[129] International Court of Justice (1975). Western Sahara: Advisory Opinion of 16 October 1975.

King Hassan II of Morocco interpreted the ruling as validating Morocco's claims. Consequently, he launched what has come to be known as the "Green March", in which about 350,000 Moroccan civilians marched across the border into the Western Sahara. The United Nations Security Council and General Assembly condemned the Green March and called for the withdrawal of participants[130]. Nonetheless, on October 31, 1975, more Moroccan forces entered the territory, sparking armed conflict between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces. Two months later, Mauritania joined the conflict on the side of Morocco[131].

On November 14, 1975, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania signed the secret "Madrid Accords", under which Spain agreed to cede administrative control of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania after its official withdrawal on February 27, 1976. The territory was divided between Morocco and Mauritania, while the Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and began a military campaign against what it saw as occupying forces. Engaging in guerrilla warfare, the Polisario Front eventually forced Mauritania to withdraw from the region in 1979 after suffering military defeats[132]. Consequently, Mauritania renounced its territorial claims, leaving Morocco in control. On the other side, after the Spanish withdrawal, the Polisario Front proclaimed the independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Algeria became a major supporter of the SADR and the Polisario Front, providing financial, military, diplomatic, and humanitarian aid[133]. From 1973 to the early 1980s, Libya also offered significant support to the Polisario[134].

Between 1980 and 1987, Morocco built a series of defensive sand walls, known as the "berm". These heavily mined and fortified barriers, equipped with barbed wire, observation posts, and advanced early warning systems, effectively left 80% of Western Sahara under Moroccan control and confined the Polisario Front to the remaining 20%. These barriers also served to protect the major population centers and the territory's valuable phosphate deposits.

This shift paved the way for the United Nations to take a more active role in seeking a resolution. In September 1988, after adopting several resolutions on the matter, the UN proposed the "Settlement Plan", which included a cease-fire and the establishment of a buffer

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[130] United Nations Security Council, "Situation Concerning Western Sahara," (New York: United Nations, 1975), S/RES/380, and United Nations General Assembly, "Question of Spanish Sahara," (New York: United Nations, 1995), A/30/3458.

[131] Weiner, J.B. (1979) 'The green march in historical perspective', Middle East Journal, 33(1), pp.20–33.

[132] Besenyő, J.; Huddleston, R.J.; and Zoubir, Y.H. (Eds) (2022) Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara: The Role of the UN's Peacekeeping Mission (MINURSO), London: Taylor & Francis.

[133] The Journal of Modern African Studies (1990). The Wester Sahara Conflict: Regional and International Dimension Volume 28, Issue 2, pp.225-243

[134] Ibidem

zone along the sand berm, also called for a self-determination referendum and set up the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to monitor the cease-fire and organize the referendum. Both parties accepted the Settlement Plan, and a formal cease-fire took effect in September 1991. The ultimate aim was to hold a referendum on independence for the Sahrawi people, initially scheduled for 1992, but it never took place, leaving the region in a cycle of conflict and cease-fire.

In the absence of a negotiated solution, Morocco proposed an autonomy plan, suggesting that Western Sahara remain under Moroccan sovereignty while offering a degree of self-government for the Sahrawi people. This proposal received support from France and the United States but was rejected by the Polisario Front, which argued that it undermined the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. Consequently, James Baker, the former U.S. Secretary of State and UN envoy, shared the draft Framework Agreement on the status of Western Sahara with the UNSC[135]. The agreement called for a referendum on the territory's status after a five-year autonomous period. However, the proposal was rejected by the Polisario and Algeria, viewing it as too accommodating to Morocco's goals and insufficiently addressing their own claims. In 2003, after significant revisions, Baker presented the amended draft Framework Agreement as the Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara, receiving strong support from the UNSC[136]. The plan offered a referendum on the final status of the territory for the population of Western Sahara and included independence, integration with Morocco, and self-governance or autonomy. Notwithstanding, this time, Morocco rejected the plan.

The conflict remained frozen until 2019, when a series of events and diplomatic tit-for-tats reignited hostilities, spreading tensions throughout the broader region. Starting in that year, Rabat succeeded in persuading several Arab and African nations to establish consulates in the Morocco-controlled Western Sahara, thus signaling their recognition of Rabat's sovereignty over the territory. In November 2020, the 1991 cease-fire came to an end as Morocco took control of a segment of the UN buffer zone to dismantle a blockade of a crucial route by Polisario activists, prompting the Front to resume attacks against Morocco in Western Sahara. The situation further deteriorated in December 2020 when the Trump administration recognized Morocco's claim over Western Sahara, and again in August 2021, when Algeria

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[135] Theofilopoulou A., (2006). The United Nations and Western Sahara: a never-ending affair, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 166, p.6.
[136] Ivi, p.9.

severed diplomatic relations with Morocco, partially due to Morocco's unilateral actions in Western Sahara.

The protracted conflict over Western Sahara remains unresolved, with Morocco maintaining control over the majority of the territory and the Polisario Front governing the remaining portion. Despite numerous international mediation efforts, including those by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity, and various proposals such as the Baker Plans, a mutually acceptable solution has not been achieved. The 1991 UN-mediated Settlement Plan's envisioned referendum on Sahrawi self-determination has yet to materialize, leaving the region in a state of persistent tension. Morocco's 2007 autonomy proposal, supported by France and the United States but rejected by the Polisario Front, highlights the ongoing impasse. Today, the situation remains characterized by intermittent periods of ceasefire and conflict, with significant international attention but no definitive resolution in sight. The Sahrawi people's aspirations for self-determination continue to drive the conflict, while geopolitical interests and strategic considerations further complicate the path to peace. The recent events highlighted in the 2023 report of the Secretary-General on Western Sahara reflect a wider trend in increased hostilities between Morocco and Frente POLISARIO. Drone strikes purportedly carried out by the Royal Moroccan Army, have resulted in civilian casualties and with them allegations of human rights violations. Additionally, the reported concentration of Moroccan vehicles and forces near their base in Bir Anzarane, along with the construction of a new airstrip 75 km away from the divisionary boundary, have raised concerns about the potential militarization and the escalation of violence in the region.

The Western Sahara conflict, though complex, can be distilled into some primary drivers that continue to fuel the dispute.

One of the fundamental root causes is the clash over the right to self-determination versus territorial integrity. For the Sahrawi people the conflict centers on their desire for self-determination. Indeed, the Polisario Front's resistance is rooted in their identity as a distinct ethnic group with historical claims to the land. This aspiration is diametrically opposed to Morocco's position, which views Western Sahara as an integral part of its national territory[137]. Therefore, for Morocco, maintaining control over Western Sahara is seen as crucial to its national identity and territorial integrity.

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[137] Human Rights Watch discussion with Governor Mohammed Azmi, Parador Hotel, Laayoune, August 15, 1995.

The struggle not only concerns the basic issue of Saharan decolonization and self-determination, but also reflects a larger geopolitical struggle between the competing and antagonistic political and economic system of Morocco and Algeria. In fact, geopolitical rivalry, particularly between Morocco and Algeria, is another critical driver of the conflict. Algeria supports the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi cause, offering refuge to Sahrawi refugees and providing diplomatic and material support. This support is partly motivated by Algeria's regional rivalry with Morocco, as well as its ideological commitment to anti-colonial and self-determination principles. The conflict thus serves as a proxy for broader regional tensions, with Algeria's involvement adding a layer of complexity and making bilateral negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front more challenging.

The conflict is also driven by the region's significant natural resources, which include rich deposits of phosphates, potential offshore oil and gas reserves, and significant fishing grounds[138]. These resources are not only economically valuable but also strategically important, making control over Western Sahara highly contested. Phosphates are one of the most prominent natural resources in Western Sahara[139]. The region is home to the Bou Craa mine, one of the largest phosphate reserves in the world[140]. Phosphates are a critical component in agricultural fertilizers, and their global demand has been steadily increasing. Morocco's state-owned company, OCP (Office Chérifien des Phosphates), operates the mine and has built one of the world's longest conveyor belts, stretching over 100 kilometers, to transport the phosphate from the mine to the coast for export. This mining operation generates significant revenue for Morocco and underlines the economic importance of Western Sahara's natural resources. In addition to phosphates, there are believed to be substantial offshore oil and gas reserves. While these reserves have not yet been fully explored or exploited, the potential is significant enough to influence geopolitical strategies. Morocco has granted exploration licenses to several international oil companies to survey and explore the coastal waters of Western Sahara.

Control over these resources provides Morocco with substantial economic benefits, strengthening its resolve to maintain its claim over Western Sahara. On the other side, for the Sahrawi people, the exploitation of their natural resources by Morocco represents not only a

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[138] Joffe, G. (1995). The Conflict in the Western Sahara, in Oliver Furley, Conflict in Africa. Tauris Academic Studies, pp. 115-16.

[139] Irwin, R. (2022) Terrains of legality and sovereignty: adjudicating the ownership of Western Sahara's phosphate in South Africa. The Journal of North African Studies 27:6, pp.1137-1159.

[140] Western Sahara Resource Watch. (2023) The conflict phosphates – four decades of plunder. https://wsrw.org/en/news/the-phosphate-exports

loss of potential economic benefits but also a point of nationalistic and ethical contention. The ongoing extraction and commercialization of these resources by Morocco without the consent of the Sahrawi people are viewed as a form of economic colonization, exacerbating the grievances that fuel the conflict.

In conclusion, international interests and interventions further complicate the situation[141]. Global powers, including France and the United States, have tended to support Morocco due to strategic partnerships and regional stability concerns. This international backing provides Morocco with significant political and diplomatic leverage, diminishing the pressure to make concessions. Conversely, various African and Latin American countries have recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), proclaimed by the Polisario Front, reflecting a divide in international opinion and complicating efforts for a unified approach to resolving the conflict.

The United Nations has played a central but often challenged role in the Western Sahara conflict, balancing its mandate with the geopolitical complexities and intransigence of the primary parties involved.

The UN first became involved in the Western Sahara issue in the 1960s, when it included the territory on its list of non-self-governing territories and recognized the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. Its importance grew in 1990s, when the UN' cease-fire agreement came into effect and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was deployed. MINURSO was established by UNSC resolution 690 of 29 April 1991 in accordance with settlement proposals accepted on 30 August 1988 by Morocco and the Polisario Front. However, the MINURSO operation did not proceed smoothly. Yet, the mission has not fulfilled its initial object.

