

# HEMISPHERES

THE TUFTS UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

*Hemispheres, The Tufts University Undergraduate Journal of International Affairs*, is the oldest academic publication of its kind. In 1975, under the direction of an energetic group of students including Shashi Tharoor, the future undersecretary-general of the United Nations, the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts established the *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*. Motivated by the *Fletcher Forum's* success, in 1977 students in the Tufts undergraduate program in International Relations established their own academic journal of international affairs. In 2017, *Hemispheres* celebrated its 40th anniversary as the premier publication of one of the most prestigious international affairs programs in the country.

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THE TUFTS UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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# Letter from the Editors

As students of international affairs, power is the language we first learn to speak. In introductory classes or seminar discussions, we continuously scrutinize structures of authority, influence, and control that shape interactions on the world stage. We are taught that—if there is a common thread underlying dominant frameworks of international affairs scholarship—it is the characteristic anarchy of the international system that leaves a vacuum for emergent hierarchies. While some scholars see in these hierarchies an inescapable state-centric structure, others choose to privilege normative interpretations. This year, our contributors lay bare shifts, inversions, and disruptions in manifestations of these hierarchies. The second issue of our 48th volume takes the theme “Trading Places” beyond traditionally intuitive analyses of great power politics and security studies in international affairs. Instead, it investigates often overlooked shifts of hierarchies in socioeconomic, electoral, diplomatic, and postcolonial spheres.

This is not to understate how important recent developments have been for those traditional concerns. The past year saw a series of significant realignments in global power structures. In stark contrast to the previous administration, President Donald Trump resumed his confrontational approach to U.S. alliances, casting doubt upon long-standing security commitments in Europe and Asia, openly threatening NATO partners with funding cuts, and undermining the sovereignty of neighbors Canada, Mexico, and Greenland. Meanwhile, his administration has escalated trade tensions with China, reinforcing economic decoupling efforts. The BRICS bloc continues to expand its influence, welcoming Indonesia as a new member in January of this year, following the 2024 additions of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. This expansion signals a growing challenge to Western-dominated financial institutions. Additionally, the shutdown of major international aid mechanisms has come as a shock to communities throughout the Global South, exacerbating already vulnerable humanitarian crises. Amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, the European Union not only grapples with the looming threat to its physical security, but also with growing risks to its energy and economic stability. Finally, the Israel-Gaza war continues to send ripples throughout the international community as questions about who defines international justice are once again brought to the fore.

Our contributors offer myriad interpretations that together paint a picture of what the theme “Trading Places” might represent in the international system. While Imogen Frazier at Wesleyan University analyzes the fluctuation of worker perceptions in Connecticut and Guanajuato as NAFTA evolved overtime, Charlotte Andreano of Columbia University explores the rhetorical manipulation of Jewish history by the German far-right, highlighting a concerning inversion of post-World War II sociocultural power structures. From a diplomatic perspective, Anna O’Sullivan at Tufts University examines the

U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, demonstrating the failure of coercive diplomacy and how it backfired in preventing Iran's nuclear proliferation. Finally, Mahree Annan at the St. Mary's College of Maryland investigates the extent to which inequalities rooted in political exclusion and economic exploitation affect peace management in critical rural geographies such as Casamance in southern Senegal.

Our interviews and editorials add yet another layer of novel perspectives on the theme. Magistrate-in-exile of the Venezuelan Supreme Tribunal, Luis Ramos Reyes, recounts his story of opposition to the Maduro regime, while former Deputy Finance Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Aleksashenko sheds light on Russia's fraught history with democracy. In addition, Professor Alex de Waal discusses peacebuilding and global power rivalry in the Horn of Africa. Finally, our editorialists examine the problematic concept of talionic justice in international law as invoked in the War on Terror; conduct a sentiment analysis of the first Trump and Biden administrations' rhetoric toward China; and propose solutions to the urban refugee infrastructure policy gap in Africa, using Kenya as a case study.