Along with organizing and overseeing a free referendum[142], the mission mandate also included a variety of peacebuilding and peacekeeping tasks. First of all, it was agreed that MINURSO would form an identification commission to identify and register, on the basis of the 1974 Spanish census, those eligible to vote in the referendum[143]. Furthermore, the Settlement Plan encompassed a timetable for voter identification, a phased reduction of Moroccan troops from the territory, an exchange of prisoners of war under the auspices of the

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[141] Fabiani R., (2023), The Western Sahara conflict: A fragile path to negotiations, ISPI.
https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-western-sahara-conflict-a-fragile-path-to-negotiations-137512
[142] United Nations Security Council. (1990) The situation concerning Western Sahara, S/21360, para. 23.
[143] Ivi, para. 24-30

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the repatriation of refugees under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Regarding the vote, it was initially scheduled to take place in January of 1992, during a transition period within which the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General would be responsible for overseeing all referendum-related issues. However, the rift between Morocco and the Frente Polisario remained, leading the former to refuse to give consent for the commencement of the transitional period on the 6th of September 1991. Since then, MINURSO has executed the oversees of the ceasefre, but they have been unable to fulfll their core objective of organizing a referendum for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

From the very beginning of the MINURSO operation, Morocco has used every possible manoeuvre to prevent the holding of a free and fair referendum. Unfortunately, in the face of Moroccan intransigence and frustration of the United Nations operation, the United Nations Security Council has consistently failed to react.

Divisions and inaction marked the UN Security Council's response since the restart of the conflict in 2020. The council remained inactive for weeks after the cease-fire collapsed due to deep divisions within its ranks between pro-Polisario (such as Russia among the permanent members, as well as several African and Latin American countries) and pro-Morocco member states (such as France and many Arab and West African governments). Pro-Polisario members wanted the council to publicly put more pressure on Rabat, while pro-Morocco states supported the kingdom's reluctance to allow any form of international scrutiny of the conflict. All attempts to push the council to discuss and take a position failed and the consequence was the paralysis of the Security Council.

Moreover, the ground situation has led to significant challenges for the operations of MINURSO, in particular its logistics and resupply efforts[144]. Indeed, low-intensity hostilities in the mission area between the Royal Moroccan Army and Frente POLISARIO continued to affect the ability of MINURSO to fully implement its operational activities, in particular ground patrols and aerial reconnaissance[145].

Nonetheless, the mission has prevented fullout conflict from breaking out, and it would be amiss to exclude this success from the evaluation of the mandate. Up until recently, MINURSO monitored the 1991 ceasefre effectively, objectively observing and reporting on

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[144] United Nations Security Council. (2023) The situation concerning Western Sahara, S/2023/729
[145] Ivi, para.56

any military actions that took place, thereby promoting a peaceful environment in which the truce could thrive. This is crucial, as it has prevented the Maghreb region from devolving into war.

Western Sahara provides a compelling example of how the liberal institutionalist framework operates within the context of a protracted territorial dispute, where the sovereignty and self-determination of the Sahrawi people remain unresolved. MINURSO was designed to facilitate a referendum that would allow the Sahrawi people to choose between independence or integration with Morocco, thereby providing a peaceful and legal solution to the territorial dispute. This aligns with the liberal institutionalist's emphasis on legal frameworks and international norms as mechanisms to resolve conflicts without recourse to violence. By advocating for a diplomatic solution through a referendum, the UN aimed to establish a precedent for conflict resolution based on international law, ensuring that sovereignty disputes could be managed within the confines of multilateral institutions. However, the Western Sahara case also reveals the limitations of liberal institutionalism, particularly when powerful state actors are unwilling to comply with international norms. Morocco's persistent refusal to agree to a referendum has stalled progress for decades, undermining the UN's efforts. In this sense, Western Sahara illustrates both the potential and the constraints of liberal institutionalism in resolving deeply entrenched territorial disputes. While international institutions can provide a framework for peaceful conflict resolution, their effectiveness is contingent upon the willingness of the conflicting parties to adhere to international norms and processes.

The Western Sahara conflict has been described as a "frozen conflict" and as "decolonisation's last stand" because, despite the multiple ceasefires throughout its history, the conflict has not been fully resolved. Even now the situation in Western Sahara continued to be characterized by tensions and low-intensity hostilities between Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO.
The resumption of the fighting in 2020 shows that, despite the ceasefire, a permanent solution is urgently needed. This would need to happen within the broader African security landscape, which is currently experiencing a shift amidst the weakening of United Nations peacekeeping operations, the growing presence of various private military companies (PMC), and the emerging role of thirds countries in African conflict situations.
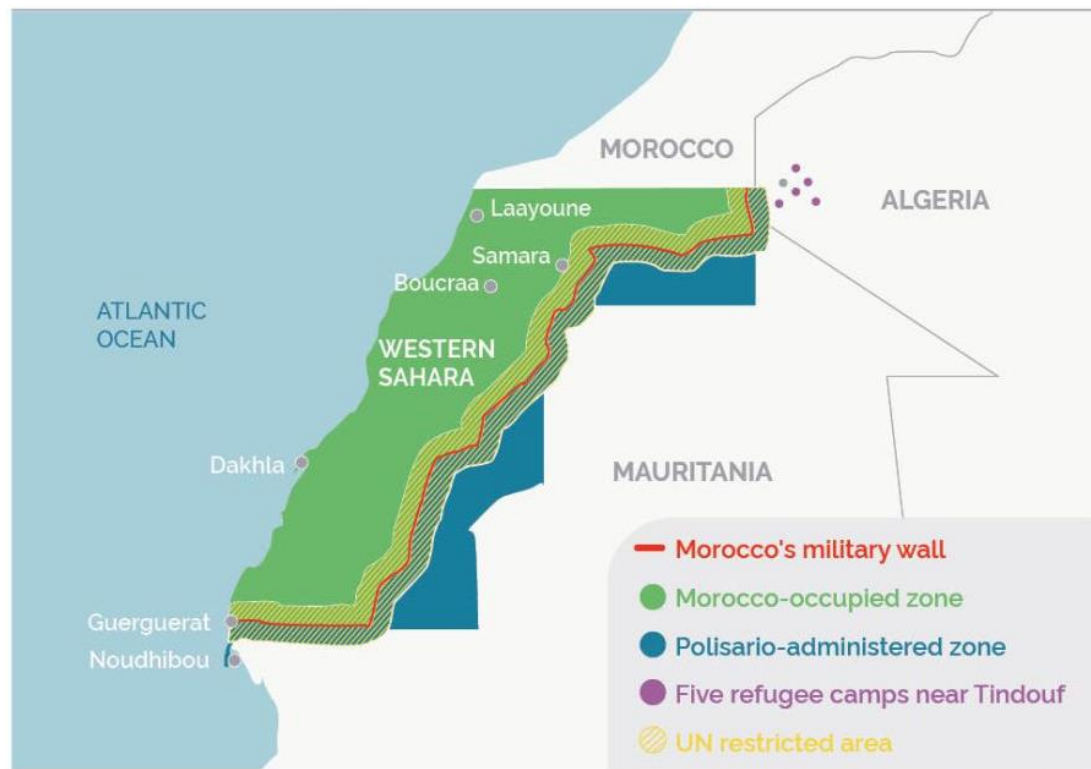
Figure 5. The Western Sahara Conflict – Situation on the ground

3.3 Case-study 2: Abyei Region

The Abyei region, located on the border between Sudan and South Sudan, has long been a disputed area and the source of various conflicts because of its strategic importance and wealth of resources. Indeed, covering approximately 10,000 square kilometers, it is rich in natural resources, including fertile land and oil. This area has historically been inhabited by two diverse ethnic groups, notably the Ngok Dinka, who are primarily aligned with South Sudan, and the Misseriya, a nomadic Arab tribe associated with Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, which aimed to bring an end to the prolonged civil war in Sudan, included provisions for a referendum to determine whether Abyei would join South Sudan or remain part of Sudan. However, the referendum has been repeatedly postponed due to disagreements over voter eligibility and other logistical issues, leaving the region in a state of unresolved tension. This analysis explores the historical and contemporary challenges in Abyei, examining the underlying causes of conflict, the roles of international and regional actors, and the potential pathways to a sustainable resolution.

The Abyei region, located along the border between Sudan and South Sudan, is a noteworthy yet contentious area marked by rich resources and strategic importance.

For centuries the region experienced clashes primarily due to ethnic tensions and competition over resources. The Ngok Dinka, who are primarily agriculturalists and aligned with the southern region, have historically lived in Abyei. Conversely, the Misseriya, a nomadic Arab tribe from the north, seasonally migrate to Abyei in search of grazing land and water for their cattle. This seasonal migration often led to disputes.

At the end of Sudan's First Civil War (1955-1972), the Addis Ababa Agreement included a crucial provision for the residents of Abyei, granting them the right to hold a referendum to decide whether they would remain part of northern Sudan or join the newly formed southern region. This promise was intended to address the unique cultural and political affiliations of Abyei's population, particularly the Ngok Dinka community, which had closer ties to the south. However, the hopes for a peaceful resolution were dashed when Sudan's President Jaafar Nimeiri reneged on this promise, refusing to allow the referendum to take place. This act of defiance contributed significantly to the eruption of Sudan's Second Civil War in 1983, as it exacerbated existing tensions and fueled grievances among the southern populations.

Nimeiri's refusal to honor the referendum was seen as part of broader attempts to consolidate power in the north and undermine southern autonomy. His decision came amidst broader political shifts, including his introduction of Islamic Sharia law across the whole country, which alienated non-Muslim populations in the south and further deepened the divide. The denial of the Abyei referendum was not just a broken promise but also a catalyst that reignited old hostilities, illustrating the complexities of managing diverse ethnic and regional interests within Sudan. The Ngok Dinka felt betrayed, and their discontent added to the southern resistance against Khartoum's central government, fueling the Sudan People's Liberation Movement's insurgency. This historical episode underscores the long-standing issues of trust, governance, and self-determination that have plagued the Abyei region and contributed to its ongoing instability.

These pre-existing tensions and conflicts set the stage for the prolonged and unresolved disputes that continued to plague Abyei even after the war officially ended.

In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)[146]. This was a landmark accord aimed at ending over two decades of civil war and establishing a framework for sustainable peace and development in Sudan. A key aspect of the CPA was the Abyei Protocol, namely specific provisions for the Abyei region[147]. One of the most critical components of the Abyei Protocol was the provision for a referendum, allowing the residents of Abyei to decide whether to join South Sudan or remain part of Sudan[148]. This referendum was scheduled to take place simultaneously with the Southern Sudanese independence referendum in January 2011. However, this referendum, scheduled for January 2011, was indefinitely postponed due to disputes over voter eligibility, particularly the participation of the nomadic Misseriya tribe. At the centre of the dispute was an ambiguity in the language of the CPA on who should count as a resident of Abyei and, thus, who exactly would be eligible to vote. For the Abyei Administration and the SPLM, 'residence' refers to permanent occupancy, and only refers to the Ngok Dinka.

Until the referendum, Abyei was to be administered by a joint administration comprising representatives from both the Government of Sudan and the SPLM[149]. This interim administration was designed to ensure equitable governance and address immediate needs in the region. For instance, given Abyei's significant oil resources, the CPA also included provisions for sharing oil revenue between the north and the south to ensure equal benefits and to reduce economic incentives for conflict.

Certainty the signing of the agreement helped to reduce large-scale violence, but it also faced numerous challenges that undermined its implementation and effectiveness. For example, disputes over voter eligibility, particularly regarding the inclusion of the nomadic Misseriya, stalled the process. The inability to hold the referendum as scheduled left the region in political limbo, perpetuating uncertainty and instability. Furthermore, intercommunal violence between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities continued to plague Abyei.

The failure to fully implement the CPA's provisions for Abyei has had significant and ongoing implications. The absence of a definitive political resolution and the persistent delays

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[146] United Nations Mission in Sudan (2005). The Comprehensive Peace Agreement. https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SD_060000_The%20Comprehensive%20Peace%20Agreement.pdf
[147] Ivi, Chapter IV, pp.65-69
[148] Ivi, p.69
[149] Ivi, p.66

in the referendum have left Abyei in a state of prolonged insecurity. Sporadic violence and displacement remain common, affecting thousands of civilians.

In 2011, the Abyei region, already characterized by tensions, witnessed a significant escalation in violence due to the launch of a full-scale military offensive organized by the Sudanese Armed Forces. Attacks began on 7 January 2011, just two days before the beginning of the Southern Sudanese independence referendum, and continued until June 2011, when a temporary peace agreement was signed. Such attacks seemed designed not simply to inflict a lasting military defeat on the police of the Abyei Administration, but to depopulate Abyei and drive people further south. Indeed, estimates suggested that between 80,000 and 110,000 people, predominantly Ngok Dinka, were forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in South Sudan or remote areas within Abyei.

Since then, the Abyei region remains a critical and highly contested area, emblematic of the broader challenges facing Sudan and South Sudan in their efforts to achieve lasting peace and stability[150]. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 offered a framework for resolving these issues through the Abyei Protocol, which promised a referendum to determine the region's future. However, the repeated delays in holding this referendum, coupled with ongoing political and ethnic strife, have left Abyei in a state of prolonged instability. The 2011 attacks by Sudanese Armed Forces and the subsequent occupation of Abyei exacerbated the region's humanitarian crisis, displacing tens of thousands and further complicating the prospects for a peaceful resolution. International efforts, including the deployment of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) and various diplomatic interventions, have provided some measure of stability but have not resolved the underlying issues. As of now, Abyei remains a flashpoint for potential conflict between Sudan and South Sudan. The absence of a definitive political resolution and the continued delay of the promised referendum perpetuate uncertainty and tension. The region continues to experience sporadic violence and significant humanitarian challenges, including displacement and limited access to essential services.

The Abyei region is a critical case for understanding how resource competition and ethnic tensions can drive conflict, as outlined in Galtung's model. The contradiction in Abyei arises from the competing territorial claims of Sudan and South Sudan, driven by the region's

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[150] United Nations Security Council, S/2024/354

valuable oil resources and the ethnic loyalties of the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya groups. These contradictions are compounded by attitudes of deep-seated mistrust and historical grievances, which frequently manifest in violent behavior, making the Abyei region a hotspot for conflict. According to Lund's Conflict Cycle, Abyei has experienced multiple phases of escalation, from Unstable Peace to Crisis and even brief episodes of open Conflict. The region's strategic importance and the recurring violence demonstrate the difficulty of achieving a stable peace, especially when ethnic and resource-based contradictions are not adequately addressed. The UNISFA mission, while successful in preventing full-scale war, has struggled to create lasting stability, highlighting the need for conflict prevention strategies that more effectively address the underlying contradictions and foster cooperative attitudes between the conflicting parties.

As mentioned, the conflict in Abyei is multifaceted, driven by a complex interplay of historical, ethnic, political, and economic factors.

The roots of the Abyei conflict can be traced back to the colonial period, which significantly influenced the region's ethnic and political landscape. During the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule over Sudan (1899-1956), British colonial administrators implemented policies that sowed the seeds of future conflicts. One of the key decisions was the drawing of administrative boundaries that often disregarded traditional ethnic territories and community affiliations. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement of 1899 placed Abyei within the jurisdiction of Kordofan, a northern province, despite the Ngok Dinka's strong cultural and political ties with the southern regions. This boundary delineation exacerbated ethnic divisions by reinforcing rivalries between different groups, particularly between the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya.

Ethnic tensions between the two are central to the conflict in Abyei. The Ngok Dinka, primarily agriculturalists, were settled in Abyei and culturally linked to the southern part of Sudan. In contrast, the Misseriya, a nomadic Arab tribe, traditionally rely on seasonal migrations to Abyei for grazing their cattle during the dry season. Consequently, the competition over land and water resources has historically led to violent confrontations between these two communities.

Moreover, the political landscape of Abyei has been shaped by the broader North-South conflict in Sudan. The failure to hold the referendum provided for in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 to determine whether it would join South Sudan or remain part of Sudan has left Abyei in a state of political limbo, fostering ongoing tensions.

Another crucial element is the economic competition on the control of the natural resources of the territory[151]. Abyei is strategically significant due to its oil-rich reserves, which have been a major economic driver for both Sudan and South Sudan[152]. The region contains some of the most productive oil fields, including the Heglig and Diffra fields. Data from the Sudanese Ministry of Petroleum indicates that Abyei's oil production accounted for approximately 25% of Sudan's total oil output before the secession of South Sudan. The control over Abyei's oil resources has significant geopolitical and strategic implications for both Sudan and South Sudan. For Sudan, retaining control over Abyei and its oil reserves is crucial for maintaining economic stability, especially after the loss of the majority of its oil fields to South Sudan following the latter's independence. For South Sudan, gaining control over Abyei is seen as essential for securing additional oil revenues to support its fledgling economy. South Sudan's economy is heavily dependent on oil exports, which constitute about 98% of its revenue.

Addressing these root causes requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the diverse factors driving the conflict. Sustainable peace in Abyei will depend on resolving historical grievances, fostering inclusive political processes, ensuring fair resource distribution, strengthening governance structures, and maintaining constructive international engagement. Only through a multifaceted and sustained effort can the long-standing issues in Abyei be effectively addressed, paving the way for lasting stability and development in the region.

The United Nations Security Council, by its resolution 1990 of 27 June 2011, responded to the urgent security and humanitarian crisis in the Abyei region by establishing the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)[153]. Indeed, its creation followed the outbreak of violence and the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians in Abyei after the secession of South Sudan from Sudan in July 2011. The mission was designed to stabilize the region, protect civilians, and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance while supporting the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the subsequent agreements specific to Abyei, particularly the 2011 Abyei Agreement.

The mandate of UNISFA is multifaceted, reflecting the complex and volatile environment in Abyei, where both Sudan and South Sudan claim sovereignty. One of the

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[151] Craze, J. (2013). 'Dividing lines: Grazing and conflict along the Sudan-South Sudan border', Small Arms Survey

[152] ICG (International Crisis Group). (2007). Breaking the Abyei deadlock. Africa Briefing No.47 https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudan-breaking-abyei-deadlock

[153] United Nations Security Council, S/RES/1990 (2011)

primary responsibilities of UNISFA is to maintain peace and security in the Abyei Area by monitoring and verifying the redeployment of armed forces from both Sudan and South Sudan out of the region, as stipulated by the Abyei Agreement. UNISFA's mandate also includes: ensuring security within the Abyei Area, strengthening the capacity of the Abyei Police Service by providing support, including the training of personnel, and coordinate with the Abyei Police Service on matters of law and order and protecting civilians in the Abyei Area under imminent threat of physical violence[154]. In addition to its security functions, UNISFA is mandated to support the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The mission works closely with humanitarian organizations to facilitate access to vulnerable populations and ensure that aid reaches those in need. This includes coordinating with local authorities, the governments of Sudan and South Sudan, and other stakeholders to overcome logistical challenges and address the humanitarian needs of the population in Abyei. Furthermore, UNISFA is tasked with supporting the establishment of a joint administration and police service in Abyei, as envisioned in the 2011 Abyei Agreement. This involves assisting the Sudanese and South Sudanese governments in setting up institutions that can provide governance, law, and order in the region. UNISFA plays a critical role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation between the two governments to create a functional administrative structure in Abyei. The mission's support for the joint administration is intended to lay the groundwork for a political resolution to the status of Abyei, which remains a contentious issue between Sudan and South Sudan.

UNISFA's unique composition and command structure reflect the sensitive nature of its mandate. The mission is composed primarily of Ethiopian troops, and the Force Commander is an Ethiopian officer, a reflection of Ethiopia's role as a neutral and influential regional actor. This arrangement was agreed upon by both Sudan and South Sudan, given the trust they place in Ethiopia as a mediator. The mission operates under a single country mandate, which is unusual for UN peacekeeping operations and underscores the specific political and security dynamics in Abyei. However, the reception was not universally positive. In some cases, local populations and militias were wary of UNISFA's presence, fearing that the mission could become entangled in the broader political disputes between Sudan and South Sudan. Some groups were sceptical about the mission's ability to effectively address their concerns or protect their interests. The contested status of Abyei itself meant that any external intervention was bound to be viewed with suspicion by some factions, especially those who felt that their claims to the land were being undermined or ignored.

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[154] Ivi, para.2,3

Despite these efforts, UNISFA faces significant challenges in implementing its mandate fully. The unresolved political status of Abyei remains a major obstacle, as it limits the mission's ability to achieve long-term stability and development in the region. The persistent distrust between the Sudanese and South Sudanese governments, as well as between the different ethnic groups in Abyei, complicates the mission's work. Additionally, logistical difficulties, such as poor infrastructure and the region's remoteness, further hinder UNISFA's operations. In summary, while UNISFA was generally welcomed as a stabilizing force in Abyei, its reception was nuanced. The mission plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and protecting civilians, but its success is constrained by the complex political and security environment in which it operates.