This year has been invigorating for *Hemispheres*. Our second ever mixed-media annual magazine last fall featured over 30 opinion and explainer pieces from our staff writers, almost double the length of our inaugural magazine issue the year prior. After tapping into our alumni network and meeting with our founder Dr. Stephen Davis, our members were infused with a sense of dedication to the legacy and continuity of the *Hemispheres* mission—resolute since 1976:

Believing that international understanding is of paramount importance in an increasingly interdependent world, [*Hemispheres*] seeks to stimulate and serve student interest and involvement in the study of global affairs.

—Stephen Davis

With every issue, we seek to reaffirm this commitment.

In closing, the Editorial Board would like to extend gratitude to everyone who made this issue possible. A great deal of effort was put into creating, curating, and polishing this selection of exceptional undergraduate research, by both our authors and our staff editors. In particular, we would like to thank Luis Ramos-Reyes, Sergey Aleksashenko, and Alex de Waal for their stimulating conversations with our staff. As always, our hope is that this selection will prove thought-provoking and spark further informed global discourse that is so desperately needed in today's polarized climate.

Yours,

Sam Sullivan, *Co-Editor-in-Chief*

Ishika Gupta, *Co-Editor-in-Chief*

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# Articles

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# Moving Parts: Trade Politics in High-Skill Manufacturing from CT to Guanajuato, 1994–2018

Imogen Satya Greenwald Frazier, *Wesleyan University*

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## PART I: WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS NAFTA?

### Introduction

Criticism of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by pro-labor politicians and worker unions in both the United States and Mexico has been long-standing, stretching from before the deal's inception in 1994 through well after the switch to the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020. The division between corporate interests and worker interests is equally established. Yet, the contemporary animosity between U.S. and Mexican workers as a mainstream attitude is a more recent development, stoked by former President Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> To better understand the origins of such animosity and its link to trade policy, a discussion of early disputes over NAFTA within the U.S. Senate is warranted. The dialogue that took place between proponents and opponents of the treaty sheds light on the diametrically conflicting analyses of trade and labor history during this watershed moment in the 1990s.

In the U.S. Senate hearing on NAFTA in 1993, most witnesses—including a former U.S. ambassador to Panama and then Senior International Officer of Citibank, William H. Rhodes—sang the praises of free trade and emphasized that Latin American political leaders would be unhappy if NAFTA did not pass. Still, one expert witness called to testify, Andrew A. Reding, director of the North America Project and Senior Fellow for Hemispheric Affairs at the World Policy Institute, stressed the importance of implementing increased labor protections in conjunction with NAFTA.<sup>3</sup>

Reding eventually went on to occupy “expert researcher” positions in both the U.S. Department of Justice and the U. S. Department of Homeland Security.<sup>4</sup> He was not a strict protectionist, especially not in comparison to later figures like Trump. He did, however, clearly explain to the Senate the implications NAFTA could have for laborers in Mexico. He also strongly recommended that the U.S. Senate ratify the American Convention on Human Rights, reminding the Senators that “a supplement to the Convention—the Additional Protocol on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—sets labor standards for the Americas. Central among these principles is the right to organize free trade unions.”<sup>5</sup>

Although NAFTA included labor provisions, Reding argued before Congress that they were not sufficiently integrated.

For decades, the basis of Reding's argument for supporting Mexican labor standards was not contentious in the Federal Government. In his 1949 inaugural address, President Harry Truman proclaimed that "guarantees to the investor must be balanced by guarantees in the interest of the people whose resources and whose labor go into these developments. The old imperialism, exploitation for foreign profit, has no place in our plans."<sup>6</sup> Following Truman's administration, presidents touted similar pro-labor principles for several decades, recognizing the recurring cycles of debt crises and inflation caused by the unchecked application of capitalism to Latin American economies.<sup>7</sup> Before President Ronald Reagan's administration rid the White House of this norm, the solutions put forth by the Oval Office were outsourced, including demanding the Mexican state take "an active role" in its economy to stabilize its commodity and capital markets in the 1950s and '60s.<sup>8</sup> These leaders at least openly acknowledged the gravity of the exploitation of Mexican workers under free trade. By contrast, the Mexican labor rights issue was of little concern to the neoliberal economic thinkers that shaped U.S. policy in the '90s. Some opponents to NAFTA, however, were still considering the question.