The Abyei region provides a different lens through which to assess the liberal institutionalist approach, particularly regarding the role of regional organizations in conflict management. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, UNISFA is an example of how international and regional institutions can cooperate to mitigate conflict through peacekeeping and diplomatic mediation. The liberal institutionalist framework emphasizes the importance of multilateral cooperation in managing cross-border conflicts and resource disputes. In the Abyei case, the United Nations acted as the primary peacekeeping entity, but the African Union, through its diplomatic efforts, played a significant role in facilitating negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan. This collaboration underscores the liberal institutionalist argument that international institutions, when working alongside regional organizations, can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts. The presence of UNISFA, alongside diplomatic interventions by the AU, aligns with the liberal institutionalist goal of establishing stability through collective security arrangements. By maintaining a peacekeeping force in Abyei, the UN serves as a neutral third party, preventing further violence and ensuring that both parties engage in peaceful negotiations. This reflects the liberal institutionalist belief in the ability of international institutions to provide frameworks for de-escalation and the management of disputes that might otherwise lead to war. However, the Abyei case also demonstrates some limitations of liberal institutionalism. While the international and regional organizations have been successful in preventing large-scale violence, they have struggled to resolve the deeper issues related to resource control and ethnic divisions. The inability to hold a promised referendum on Abyei's final status, similar to the situation in Western Sahara, highlights how liberal institutionalism can falter when local actors are reluctant to agree to international frameworks for dispute resolution. Additionally, the dependency on external

funding and logistical support for peacekeeping operations suggests that international cooperation, while essential, is not always sufficient to guarantee long-term stability in resource-rich regions.

3.4 Case-study 3: Mali

The conflict in Mali represents one of the most complex and enduring crises in West Africa, marked by a volatile mix of ethnic tensions, separatist aspirations, jihadist insurgencies, and chronic political instability. Emerging from deep-seated historical grievances, particularly the marginalization of the northern regions and the Tuareg population, the conflict has escalated over the past decade into a full-scale crisis with profound implications for both Mali and the broader Sahel region. The 2012 Tuareg rebellion, initially driven by demands for autonomy, quickly spiraled into a multifaceted war involving Islamist militant groups, leading to the collapse of state authority and the intervention of international forces. This analysis delves into the intricate layers of the Malian conflict, exploring its historical roots, the diverse array of actors involved, and the regional and international dimensions that have shaped its evolution. It examines the challenges posed by ongoing insecurity, political instability, and the humanitarian crisis, highlighting the difficulties in achieving a sustainable peace.

Mali, a landlocked nation situated in West Africa, is known for its rich cultural diversity and heritage. The country is home to various ethnic groups such as the Bambara, Fulani, Songhai, and Tuareg, among others. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Mali has faced ongoing challenges related to national identity, governance, and economic development.

One of the most significant underlying factors in the Malian conflict is the longstanding marginalization and neglect of the northern regions, particularly the regions inhabited by the Tuareg people. Their relationship with the central government in Bamako has been fraught with tension, as they have often felt excluded from political power and economic opportunities. For decades, a historical lack of mutual understanding and distrust between Bamako and the northern regions has contributed to instability in Mali. By failing to address the north's aspirations for economic growth or political representation, the Malian government has inadvertently set the stage for violent conflicts and separatist movements. As a result, the Tuareg have launched several uprisings since Mali's independence. These rebellions have been driven by demands for greater autonomy or even independence for the northern region, known as Azawad. The Malian government's typical response has been military action, and while

peace agreements have occasionally been reached, they have often been short-lived and poorly implemented, failing to tackle the root causes of these grievances.

The 2012 coup in Mali was a pivotal moment in the country's history, ushering in a period of profound instability and conflict. The coup, which occurred on March 21-22, 2012, was led by a group of dissatisfied junior officers in the Malian army who formed the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDR). Their primary motivation was frustration over the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion in the northern regions. At the time, Mali was led by President Amadou Toumani Touré, who had been in power since 2002. Touré's administration faced growing criticism for its inability to effectively address the escalating Tuareg insurgency, which had intensified in January 2012. This insurgency, spearheaded by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), sought independence for northern Mali. The Malian military, poorly equipped and demoralized, suffered several defeats at the hands of the better-armed and more motivated Tuareg rebels. As conditions in the north worsened, soldiers on the front lines grew increasingly resentful of what they saw as a lack of support and leadership from the central government. These frustrations were compounded by allegations of corruption and mismanagement within the government, eventually leading to a mutiny. On March 21, 2012, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, the mutiny began at the Kati military camp near Bamako. The mutineers swiftly took control of the camp and proceeded to seize key government buildings in the capital, including the presidential palace. Within a day, President Touré had fled, and the CNRDR declared itself the new ruling authority.

The decentralization promised by various peace agreements led to the withdrawal of the central government from the northern regions. Coupled with the lack of economic development in the north and growing resentment among local populations, this created a security vacuum that allowed terrorist groups to establish a foothold. In essence, decisions made in the wake of the Tuareg rebellions paved the way for terrorist organizations to function as quasi-governments in the absence of a strong central state. The lack of action, and in some cases, complicity of certain Malian political leaders, allowed these groups to thrive, significantly worsening the security situation in the north. The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later became Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), was the first to enter northern Mali in 2003. By gaining the support of local criminal networks and winning over the northern communities through acts like distributing money and providing

medicine, the GSPC positioned itself as a social safety net in regions abandoned by the state[155]. This allowed the organization to operate with little interference from the government and to attract young recruits who were drawn by the prospect of easy money and disillusioned by the lack of other economic opportunities.

Beyond the undeniable lack of political will on both sides, the failure of the Malian national pact is also linked to internal divisions within northern communities and, also, to the multitude of communities and ethnic groups that characterizes the north. For this reason, to achieve lasting stability, Malian authorities would need to navigate these divergent interests and reconcile conflicting local demands. In fact, past peace agreements have often failed due to this disunity and the difficulty of addressing the diverse interests of all communities involved.

By the end of March 2012, Mali was facing two critical political and security threats. Half of the country was under the control of Islamist groups, which ruled according to their own laws and did not recognize Bamako's constitutional authority. Meanwhile, a military junta had seized power in the south, imprisoned most of the legitimate authorities, and called for military action in the north. The local population, caught between the militarization of the region and the rise of terrorism, found themselves in a desperate situation, seeking refuge with mercenary groups and ethnic self-defense militias that were causing bloodshed in the center-north of the country.

Since 2012, Mali has been engulfed in a period of ongoing conflict, political instability, and frequent international interventions. The crisis began with the 2012 coup and the subsequent takeover of northern Mali by Tuareg separatists and Islamist militants, which quickly spiraled into a full-blown crisis that continues to impact the country and the wider region.

In 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was elected as president, with a promise to restore stability and tackle the security challenges facing Mali. However, his administration soon became mired in accusations of corruption, inefficiency, and a failure to effectively counter the growing insurgency. Growing public dissatisfaction with Keïta's government led to widespread protests in 2020. This unrest culminated in two military coups within a span of nine months. The first occurred in August 2020, when President Keïta was overthrown. The National Committee for the Salvation of the People, led by Colonel Goïta, took control and

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[155] Bøås, M., & Torheim, L. E. (2013). The Trouble in Mali—corruption, collusion, resistance. Third World Quarterly, 34(7), pp.1279–1292.

pledged a transition to civilian rule. However, this coup was met with widespread condemnation from the international community, including the African Union, ECOWAS, and the United Nations, all of which called for a quick return to constitutional governance. ECOWAS responded by imposing sanctions on Mali, including border closures and a suspension of financial flows, to pressure the military junta into agreeing to a transition plan. After weeks of negotiations, the junta agreed to a transitional government in September 2020, with Bah N'Daw, a retired colonel and former defense minister, appointed as interim president, while Colonel Goïta took the position of vice president. This transitional government was tasked with organizing elections within 18 months.

The second coup occurred in May 2021, when the junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta again seized power, this time taking the presidency. The immediate trigger for this coup was a cabinet reshuffle by interim President Bah N'Daw, which removed two key military figures, Colonel Sadio Camara and Colonel Modibo Koné, from their positions. The military saw this move as an attempt by the civilian leadership to exert more control over the transition, leading Colonel Goïta to order the arrest of President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, effectively dissolving the transitional government. Following these events, Goïta declared himself the transitional president.

By 2024, Mali is grappling with multiple crises that threaten its stability and development. The human rights situation has significantly deteriorated, with increasing attacks on civilians by Islamist armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), as well as large-scale abusive counterterrorism operations carried out by Malian forces and associated foreign fighters. The government's ability to extend its authority and provide essential services across the country remains weak, especially in rural and conflict-ridden areas. There has been little progress in government investigations into reported abuses. For instance, in June 2023, Human Rights Watch detailed findings of abuses by Malian armed forces during operations in various villages[156], but the government's response was limited, with no progress in the promised investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Political instability remains a persistent issue, with the military-led transitional government under pressure from both domestic and international forces to hold credible elections and return to civilian rule. Although Mali's leader has pledged to return the country to democracy in early 2024, the junta indefinitely postponed elections scheduled for February

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[156] Human Rights Watch. (2023, June 26). [Letter on Human Rights Issues in Redacted Context]. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2023/07/HRWLetter_26June_EN_Redacted.pdf

2024, citing the need for more time to prepare. Deep-rooted problems such as corruption, governance deficiencies, and regional inequalities hinder efforts to achieve lasting peace.

The conflict in Mali is rooted in a complex web of historical, social, economic, and political factors that have converged over decades, leading to the current crisis.

As previously mentioned, one of the primary root causes of the conflict in Mali is the longstanding marginalization and neglect of the northern regions, particularly the areas inhabited by the Tuareg and other nomadic groups. This marginalization has its roots in the colonial era, when French authorities established borders that grouped together diverse ethnic and cultural groups with little regard for their historical territories or governance systems. After gaining independence in 1960, the Malian state continued to centralize power in the capital, Bamako, while neglecting the northern regions in terms of development, infrastructure, and political representation. For the Tuareg, a nomadic people with a strong cultural identity and historical autonomy, integration into the Malian state was deeply problematic. The post-independence Malian government prioritized the interests of the southern regions, where the majority of the population resided, and neglected the northern territories, which were seen as peripheral and difficult to govern. The Tuareg, who had their own political and social systems, resented the imposition of central authority and the lack of attention to their needs. This sense of alienation and exclusion led to a series of uprisings by the Tuareg, the first of which occurred in 1963, just three years after independence. The Malian government responded with harsh military repression, further deepening Tuareg grievances. Over the decades, these grievances festered as promises of development and autonomy made by successive governments were largely unfulfilled. The failure of the Malian state to address these grievances led to repeated cycles of rebellion, with major uprisings in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The environmental and economic degradation of the Sahel region has significantly contributed to the conflict by exacerbating competition over scarce resources and heightening tensions between different communities. The Sahel is a semi-arid region that has long been vulnerable to the effects of climate variability, including droughts, desertification, and the encroachment of the Sahara Desert. Over the past few decades, these environmental challenges have worsened, driven by a combination of climate change, population growth, and unsustainable land use practices. The degradation of arable land and the diminishing availability of water have put immense pressure on both nomadic herders and sedentary farmers, leading to conflicts over grazing rights, access to water, and agricultural land.