In the following section of this paper, "*Conflicting Economic Histories in NAFTA Hearing Testimony*," I use dialogue from the 1993 NAFTA Senate hearing to show how the two predominant trade policy schools of thought are grounded in two different understandings of trade history. Part II then lays out the changing views of high-skill Mexican and U.S. workers during and after NAFTA, as seen in a range of local news and government sources. In Part III, I argue that region-specific politics molded worker perceptions of trade history in each decade of the agreement.

On a broader level, this paper seeks to examine the historical relationship between workers and corporations under NAFTA in both Mexico and the United States. By examining local microhistories in areas where high-skill manufacturing labor unions and individuals were forced to adapt at the whims of corporate decisions, this interpretation of history aspires to foster mutual understanding and solidarity of union workers across the U.S.-Mexico border. Here, I will examine various shifting narratives in the historical record, such as changes in union rhetoric, media coverage, and political discourse, that color the impacts of trade policy on local populations.

How did workers and worker communities in Connecticut, U.S., and Guanajuato, Mexico, perceive NAFTA over its span? How did they navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by NAFTA-borne manufacturing sector developments? I found that throughout the period in question, manufacturing worker opinions on the deal in both Mexico and the United States were influenced almost as much by their experiences of economic conditions as by the regional political rhetoric prevalent at the time.

Furthermore, these opinions were far from static; they shifted over time, reflecting the broader social, political, and historical contexts in which workers

operated. I propose that the interconnected experiences of workers reveal a shared struggle against corporate exploitation, emphasizing the importance of cross-border solidarity under economic globalization. By exploring local narratives, U.S. scholars can better understand how policy changes affect not just economies, but also the lives and ideas of individuals and communities on both sides of the border.

## **Conflicting Economic Histories in NAFTA Hearing Testimony**

Even among leading academics and political thinkers, the truth about the state of North American trade in the years preceding NAFTA is heavily disputed. These conflicting understandings have divided the United States, not between left and right, but between so-called “free traders” and “protectionists.” In the second half of the 20th century, several Nobel Prize winners associated with the Chicago School of Economics proposed that all nations would be better off without tariffs. This concept, known as “free trade,” has since become the dominant economic philosophy.<sup>9</sup> On the other end of the trade ideology spectrum, “protectionists” held the conviction that limiting imports with trade barriers like tariffs, while supporting exports, would protect domestic industry.<sup>10</sup> Protectionist theory gained momentum in Latin American developing economies in a unique way, where famed Argentine economist Raúl Presbisch advocated industrial manufacturing in the Americas in the wake of World War II.<sup>11</sup> He argued that otherwise, the exportation of raw materials would keep Latin American economies subservient to the United States because of ever-declining prices of these raw goods.<sup>12</sup> The dialectic between free traders and protectionists has been fortified in textbooks over the years and has slowly seeped into the fabric of U.S. and Mexican societies, impacting how manufacturing laborers themselves viewed free trade agreements over time.<sup>13 14</sup> These ideologies have been shaped by the distinct versions of history that academics on each side rely on.

Indeed, the debate among economists, businessmen, labor advocates, and policymakers over trade policy and economic history started in the very Senate floor testimony that led to the passing of NAFTA, nearly 30 years after the dispute’s bloom. For Reding and other pro-labor protectionists, the narrative of declining real wages and labor abuses was key. The decline in the average real minimum wage in Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s coincided with a sharp increase in the number of billionaires in the country, which grew from one in 1987 to thirteen in 1994 and nearly doubled to 24 in 1995.<sup>15</sup> Notably, this exponential decline in real wages and rise in billionaires in Mexico was joined by an expansion of free trade policies between Mexico and the United States that culminated in NAFTA. This concentration of wealth was facilitated by significant corruption and became particularly evident in the privatization initiatives led by then President Carlos Salinas, who sold off more than a thousand state-owned enterprises to his Mexican elite political allies.<sup>16</sup>