In this context of economic despair, some have turned to illicit activities, such as smuggling, drug trafficking, and armed banditry, as alternative means of survival. These economic activities have not only eroded the rule of law but have also provided funding and recruits for armed groups, including both Tuareg separatists and Islamist militants. Therefore, the lack of state presence and the vacuum of legitimate economic opportunities have made the northern regions fertile ground for insurgencies and criminal networks, further destabilizing the region.

The rise of Islamist militancy in Mali is another key factor that has exacerbated the conflict. Over the past two decades, northern Mali has become a battleground for various jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The jihadists have exploited the region's instability, weak state presence, and local grievances, such as ethnic tensions and disputes over resources, to recruit fighters and establish new fronts in the conflict. Their activities have further undermined state authority, making it even more difficult for the Malian government to restore control and provide security to its citizens.

To conclude, the conflict in Mali cannot be understood in isolation; it is part of a broader regional crisis in the Sahel that has been shaped by a range of external influences and regional dynamics. The porous borders of the Sahel have allowed for the easy movement of fighters, weapons, and illicit goods across national boundaries, making the conflict in Mali both a driver and a consequence of instability in the wider region. Regional dynamics have also played a role in shaping the conflict. The weak state structures and governance challenges faced by many Sahelian countries, including Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, have created a conducive environment for the spread of jihadist.

Mali represents a multifaceted conflict involving terrorism, ethnic divisions, and political instability, making it an ideal case study for examining the application of Galtung's Conflict Triangle in a complex and evolving conflict environment. The contradictions in Mali stem from the central government's struggle to maintain control over its territory, the aspirations of Tuareg separatists, and the activities of Islamist militant groups. These contradictions are exacerbated by negative attitudes, such as distrust between ethnic groups and the alienation of northern populations, which frequently manifest in violent behaviors, including insurgencies and terrorist attacks. In terms of Lund's Conflict Cycle, Mali has rapidly progressed from Unstable Peace to Crisis and War, with fluctuating levels of violence and instability. The presence of MINUSMA and other international forces has been crucial in preventing the

complete collapse of the state, but the mission's effectiveness has been limited by the complex and adaptive nature of the conflict, as well as the recent withdrawal request by the Malian government. This case highlights the limitations of traditional peacekeeping models and the necessity for more adaptive, context-specific strategies that can respond to the evolving nature of conflicts like those in Mali.

The United Nations has played a pivotal role in addressing the ongoing conflict and instability in Mali. However, the UN's involvement in Mali has also been marked by significant challenges, reflecting the complexity of the conflict and the difficulties inherent in peacekeeping in such a volatile region

The United Nations Multidensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established in April 2013 through United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100, in response to the escalating crisis following the 2012 coup and the subsequent occupation of northern Mali by Tuareg separatists and Islamist militants. MINUSMA took over the peacekeeping mission carried out by the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) after the latter faced logistical and budgetary challenges.

Its original mandate was to "protect, without prejudice to the responsibility of the transnational authorities of Mali, civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, within its capacities and areas of deployment". However, in the intervening years, the mission's protection of civilians' mandate has evolved to reflect the changing political and security situation, including the implementation of jihadist groups in the central regions of the country. Indeed, by adopting resolution 2164 of 25 June 2014 and resolution 2295 in 2016, the Council extended MINUSMA's mandate and decided that the Mission should focus on duties, such as ensuring security, stabilization, and protection of civilians; supporting national reconciliation; and assisting the reestablishment of State authority, the rebuilding of the security sector, and the promotion and protection of human rights in that country. MINUSMA was also tasked with supporting the transitional authorities, helping to organize elections, and facilitating national dialogue, all of which were crucial for restoring Mali's territorial integrity and political stability.

However, MINUSMA faced multiple challenges. First of all, MINUSMA was deployed in a highly active conflict zone with multiple armed groups, including well-armed jihadists who were hostile to any international presence. This has made the mission's stabilization and peacekeeping tasks extraordinarily difficult. For instance, these groups have consistently targeted MINUSMA forces, causing significant casualties and making it one of the deadliest

UN peacekeeping missions in history. This high level of insecurity has constrained MINUSMA's ability to operate effectively, limiting its reach and often forcing it to adopt a defensive posture rather than proactively engaging in stabilization efforts. The political instability in Mali also played a crucial role. The mission has had to operate in a context where the Malian government itself has been weak, fragmented, and sometimes seen as part of the problem, particularly in its failure to effectively implement the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement and address the grievances of marginalized communities. Also, MINUSMA has faced operational challenges related to the harsh environment and logistical difficulties of working in Mali. The vast, inhospitable terrain, coupled with the lack of infrastructure in many areas, has made it difficult to sustain operations, supply troops, and reach isolated communities. These logistical constraints have further limited MINUSMA's ability to fulfill its mandate, particularly in regions where its presence is most needed.

Consequently, Mali's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdoulaye Diop, during his speech at the UN Security Council on June 16, 2023, requested the end of MINUSMA. Denouncing the failure, as well as the inadequacy of MINUSMA's mandate in Mali, Diop declared that "*MINUSMA appears to become part of the problem, by fueling communal tensions, exacerbated by allegations of extreme gravity, and that bring prejudice to peace, reconciliation, and to national cohesion in Mali*" [157]. Claiming that Mali is capable of addressing the security situation on their own, Diop, on behalf of the Malian government, demanded "*the withdrawal of MINSUMA without delay*". The new military-led government in Bamako expressed growing frustration with what it perceived as the inefficacy of MINUSMA, arguing that the mission was not sufficiently contributing to the restoration of peace and order. This led to an increasingly hostile environment for MINUSMA, with the Malian authorities limiting the mission's operational capabilities and questioning its role in the country. Moreover, the shifting geopolitical landscape in the Sahel influenced the decision to end MINUSMA. The rise of new regional and international actors in the region presented alternative sources of security assistance for Mali. The Malian government's pivot towards these new alliances, coupled with a nationalist discourse that rejected foreign intervention, made MINUSMA's continued presence untenable. Therefore, the United Nations Multidimensions Integrated Mission in Mali officially ceased its peace operations on January 1, 2024. Its departure leaves a vacuum that could exacerbate the already precarious security

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[157] Al Jazeera. (2023, June 16). Mali asks UN to withdraw its peacekeeping mission 'without delay'. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/16/mali-asks-un-to-withdraw-its-peacekeeping-mission-without-delay

situation, potentially leading to increased violence and further destabilization. Additionally, the absence of MINUSMA may weaken efforts to hold parties accountable for human rights violations, reduce international oversight, and hinder progress towards political reconciliation.

The end of MINUSMA also underscores broader issues within UN peacekeeping itself. The mission faced significant resource constraints, logistical challenges, and a mandate that many viewed as overly ambitious given the realities on the ground. The high casualty rates among peacekeepers and the mission's inability to substantially alter the security situation in Mali prompted questions about the viability and effectiveness of UN peacekeeping in such environments. The drawdown of MINUSMA can be seen as a recognition of these limitations, highlighting the need for the international community to rethink its approach to peacekeeping in conflict zones where state authority is weak, and insurgent threats are pervasive.

Mali provides a particularly rich case for exploring the application of liberal institutionalism in a modern conflict setting. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, MINUSMA exemplifies the multilateral approach to conflict resolution, where international institutions step in to support fragile states in maintaining peace and security. MINUSMA's mandate, which includes both peacekeeping and counterterrorism elements, reflects the evolving nature of international intervention, as liberal institutionalism adapts to the realities of contemporary conflicts involving non-state actors. The mission's focus on state-building and institutional reform aligns with the liberal institutionalist belief that strengthening state institutions and promoting good governance are essential components of long-term conflict prevention. However, Mali also illustrates the challenges faced by international organizations when local governments resist international oversight. The Malian government's recent request for MINUSMA's withdrawal points to the tensions between state sovereignty and international intervention. From a liberal institutionalist standpoint, this development highlights the difficulty of maintaining long-term missions in sovereign states when the local government perceives the international presence as either ineffective or intrusive. The case of Mali raises critical questions about the adaptability of liberal institutionalism to complex, fluid conflicts where state and non-state actors are involved, and where the legitimacy of international institutions may be contested. Moreover, the role of regional organizations such as the ECOWAS in Mali underscores the liberal institutionalist argument that regional cooperation is key to addressing transnational threats like terrorism. The collaboration between MINUSMA, ECOWAS, and the African Union demonstrates the liberal institutionalist emphasis on multilevel governance, where global and regional actors cooperate to address security challenges that transcend national borders.

CHAPTER 4 – Strengthening UN Conflict Prevention in Africa

4.1 Enhancing UN strategies to conflict prevention in Africa: evidence from the case-studies

The cases of Western Sahara, Abyei, and Mali, when analyzed through the lens of liberal institutionalism, offer valuable insights into the strengths and limitations of international and regional organizations in conflict prevention. While each case demonstrates the potential for multilateral cooperation to manage conflicts and promote peace, they also reveal the constraints of liberal institutionalist approaches, particularly when local dynamics, state interests, and regional politics complicate the implementation of international norms. Western Sahara highlights the difficulties of enforcing international law in protracted disputes where powerful state actors resist international pressure. Abyei illustrates the importance of regional cooperation in managing resource-based conflicts, but also shows how international frameworks can be undermined by local reluctance to engage in institutional processes. Mali, with its complex blend of terrorism, state fragility, and local grievances, underscores the need for international institutions to be more flexible and adaptive in addressing modern conflicts that involve both state and non-state actors. Together, these cases demonstrate that while liberal institutionalism provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of international organizations in conflict prevention, it must be continuously adapted to respond to the evolving nature of global conflicts and the specific challenges posed by different regions.

The efficiency of UN peacekeeping efforts in Africa has significantly decreased in recent years, which is a result of both changing conflict dynamics on the continent and organizational structural issues. For example, progress on the agenda has been hampered by a lack of consensus over prevention, which has led to ineffectiveness. The UN's strategy has found it difficult to adjust to the complexity of contemporary warfare, which is increasingly defined by internal turmoil, asymmetric threats, and non-state players. The UN was first created as a vehicle to handle traditional interstate conflicts. The complexity of today's African conflicts has brought to light the shortcomings of UN peacekeeping efforts, which frequently experience insufficient funding, a dearth of political will, and conflicting member state interests. Furthermore, the UN's ability to successfully avert conflict escalation has been criticized due to bureaucratic slowness and poor response times. The UN's credibility is weakened by this fall in operational efficacy, which also begs serious concerns about the organization's potential

future role in preserving peace and security in Africa. There is a pressing need to review and update the UN's conflict prevention methods in order to make sure they are appropriate for tackling the particular difficulties presented by the African setting, given that the continent is still struggling with ongoing instability.

Before analyzing the changes related to armed conflict prevention on the continent, it is useful to remember that Africa is home to more than 80 percent of the 90,000 UN field personnel. In fact, the continent hosts four of the largest UN operations, which together absorb most of the $6.1 billion budget allocated for fiscal year 2023-2024[158]. Despite this, UN missions in Africa have declined since 2016, both in terms of budget and personnel deployed. Simultaneously, there has been growth in the number and size of African-led Peace Support Operations (PSOs): since 2000, 38 African-led PSOs have taken place[159].

The gradual shift towards peacekeeping operations led by regional actors is driven by several factors. First of all, the emergence of new actors in the continent, including non-state armed groups and jihadist groups[160]. The operational environment in Africa is also particularly challenging due to factors such as difficult terrain, poor infrastructure, and hostile environments. But, also, other dynamics related to the UN's own performance in conflict-affected states, such as the UN liquidity crisis or the Security Council's perceived loss of legitimacy, due to its lack of reform and the absence of permanent African representation. Additionally, the UN has faced challenges in securing the cooperation of host governments and local populations since, in many cases, governments have been reluctant to allow UN interventions, viewing them as infringements on their sovereignty. Indeed, after decades of colonial rule and the influence of Western powers in the continent, many African leaders are now skeptical of external interventions that are seen as driven by geopolitical interests rather than genuine concern for African stability and development. This skepticism is fueled by the

[158] Pinto, T. N. (2024, February 12). Peacekeeping without the UN. GIS Reports. https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/un-peacekeeping-africa/
[159] Allen, N. (2023, August 9). African-Led Peace Operations: a crucial tool for peace and security. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-led-peace-operations-a-crucial-tool-for-peace-and-security/#:~:text=African-Led%20Peace%20Operations:%20A%20Crucial%20Tool%20for%20Peace%20and%20Security,-By%20Nate%20D.F.&text=African-led%20peace%20operations%20have,the%20continent's%20most%20devastating%20conflicts
[160] IISS. (2023, December 6). From Global Jihad to Local Insurgencies: the changing nature of Sub-Saharan Jihadism. Armed Conflict Survey 2023. https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2023/from-global-jihad-to-local-insurgencies/

historical experiences of interventionist policies that often prioritized Western strategic goals over the well-being of African populations, leading to a distrust of UN missions that are frequently led by or heavily influenced by Western countries. The AU's push for the mantra "African solutions for African problems" is, therefore, not just a practical strategy but also a symbolic rejection of the lingering effects of colonialism and neocolonialism. African leaders seek to reclaim agency over the continent's affairs, asserting that Africans are best positioned to address their own challenges and acknowledging the limitations of external interventions that often lack contextual sensitivity and a deep understanding of local socio-cultural dynamics. Accordingly, the wider international community, has largely embraced this trend by deferring responsibility to the AU and subregional organizations, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

Notwithstanding, the United Nations still has a crucial role to play in this evolving landscape. The UN brings to the table a wealth of experience, global legitimacy, and access to resources that are often beyond the reach of regional organizations. While the AU and other African bodies have made significant strides in conflict prevention and resolution, they still face substantial challenges, including limited financial resources, logistical constraints, and capacity-building needs. In fact, even if UN-led missions in Africa are gradually replaced by regional frameworks under the leadership of the African Union or other regional organizations, these will surely remain dependent on UN financing since most African countries are not able to pay for their cost. In this regard, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2719[161] was crucial. This resolution establishes a framework for financing African Union PSOs, by allowing them to access UN funding, covering up to 75% of the annual budget for these missions[162]. Therefore, in the new environment of increased African agency, the UN's role should evolve to one of partnership and support, working in tandem with African organizations to enhance their effectiveness. By aligning its efforts with the aspirations of African-led initiatives, the UN can help build a more cooperative and effective framework for peace and security on the continent. In addition to its broader peacekeeping and diplomatic roles, the United Nations plays a vital role at the country level through its UN Country Teams (UNCTs), in particular Resident Coordinators (RCs) and Peace and Development Advisers

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[161] United Nations Security Council (2023). S/RES/2719
[162] Ivi, para.6

(PDAs). These entities work directly within African nations to provide on-the-ground support, fostering local ownership of peace and development initiatives while aligning them with international standards and best practices. The UN can also play a pivotal role in strengthening in-country capacity by supporting nationally led initiatives to assess and address potential conflicts. When requested, the UN can assist national governments in conducting cost-benefit analyses to evaluate the implications of different conflict prevention strategies, as well as the risks associated with inaction. This support helps national actors make decisions that are grounded in a clear understanding of the potential outcomes. As to be effective national strategies should be evidence-based and tailored to specific contexts. In this sense, the UN should adopt a more systemic approach to help national actors build systems for research, data collection, and analysis.

Any successful conflict prevention approach must have coordination at its core because it guarantees that the activities of different actors are complementary, mutually reinforcing, and linked. It affects not just the UN-AU level but also local communities and national governments. Coordination helps to create a thorough and cogent response to possible disputes by encouraging communication and collaboration amongst various stakeholders, guaranteeing that all levels—from the local to the global—are working towards the same objectives. By preventing redundant systems and facilitating information sharing, this integrated strategy not only improves the efficacy and efficiency of conflict prevention techniques but also fosters partner trust, which eventually leads to more long-lasting peace results.

From the evidence and the case-studies discussed before, emerges that effective prevention must be country context-specific and should be characterized by strategic coordination, with a vital support by a lead actor or by major international actors. Moreover, it is essential that preventive actions have adequate resources and are timely, multifaceted in terms of the preventive instruments and measures used, focused on both short-term and long-term engagement.

The risk factors linked to violence are by their very nature volatile, fluctuating in response to a wide range of social, economic, and political factors. However, policy frameworks for conflict prevention are often limited by inflexible four- or five-year planning cycles, which can quickly make them outdated and unsuitable for use in environments that are changing quickly. This inflexibility erodes the efficacy of prevention strategies, making them more and more detached from the realities on the ground and unable to react to new threats or changes in the types and drivers of violence. To overcome these flaws, conflict prevention strategies must be constructed with inherent flexibility, enabling them to be responsive to the

changing nature of risks. A key aspect of this adaptability is the shift from a narrow focus on specific types of violence to a more holistic, risk-driven approach. Such an approach would enable the identification and mitigation of a broader spectrum of potential threats, ensuring that prevention strategies are not overly prescriptive or constrained by predetermined categories of violence. This shift necessitates the integration of flexible, long-term planning mechanisms that allow for continuous reassessment and course correction within the planning cycle as new information becomes available and as the risk landscape changes. Local players, such as traditional authorities, grassroots groups, and community leaders, frequently possess a more sophisticated comprehension of the particular factors that propel conflict in their respective regions. More focused and efficient interventions may result from involving these players in efforts to prevent conflicts. Additionally, because they may coordinate responses among neighboring nations, foster cross-border collaboration, and handle issues that transcend national boundaries, sub-regional organizations are better positioned to address the transnational dimensions of current conflicts.

The efficacy of conflict prevention initiatives is hampered and the capacity to address the root causes of conflict is compromised by the absence of more all-encompassing, bottom-up techniques. Given the prevalence of informal networks, practices, and structures in Africa, it is crucial to engage with these elements to increase participation and ensure that conflict prevention strategies are truly representative and effective. By integrating informal actors and community-based structures into formal processes, governments can foster a more inclusive and participatory approach that better reflects the realities on the ground. Furthermore, for national actions to sustain peace to be truly effective, they must be people-centered, prioritizing the full spectrum of human rights and placing the aspirations and needs of the population at the core of their strategies. An essential aspect of this is recognizing the significant role that religious authorities play within communities. Religious leaders often hold considerable influence and moral authority, making them key actors in shaping public opinion and fostering social cohesion. By integrating religious authorities into peace processes, governments and international organizations can leverage their unique position to mediate conflicts, promote dialogue, and encourage reconciliation. The shift towards a more inclusive, bottom-up approach is vital for creating sustainable peace and addressing the root causes of conflict in Africa.

In conclusion, the evolution of conflict prevention strategies in Africa requires a fundamental shift from traditional, state-centric approaches toward a more inclusive and adaptable

framework that integrates the continent's diverse realities. The persistent focus on formal, top-down mechanisms has often neglected the critical role of local actors, informal networks, and sub-regional organizations in addressing the root causes of conflict. To build sustainable peace, it is imperative that these strategies foster a culture of prevention, which means a comprehensive approach that permeates all levels of society, including the private sector, and recognizes that preventing violence is a long-term, ongoing effort. It is imperative that this preventive culture become ingrained in national, regional, and international actors' agendas as a regular practice. In addition to persuading these players of the value of preventive policies, it calls for making sure that a cooperative group of preventive stakeholders operationalises these policies. Significant barriers still exist, though, such as misgivings about the viability and legitimacy of preventive action as well as difficulties organising multinational initiatives. A decentralised strategy is required to get beyond these obstacles, giving local stakeholders and regional organisations the freedom to take the lead in developing contextually appropriate solutions. African countries and their allies may better address the dynamic and transnational character of modern conflicts by instituting a culture of prevention in every aspect of society. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of prevention efforts but also helps to create a resilient and peaceful society, where the prevention of violence is seen as a shared responsibility and an integral part of governance. As we move forward, it is essential to view conflict prevention not as a temporary measure, but as a continuous, collaborative process that evolves with the changing landscape of risks and opportunities on the continent. By cultivating this culture of prevention, we can ensure that peace becomes a durable and ingrained aspect of African societies.

Focusing now on the case studies analyzed in the previous chapter, it should be emphasized that the history of UN peace operations in Africa is marked by many successes but also by failures.