On a broader level, the economic conditions in Mexico during the lead-up to NAFTA, including the 1982 debt crisis and the 1994 peso crisis, were shaped by the neoliberal policies of the time. Liquid Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) encouraged by free trade proponents meant foreigners could pull money quickly from Mexico in anticipation of a currency devaluation, worsening the pain of economic suffering for the Mexican people. More precisely, the decline in the average real minimum wage and the rise in wealth inequality align with the effects of NAFTA, as the agreement was part of the same broader strategy of economic liberalization that favored large international corporations. The concentration of wealth, facilitated by privatization under Salinas, arguably paved the way for the kind of economic environment that NAFTA exploited, where corporate profit and economic efficiency were prioritized over domestic labor interests. This was something many workers on both sides of the border resented.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, Reding's critique of NAFTA becomes particularly relevant as it represents the transnational sentiments of workers in the early 1990s, going against the grain of popular free trade ideology of the time. Just as free trade academics saw rising GDP and increased trade flows as justifications for continued neoliberal policy, Reding's vision of the past also informed what he believed.<sup>18</sup> Based upon his understanding of the effects of neoliberal trade policy on Mexico, Reding told Congress that changes to NAFTA would be necessary to avoid worsening worker quality of life. He notes in his opening statement that "the side agreements merely seek—and very gently at that—to enforce differing national standards. In the case of labor, the right to organize free trade unions is explicitly left out. That is peculiar, since by definition—there can be no free market without free labor."<sup>19</sup> "Free labor," as used in this quote, references a worker's ability to organize freely, associate with trade unions, and collectively bargain for safety standards, factory conditions, and fair benefits without restrictions or interference. Reding goes on to say that "free markets are the ostensible aim of international trade agreements such as NAFTA." In other words, the status quo was not enough. The quotation exposes the fundamental contradiction within NAFTA, highlighting how the exclusion of labor rights undermines the very principles of free trade that the agreement purports to support. This internal contradiction is crucial context for a dialogue later in the testimony that bluntly represents the blind eye U.S. Congress turned on its own experts when considering labor issues of its neighboring Latin American country.

The dialogue in question is between Mr. Reding and NAFTA Committee Chairman Senator Dennis DeConcini, a then-freshman Democratic representative of Arizona with a staunch pro-business stance. One section in particular illuminates the intractable dynamic of differing historical world-views. Reding raised a point of concern about the trends in economic reforms, drawing a parallel with the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, where he argued that the benefits of growth were disproportionately channeled to the top one to five percent of the population. He referenced reports from security and CIA analysts, suggesting

that the benefits of Mexico's economic growth were not reaching the majority of the population.

In response, Deconcini focused on job availability and GDP growth in Mexico as a metric of worker wellbeing, rather than income inequality or labor standards. In his version of history, Mexico saw great financial gains during the 20th century and, thus, had nothing to complain about. However, Reding countered by shifting the focus of the conversation to the catastrophic decline in real wages early in the reform period, an aspect of the economic experience that Deconcini overlooked in his assessment of the situation.

Deconcini replied by reminding Reding that, in the very year in which this testimony took place, the peso had been devalued by the Mexican government and was stabilizing. The devaluation drove investment from the country and plummeted wages, necessitating a quick fix to wages, Deconcini argued, that could be accomplished by U.S. investment in Mexico through NAFTA. Reding didn't disagree with Deconcini that U.S. investment in Mexico could have positive impacts on wages, but he did remark that after the stabilization of the Mexican economy, real wages did not rebound as expected. He compared this situation to Costa Rica, where wages typically rose faster than the economy after a crisis, but only in the presence of an independent labor force with free unions, collective bargaining, and the right to strike—asserting that NAFTA would be a threat to those four crucial factors.

In the end, the U.S. Congress *did* pass NAFTA and did not ever ratify, nor come close to ratifying, the American Convention on Human Rights, revealing the ultimate triumph of corporate interest over labor standards.<sup>20 21</sup>

Reding's testimony reveals a transnational understanding of worker rights that has since deteriorated in manufacturing and political spaces alike, accompanied by built-up resentment for the Mexican workers. In Trump's calls for the end of NAFTA at his first presidential debate in 2016 he said outright, "they're taking our jobs," referring to the Mexican people.<sup>22</sup> With competition between nations so strongly emphasized in political discourse such as this, transnational labor activism in North America, such as partnerships between Mexican, U.S., and Canadian unions, has endured, but achieved little.<sup>23</sup>

## PART II: VIEWS FROM HIGH-SKILL MEXICAN AND U.S. WORKERS

### Mexico

#### *Mexico: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2010s*

A focus on the benefits of FDI, or the flow of capital from foreign companies and governments into Guanajuato during NAFTA, was common in U.S. print media about the area throughout the 2010s. A *New York Times* article from 2013 entitled "In the Middle of Mexico, a Middle Class Is Rising" describes how the automobile manufacturing industry transformed Silao, Guanajuato,

Mexico.<sup>24</sup> Located in central Mexico, the state of Guanajuato has been a mining hub and exporter of raw metals and minerals since the colonial era.<sup>25</sup> Over the 20th century, its production of a vast range of goods slowly yet steadily grew. In the thirty years since NAFTA's enactment, the state saw a dramatic uptick in machine and aerospace manufacturing—what industries typically refer to as a “high-skill” export.<sup>26</sup>

The article describes the region by relying on an interview with Ivan Zamora, a 23-year-old local mechanical engineer. Zamora had witnessed the changes in his home state throughout his childhood and adolescence. The article asserts that Guanajuato was long known as a “mostly poor state” and as “one of the country’s main sources of illegal immigrants to the United States,” suggesting that Zamora might have left for the United States if not for the dramatic increase in opportunities that began emerging in Guanajuato. An academic journal corroborates the Times article’s narrative, referencing historical automotive data from the Mexican Ministry of Economy on various municipalities within Guanajuato. The data shows that, between 2006 and 2016, the automotive industry added over 18,000 jobs to Silao’s workforce, by far the largest number in the province.<sup>27</sup>

In Zamora’s depiction of NAFTA, the people of Guanajuato have some level of agency in the region’s economic success. It suggests that many of these companies originally entered Guanajuato to take advantage of low wages and maintain the trade benefits under NAFTA, but stayed because of government incentives and the efforts of the diligent local population. He writes that approximately 40 percent of all auto-industry jobs in North America are in Mexico, where thirteen years prior that same figure sat at just 27 percent. Dozens of foreign conglomerates had moved plant operations to Guanajuato by 2013, including major industrial players. Among them were General Motors (GM), a leading American automotive manufacturer; Volkswagen, a prominent German carmaker; Pirelli, an Italian multinational specializing in tire manufacturing for various vehicle types; and Nissin, a Japanese company that provided precision stamping and advanced tooling for automotive parts.

The interview offers an idyllic view of NAFTA’s impacts, and of Guanajuato more generally. Likewise, a 2011 academic article offers the narrative of local civilians taking full advantage of the new business from NAFTA and of company initiatives to create productive work environments in the Silao plants.<sup>28</sup> The research paper compares the style of organization at a GM automobile manufacturing plant in its original Mexico City location to the newer version of the plant moved to Silao, Guanajuato in 1995. It notes, for instance, that in the new Guanajuato GM plant “the continuous dissemination of technical knowledge, through the integration of work groups, information, and technological learning allows us to act and make, both individually and collectively, the most correct decisions within the production process.”<sup>29</sup> By emphasizing the role of knowledge-sharing and collaborative decision-making at the Silao GM plant, this analysis supports the argument that Guanajuato’s perception



of NAFTA in the 2010s was shaped by narratives of opportunity and modernization, even as labor challenges persisted.