When discussing failures, the case of MINUSMA, the UN established mission in Mali in 2013, cannot go unmentioned. In fact, this was the first time that a State has officially requested the withdrawal of a UN peacekeeping operation. The mission has been fraught with a multitude of challenges that have significantly impeded its ability to fulfill its mandate effectively. Indeed, since its inception MINUSMA has been deployed under difficult security conditions. Despite the mission's presence, the country has remained plagued by violence, largely driven by various armed groups, including jihadist factions, that targeted MINUSMA personnel.

Unsurprisingly, it has been given the unpleasant primacy of the UN's deadliest peacekeeping mission. Another factor was the ethnic tensions that has escalated in various parts of the country. MINUSMA has struggled to mediate these conflicts, as its resources are stretched thin across a vast territory, and its presence in these regions is often viewed with suspicion by local populations. The mission's inability to prevent or effectively respond to intercommunal violence has been a significant shortcoming, contributing to a perception of ineffectiveness. Political instability within Mali has further complicated MINUSMA's efforts. The lack of a stable and legitimate government has been a major obstacle, as the mission relies on effective state institutions to implement its mandate. Moreover, the multiple coups have ed to a period of uncertainty and disrupted the fragile progress towards peace and stability. Beside resource constraints, also Mali' challenging geography has posed significant logistical challenges. Finally, MINUSMA has operated in an increasingly hostile environment. The mission has faced growing hostility and resentment from some segments of the Malian population, who view MINUSMA as ineffective or even complicit in the failures of the Malian government. This local hostility has manifested in protests, and in some cases, attacks against UN forces. There have been expectations for quick results, but the complex and entrenched nature of the conflict in Mali has made it impossible for MINUSMA to meet these expectations, leading to widespread criticism and calls for a re-evaluation of the mission.

One of the mission's primary goals was to stabilize the country and reduce violence. However, nearly a decade after its deployment, violence persists at alarming levels, calling into question MINUSMA's effectiveness. The fact that large areas of the country remain outside the control of the central government, serving as safe havens for armed groups, is a clear indicator that MINUSMA has not succeeded in its objective of restoring security. In terms of supporting the political process, MINUSMA's impact has been limited. The mission was tasked with assisting in the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement, which was intended to bring an end to the conflict and establish a framework for long-term peace and stability. However, progress on the peace process has been slow and fraught with difficulties. Key provisions of the agreement, such as the disarmament of armed groups and the decentralization of government authority, have seen little to no implementation. The mission has been unable to foster the necessary conditions for the peace agreement to take hold, and as a result, the underlying issues that fuel the conflict remain unresolved. The lack of local ownership of the political process has also been a significant barrier. Many Malians view the peace process as externally imposed, with limited involvement from local actors. MINUSMA's inability to bridge this gap and foster genuine local engagement has been a major shortcoming.

When it comes to protecting human rights, MINUSMA's record is mixed. While MINUSMA has documented these abuses and issued reports, its capacity to prevent them has been limited. The mission has often been criticized for failing to protect civilians effectively, particularly in regions plagued by intercommunal violence. In some instances, MINUSMA has been accused of being slow to respond to emerging threats, which has undermined its credibility and effectiveness. While MINUSMA was expected to coordinate with humanitarian agencies to address these issues, its efforts have been hampered by security concerns and resource limitations. Moreover, MINUSMA has struggled to address the root causes of the humanitarian crisis, such as poverty, underdevelopment, and the absence of basic infrastructure. The mission's focus on security, while necessary, has sometimes come at the expense of addressing these underlying issues, which are critical to achieving long-term stability and improving the humanitarian situation.

The assessment of MINUSMA's performance is reinforced by criticisms and concrete evidence that suggests the mission has largely failed to achieve its objectives. One of the most compelling pieces of evidence pointing to MINUSMA's failure is the continued and, in some areas, escalating violence across Mali. Despite being one of the UN's largest and most expensive peacekeeping missions, Mali remains in a state of chronic insecurity. Further criticism is directed at MINUSMA's failure to achieve significant progress in key areas outlined in its mandate, such as the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement, which has seen minimal advancement. Key provisions remain unfulfilled, and the peace process has stalled, largely due to the lack of political will, ongoing violence, and the mission's limited influence over the key actors involved. MINUSMA's role in facilitating the political process has been criticized as ineffective, with many arguing that the mission has failed to provide the necessary support or pressure to ensure compliance with the agreement. The failure to make meaningful progress on the peace agreement is a significant indicator of the mission's inability to fulfill its political mandate, further contributing to the perception of MINUSMA as a failure. Local populations have also expressed growing discontent with MINUSMA, often viewing the mission as either ineffective or, in some cases, complicit in the failures of the Malian government. This disillusionment has been exacerbated by MINUSMA's perceived inability to protect civilians from violence or to deliver tangible improvements in their daily lives. Such hostility from the very communities MINUSMA is supposed to protect is a clear sign of the mission's disconnect from local needs and its failure to win the trust of the population. Moreover, this local dissatisfaction has sometimes translated into active resistance, making it even more difficult for MINUSMA to carry out its operations effectively. This evidence,

combined with the growing chorus of criticism from both within Mali and the international community, supports the argument that MINUSMA has been a failure in its efforts to stabilize Mali and bring about lasting peace.

One of the primary reasons for MINUSMA's failure is the inherent complexity of the conflict in Mali. The conflict is not a simple binary struggle between two opposing forces but rather a multifaceted and fluid situation involving a range of actors with differing agendas. These include jihadist groups, local militias, ethnic factions, and criminal networks, all of which operate across vast, poorly governed spaces. The conflict is further complicated by the historical and socio-political dynamics in Mali, including long-standing ethnic tensions, grievances over marginalization, and the legacy of colonialism. Another significant factor contributing to MINUSMA's failure is the issue of coordination. MINUSMA operates alongside a variety of other international and regional actors, including the Malian government, the French military (through Operation Barkhane), the G5 Sahel joint force, and various humanitarian organizations. However, coordination between these actors has often been problematic. There have been instances of overlapping mandates, duplication of efforts, and even contradictory strategies. A further underlying reason for MINUSMA's failure is the flawed nature of its mandate. The mission's mandate, as outlined by the UN Security Council, is ambitious and broad, covering a wide range of issues from security and political stabilization to human rights protection and humanitarian assistance. While these objectives are all important, the mandate has been criticized for being unrealistic given the complexity of the conflict and the resources available to the mission. The broad mandate has forced MINUSMA to spread its efforts across multiple areas, often leading to a dilution of focus and impact. Finally, the lack of political will, both within Mali and among the international community, has been a critical factor in MINUSMA's failure.

Some strategic adjustments and practical interventions might have significantly enhanced its effectiveness in Mali. One of the primary steps towards making MINUSMA a success would have been a more focused and realistic mandate. From its inception, MINUSMA was tasked with an ambitious set of objectives, ranging from stabilizing security to supporting political processes, protecting human rights, and delivering humanitarian assistance. However, this broad mandate, while well-intentioned, diluted the mission's effectiveness by spreading its resources too thin across a wide array of complex issues. A more focused mandate, tailored to the specific challenges of Mali, would have allowed MINUSMA to concentrate on achievable goals. Additionally, setting realistic, incremental objectives aligned with the on-the-ground realities in Mali could have led to more measurable progress, fostering greater international

and local confidence in the mission's capabilities. Also, as previously mentioned, the mission operated alongside various other organizations, thus improving coordination with them would also have been crucial. Establishing a more integrated approach, with clear communication channels and joint strategic planning, could have prevented these issues and ensured that all actors were working towards a common goal. Adequate funding from the international community, coupled with a robust supply of necessary technology, logistics, and intelligence capabilities, would have significantly enhanced MINUSMA's operational capacity. For example, the mission could have invested in advanced surveillance drones to monitor vast and difficult-to-access areas, providing real-time intelligence to ground forces and enabling quicker responses to emerging threats. Moreover, a greater emphasis on capacity-building for Malian security forces and local governance structures would have been crucial. By empowering Mali to take greater responsibility for its own security and governance, MINUSMA could have facilitated a gradual handover of responsibilities, reducing the country's dependency on international forces and fostering long-term stability. Another vital component of a successful MINUSMA mission would have been deeper engagement with local communities. Building trust and establishing meaningful relationships with the local population are essential for any peacekeeping mission. For instance, MINUSMA could have initiated community dialogue sessions in conflict-affected areas, allowing residents to voice their concerns and directly participate in decision-making processes. Additionally, the mission could have supported local conflict resolution mechanisms, such as traditional justice systems, to address disputes over land and resources that often fuel intercommunal violence. By investing in community-based initiatives and ensuring that local populations felt genuinely included in the peace process, MINUSMA could have fostered a more supportive environment for its operations. Moreover, the mission could have organized regular roundtable discussions that brought together representatives from the government, rebel groups, civil society, and local communities to discuss the implementation of the peace agreement and address any emerging issues. Finally, addressing the root causes of the conflict in Mali would have been key to achieving long-term peace and stability. While MINUSMA's primary focus was on immediate security concerns, it was also crucial to address the underlying issues that fueled the conflict, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, and economic disparities. Indeed, MINUSMA could have collaborated with development agencies to build schools and healthcare facilities in underserved regions, providing tangible benefits that would improve the quality of life for local populations and reduce the appeal of extremist groups. Additionally, initiatives focused on economic

empowerment, particularly for youth and marginalized communities, could have reduced the appeal of joining armed groups.

Shifting now attention to MINURSO, the mission was created with a specific mandate: to oversee a ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front, and to organize and conduct a referendum that would allow the people of Western Sahara to choose between independence and integration with Morocco. However, more than three decades later, the referendum has yet to take place, and the political status of Western Sahara remains unresolved. This failure to achieve its primary objective is often cited as evidence that MINURSO has been unsuccessful in fulfilling its mandate. The referendum has been repeatedly delayed due to disagreements over voter eligibility and the broader geopolitical interests of the involved parties. The lack of progress on this front has led to a protracted stalemate, with MINURSO unable to break the deadlock. The mission's limited mandate, which does not include a human rights monitoring component, further restricts its ability to address broader issues in the region, such as allegations of human rights abuses on both sides. Despite these challenges, MINURSO has had some successes, particularly in maintaining the ceasefire that has largely held since 1991. The mission has played a crucial role in monitoring and maintaining peace between the Moroccan forces and the Polisario Front, preventing a return to large-scale armed conflict. This contribution to regional peace and security should not be underestimated, especially considering the broader instability in North Africa and the Sahel.

MINURSO's legacy could be considered as mixed because while it has succeeded in its peacekeeping role, has failed in its peacebuilding mission. To enhance its effectiveness and make a meaningful impact on the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict, MINURSO could adopt several strategic and operational improvements. Firstly, the Security Council should authorize an increased presence of MINURSO military forces and civilian police in the Moroccan-controlled territories. This heightened presence is essential to prevent any intimidation and restrictions on access and movement that have previously compromised the transparency and fairness of the referendum process. The Security Council should also take a firm stance by publicly calling on the Moroccan government to cease any obstruction of UN operations. Furthermore, the Secretary-General should be instructed to order an independent investigation into MINURSO staff who may have compromised the UN's impartiality by siding with Morocco during the identification process or by pressuring subordinates into engaging in improper conduct. This investigation should aim to uphold the integrity of the mission and ensure that all staff members adhere to the highest standards of impartiality and

professionalism. Considering that one of the most significant limitations of MINURSO is its lack of a human rights monitoring component, incorporating it into its mandate would enable the mission to address allegations of human rights abuses. For example, MINURSO could establish dedicated human rights teams to investigate reports of abuse, ensuring that all parties are held accountable. To break the political deadlock, MINURSO could play a more active role in facilitating confidence-building measures between Morocco and the Polisario Front. These measures could include organizing prisoner exchanges, enabling family reunifications across the berm, and promoting joint economic projects that benefit communities on both sides. For instance, MINURSO could assist in setting up neutral zones for these exchanges and provide logistical support to ensure their smooth execution. By fostering trust between the parties, these initiatives could pave the way for more substantive negotiations on the future status of Western Sahara. Additionally, MINURSO could convene regular high-level meetings with regional stakeholders, including Algeria, to explore broader regional solutions to the conflict and, thus, actively facilitating dialogue and break the current impasse. To enhance its effectiveness, MINURSO could strengthen partnerships with regional organizations such as the African Union and the Arab League, as well as with key international actors, including the European Union. Moreover, since engaging directly with community is crucial, increasing transparency through public information campaign and social media outreach could help MINURSO to build greater trust. Finally, even if immediate progress is not possible, keeping the referendum on the agenda through new negotiation on voter eligibility would maintain pressure on the parties to reach a political compromise.

Like MINUSMA, the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) operates in a highly sensitive and contested region, with a mandate to maintain peace and stability amid ongoing political and ethnic tensions. However, the context, mandate, and specific challenges of UNISFA differ in significant ways, offering a complementary perspective on the successes and limitations of UN peacekeeping in Africa.

UNISFA can be considered a success in several critical areas. First and foremost, it has played a vital role in maintaining relative peace and preventing large-scale conflict in the Abyei region. The deployment of Ethiopian peacekeeping troops, who make up the bulk of UNISFA's forces, has been instrumental in creating a buffer between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Army of South Sudan. This military presence has significantly reduced the likelihood of direct clashes between the two nations, particularly in the tense period following South Sudan's independence in July 2011. The mission's peacekeepers have

provided a crucial security presence, deterring violence and offering protection to the local populations. For instance, during seasonal migrations, when tensions typically rise between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities, UNISFA's presence has helped to prevent violent confrontations. Furthermore, UNISFA has contributed to humanitarian efforts in the Abyei region by facilitating the safe delivery of aid and ensuring that humanitarian organizations can operate without interference. In a region plagued by poverty, underdevelopment, and the legacy of conflict, the ability of UNISFA to secure and support humanitarian corridors has been vital in addressing the basic needs of the population. This role has been particularly important given the region's isolation and the lack of infrastructure, which complicates the delivery of aid.

Despite these successes, UNISFA has faced significant challenges that have limited its effectiveness and raised questions about the mission's overall success. One of the most critical limitations is the mission's restricted mandate, which does not include a comprehensive political component. UNISFA was primarily established as a security force, tasked with maintaining peace and protecting civilians, but without a clear mandate to facilitate a political resolution to the Abyei dispute. This lack of a political mandate has meant that while UNISFA has been able to prevent violence, it has not been able to address the underlying causes of the conflict or bring about a lasting solution to the status of Abyei. Another significant challenge has been the continued failure to implement the Abyei Protocol, which was part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the Second Sudanese Civil War in 2005. The protocol called for a referendum to determine whether Abyei would join Sudan or South Sudan, but this referendum has been repeatedly delayed due to disagreements over voter eligibility— specifically, whether the Misseriya nomads, aligned with Sudan, should be allowed to vote.

To address the limitations of UNISFA and enhance its overall effectiveness, the mission must evolve beyond its current mandate. UNISFA's mandate has traditionally focused on security and maintaining peace, but it lacks a strong political component necessary for resolving the underlying conflict over Abyei's status. The Security Council should expand UNISFA's mandate to explicitly include political mediation between Sudan and South Sudan, as well as between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities. This could involve appointing a high-level UN Special Envoy dedicated to Abyei, who would work closely with both governments to break the deadlock over the region's final status. Additionally, the envoy could organize community dialogues within Abyei to address local grievances, such as land use disputes between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya, potentially leading to interim agreements that reduce tensions and foster cooperation. Regarding the referendum issue, UNISFA could deploy additional troops to ensure security at polling stations during the referendum, preventing

intimidation or interference by any party. Moreover, UNISFA could collaborate with international observers to monitor the voting process, ensuring transparency and legitimacy. To resolve the voter eligibility dispute, UNISFA could help establish a joint voter registration commission that includes representatives from both the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities, supported by independent experts to verify voter lists. Moreover, UNISFA could address the root causes of humanitarian crises through development projects. For instance, it could partner with NGOs and international development agencies to build and maintain water wells in drought-prone areas, reducing competition over water resources between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya. The mission could also support the construction of schools and healthcare facilities, providing education and medical services to both communities and promoting long-term development. In summary, UNISFA has made significant contributions to maintaining peace and stability in the Abyei Area, but it faces substantial challenges that limit its overall effectiveness. By expanding its mandate to include political mediation, facilitating the Abyei referendum, strengthening community engagement, improving logistical capabilities, increasing humanitarian support, advocating for the implementation of agreements, expanding international partnerships, and enhancing transparency, UNISFA could address these challenges more effectively.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of the United Nations' efforts in conflict prevention and management, particularly within the African continent. Through the examination of three case studies—Western Sahara, Abyei Region, and Mali—this research has highlighted both the achievements and limitations of UN peacekeeping missions in complex and evolving conflict environments. Indeed, while these missions were established with clear objectives tailored to the unique challenges of their respective regions, they have encountered significant obstacles that have often hindered their effectiveness.

The analysis of MINUSMA, UNISFA, and MINURSO reveals a complex picture of United Nations peacekeeping efforts in Africa, highlighting both the achievements and limitations of these missions in preventing and managing violent conflicts. Each mission was established with specific objectives tailored to the unique challenges of their respective regions—Mali, Abyei, and Western Sahara. However, the successes and failures of these missions reflect broader trends in UN peacekeeping on the continent, offering valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the UN's approach to conflict prevention and resolution in Africa. In a broader context, the role of the UN in Africa's conflict prevention and resolution efforts remains vital but requires significant enhancement to meet the evolving challenges on the continent. The cases of MINUSMA, UNISFA, and MINURSO suggest that for the UN to be more effective in Africa, peacekeeping missions must be supported by comprehensive strategies that go beyond mere conflict containment. Strong political mediation, active community involvement, and long-term development programs targeted at resolving the underlying causes of violence should all be part of these tactics. Furthermore, in order to provide more resilient and context-specific solutions, the UN must collaborate closely with regional organisations like the African Union, ECOWAS, and IGAD. Incorporating regional viewpoints and capacities into UN peacekeeping missions helps guarantee that interventions are more in line with local conditions and more prepared to bring about enduring peace.

The mixed outcomes and challenges faced by MINUSMA, UNISFA, and MINURSO may signal a broader shift in the landscape of United Nations peacekeeping in Africa, potentially marking the end of an era for large-scale UN operations on the continent. These missions, each with their unique mandates and contexts, reveal underlying issues that question the viability and effectiveness of such expansive and complex peacekeeping endeavors in Africa's evolving

geopolitical environment. Over the past few decades, conflicts in Africa have taken on a radically different aspect, becoming more complicated, fragmented, and ingrained in regional socio-political processes. In the instance of MINUSMA, the mission's objective was to stabilise a war involving numerous non-state actors, such as criminal networks, jihadist organisations, and ethnic militias, in addition to conventional state actors. The difficulties the mission encounters in executing its mandate in this particular context highlight the limitations of traditional peacekeeping models. These models were originally developed to supervise ceasefires between state actors rather than addressing intricate conflicts involving asymmetric warfare and deeply entrenched local grievances. Therefore, in order to prevent maintaining the status quo or escalating already-existing conflicts, more focused, adaptable, and locally grounded approaches could be required, with a stronger focus on political solutions, community engagement, and addressing order. Furthermore, these missions, for all their scale and breadth, have frequently lacked the resources necessary to meet the demands made of them. The difficulty in securing adequate funding and personnel reflects a broader issue within the UN system, where peacekeeping missions frequently struggle to garner the necessary international support, both in terms of political backing and material resources. Another factor that signals the possible end of an era for large-scale UN operations in Africa is the increasing role of regional organizations in conflict management and peacekeeping. Organizations like the African Union and sub-regional bodies such as ECOWAS and IGAD have become more active and assertive in leading peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts on the continent. As regional organizations grow more capable and confident in managing their own security challenges, the UN's role may increasingly shift to providing support and resources for these locally led efforts, rather than leading large-scale operations itself. This shift could allow for more context-specific responses that are better attuned to the cultural, political, and social dynamics of the regions in question, while also promoting African ownership of peace and security issues. This potential shift would not necessarily mean the end of UN involvement in Africa's security landscape but rather a transformation in how the UN engages with the continent's conflicts. By focusing on supporting regional efforts and deploying more specialized, nimble missions, the UN could enhance its effectiveness in preventing and resolving conflicts in Africa, while avoiding the pitfalls of overstretched mandates, resource limitations, and prolonged engagements with no clear exit strategy.

In conclusion, this thesis argues for a strategic transformation in the UN's approach to conflict prevention and management in Africa. The future of UN peacekeeping in the region may lie in

a supportive rather than a leading role, where the focus is on empowering regional organizations, fostering sustainable peace through long-term development initiatives, and addressing the root causes of conflict. This strategy necessitates a shift away from traditional peacekeeping methods and towards more flexible, context-aware tactics that are more suited to address the intricate reality of contemporary African conflicts. In the end, the contradictory results of UN peacekeeping operations in Africa underscore the necessity of ongoing evaluation and innovation in global conflict prevention approaches. The UN can help build a more resilient and peaceful continent where preventing violence is a shared responsibility and a fundamental component of governance by adopting a more cooperative and locally based approach.

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