The more positive vision of free trade is complicated by the context that NAFTA was implemented during great economic turmoil in Mexico—on the heels of the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s and in tandem with the 1994 Mexican peso crisis.<sup>30</sup> After a steady increase in interest rates and shortening of debt repayment windows globally, Mexico had reached a point in 1982 at which it could no longer repay, or “service,” its national debt. When Mexico’s minister of finance announced this debt crisis to the U.S. Federal Reserve and the International Monetary Fund, the announcement catalyzed a slew of 27 other developing countries, owing a total of \$239 billion, to reschedule their debts as well.<sup>32</sup> The result of the debt crisis in Mexico was a recession, sunken wages, failing banks, and low employment. Subsequently, just as the effects of the Latin American Debt Crisis were beginning to wane, the Mexican people were dealt another financial stab: In 1994, Mexico’s government deviated from its traditional monetary policy and devalued the peso against the dollar significantly as an attempt to stabilize it, incidentally leading to capital flight, a severe economic downturn, and ultimately the need for an emergency U.S.-led bailout to stabilize Mexico’s economy.<sup>33</sup> This was the era of poverty that Ivan Zamora’s grandparents lived through.

Reflecting back on the pre-NAFTA period from the 2010s, some argued that free markets harmed Mexican workers by prolonging the policies that caused the economic hardships of the 80s and 90s. Even the largely optimistic *Times* article reckoned that the “free-market wave of the 1990s failed to produce much more than low-skilled factory work.”<sup>31</sup> The statement suggests that, without government intervention, the initial impact of NAFTA on Silao, Guanajuato generated limited worker opportunity.

Although jobs at foreign firms typically offered higher wages compared to what had been available in Guanajuato before the companies established themselves on the market, factory floor employees still earned roughly \$3.65 per hour. This persisting low salary shows that floor workers continued to struggle with labor issues—issues the article earlier asserts were only “of the 1990s.” It also notes that higher-up professionals began to make up around 30 percent of the workforce at “many” of the automobile plants in the region. The use of the word “many” is noteworthy because it is non-specific and because it suggests that this professionalization trend was not uniform across all plants. Thus, while certain companies and locations may have experienced an increase in well-paid technical and managerial positions, others continued to rely on a predominantly low-wage, low-skill workforce.

Zamora’s was just one of several interviews conducted for this article by the *Times* that suggest some real opportunity did emerge in the 2000s, but that most trickle down in Guanajuato was driven by the strategic adaptation of local government rather than emerging as a natural consequence of free trade policy. For example, state-made improvements such as customs facilities, a railroad depot, facilitated transportation to the airport, as well as subsidized

standardized employment tests and training, transformed Silao. One change that had a particularly significant impact on Zamora's life was the opening of a new polytechnic university in Silao, where he got the chance to study engineering, and ultimately secure an internship in the field after graduation. This is something that he says his parents, who became teachers, did not have available to them. The Times' attitude is especially noticeable in a sweeping phrase used towards the end of the article, "on a smaller scale in Guanajuato, individual success is creating a sense of possibility."<sup>34</sup>

### ***Mexico: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2020s***

From the start of his first presidency, Trump sought to dismantle NAFTA. This was not because he acknowledged it was contributing to labor abuses in Mexico by deregulating corporations, but because it was in his political interest to push the idea that Mexican manufacturing workers were "taking" U.S. manufacturing workers' jobs.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, Trump's political ambitions led to the birth of a new trade deal between the United States, Mexico, and Canada called the USMCA. Since the transformation of NAFTA into the USMCA, including the addition of several hefty labor provisions that NAFTA lacked, Mexican perceptions of the original agreement have soured. Although it may not have been President Trump's intention, the introduction of the USMCA brought stronger labor provisions, prompting a reassessment of NAFTA that led to more critical evaluations of its impact on labor conditions, even within high-skill beneficiaries like Silao, Guanajuato. Recent sources thus paint a very different picture of what was occurring in Silao, Guanajuato, during the span of NAFTA.

Just this August, the U.S. Trade Representative's office recognized a complaint against the Pirelli facility in Silao that the company had denied workers the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, and demanded the Mexican government investigate within forty-five days.<sup>36</sup> A USMCA labor law enforcement clause establishes a tool called the Rapid Response Mechanism, making this kind of expedited workers' rights petition possible. The petition, filed by the workers of a local union called *La Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana*, provides evidence of mistreatment over time and further serves as local historical evidence of the working conditions in Silao during the duration of NAFTA. Under the USMCA, a growing number of interconnected cases against various companies reveal that union leaders in Mexico were controlled by the State or a corporation. This "charro" unionism went virtually unpunished under NAFTA.<sup>37 38</sup>

The most recent Rapid Response case illuminates how the perception of NAFTA shifted negatively after its end. The case was brought against both the company Pirelli and an allegedly conspiring union called the *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria Metal-Mecánica, SideroMetalúrgica, Automotriz y Proveedoras de Autopartes en General, de la Energía, sus Derivados y Similares de la República Mexicana* "Miguel Trujillo López," which translates to "National Union of Workers in the Metalworking, Iron and Steel,

Automotive, and Suppliers of Auto Parts in General, Energy, Derivatives, and Similar Industries of the Mexican Republic.” I will refer to the aforementioned union as “the MTL union” throughout this paper. In 2003, the MTL union was founded in the province of Coahuila, which borders the American state of Texas and sits two provinces north of Guanajuato.

Pirelli was neither the only company tied to the MTL union, nor the only plant accused of violating international labor law in Guanajuato under NAFTA. According to a 2021 article in *El Sol de México*, workers at the General Motors plant in Silao—that same plant that was praised for efficiency and job creation in the 2010s—were also strategically “neglected” by the MTL union’s leader Tereso Medina Ramírez for ten years.<sup>39</sup> This would mean that the labor violations began as early as 2011 but were not aired until the aftermath of NAFTA. Another 2021 article in the *Sol de León* elaborates on the same story, pointing to the distance between the union’s central location and Guanajuato as a major issue. The article asserts how the workers felt about the Coahuila-based union representing them on paper before General Motors: “*no tienen ningún tipo de arraigo con nosotros*,” meaning, “they have no ties with us.”<sup>40</sup>

## Connecticut

### *Connecticut: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 1990s*

The effects of NAFTA and economic liberalization in Guanajuato paralleled significant shifts within the manufacturing-heavy region of Connecticut. While NAFTA’s impact on labor in Guanajuato brought about challenges of low wages and uneven labor protections, the “upskilling” programs that came with it were viewed by the Guanajuato local government as opportunities for upward mobility.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, Connecticut unions upheld their labor standard demands and grew skeptical of “upskilling” programs that sought to reduce the number of employees necessary in each plant over time.<sup>42</sup> Connecticut workers also became wary of U.S. manufacturing companies like General Electric and Pratt & Whitney, as CEOs increasingly moved plant operations abroad.<sup>43</sup> Just as Mexican workers in Silao contended with issues of labor representation and job stability, U.S. industrial workers grappled with job relocations, wage pressures, and the weakening of union influence.

Over the course of NAFTA, manufacturing giants Pratt & Whitney and General Electric misled a Connecticut manufacturing union multiple times.<sup>44</sup> The impact of this betrayal can be best understood in the context of the New England state’s extensive history of manufacturing work. Pratt & Whitney first entered the Connecticut labor market when establishing operations in 1850s Hartford as a machine tool producer. They eventually transitioned in 1929 to designing aircraft engines. After World War II, the company expanded operations dramatically across the state and became Connecticut’s most prominent industrial employer. In 1920, General Electric first entered the Connecticut market when the company purchased a factory in Bridgeport.<sup>45</sup> After steady expansion in Connecticut over the course of the 20th century, General Electric

moved its headquarters in the early 1970s from Manhattan, New York City to Fairfield, Connecticut.<sup>46</sup>

The first major fracture of trust between Pratt & Whitney and the Connecticut workers occurred in 1993 as NAFTA was being passed through Congress. During the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) union contract renegotiations that year, the company was able to win significant agreements on wage reductions, less stringent seniority provisions, and even tax concessions from the Connecticut legislature.<sup>47</sup> The struggle between the two entities only heightened in the following years. This demonstrates how NAFTA's passage coincided with a critical moment in which many of Connecticut's manufacturing workers were beginning to distrust Connecticut-based multinational manufacturing corporations. It also illustrates how corporations like Pratt & Whitney exploited the climate of economic uncertainty surrounding NAFTA to secure a higher profit margin.

By December of 1998, the IAM union of District 91 in Connecticut reached an accord with Pratt & Whitney for a three-year contract.<sup>48</sup> Yet, within less than a year, the company announced plans to relocate critical engine repair work outside the state. The following year, General Electric would also move even further than other U.S. plants, launching its "Globalization and Supplier Migration" strategy.<sup>49</sup> Moving production to nations with lower labor costs was the only way for GE to reduce the 10 percent input price reduction targets to 14 percent that year, the company announced.<sup>50</sup> According to Forrant, the benefits of moving to Mexico included the potential for sustained low labor costs, more "friendly" unions, and "average daily wage rates of \$6.00."<sup>51</sup>

The experience of Connecticut's manufacturing workers in the 1990s reflects a broader shift in U.S. perceptions of NAFTA as a driver of labor insecurity rather than economic opportunity. Initially framed as a pathway to mutual economic growth, NAFTA instead exposed U.S. workers to heightened vulnerability as corporations like Pratt & Whitney and General Electric leveraged the threat of outsourcing to extract wage cuts, weaken union power, and justify plant relocations. From its start, NAFTA symbolized a deeper betrayal for workers in a state with a rich manufacturing legacy. While local governments in Guanajuato, Mexico, promoted NAFTA as a means for "upskilling" and economic mobility, Connecticut unions viewed corporate "upskilling" initiatives with suspicion, recognizing them as tactics to reduce workforce size. This growing cynicism about trade liberalization would later shape political discourse on globalization and trade policy well into the 21st century.

### ***Connecticut: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2000s***

By the 2000s, the notion that manufacturing jobs were disappearing as a result of NAFTA remained prevalent in CT local media, and yet, there was also awareness that the deal had a similar impact on Mexican workers. A 2006 *Hartford Courant* article rails on the damages of NAFTA to both Connecticut and Mexican communities, calling for Congress to reject the copycat Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).<sup>52</sup> The *Courant* claims that between

1993 and 2002, 12,720 Connecticut manufacturing jobs were “destroyed by NAFTA.” They also acknowledge the issues the deal posed for Mexico and the promises it failed to live up to there, noting the continued increase in labor issues in Mexico over the first decade of NAFTA. The Courant even pointed out that, “by flooding the market with highly subsidized American agricultural products, NAFTA destroyed 1.7 million farming jobs in Mexico.” The article purports that in the Central American countries in question (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, as well as the Dominican Republic), “workers, teachers, farmers and church leaders” were forming a movement to oppose the Trade Agreement after “Learning from Mexico’s tough lesson.” The article called for organizing a similar movement to oppose the Act in Connecticut. Nevertheless, any movement that may have emerged was unsuccessful, and CAFTA, NAFTA’s younger sibling trade agreement, was passed through Congress and ultimately implemented widely in 2006.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, local concern culminated in the introduction of a Connecticut State Senate Bill.

In 2007, Connecticut’s General Assembly proposed House Bill No. 7032 to address the retention of state manufacturing jobs.<sup>54</sup> The bill mandated that the governor review all existing state contracts by January 1, 2008, to identify those involving services performed outside of Connecticut and assess their economic impacts. It also established a 10-member task force to examine why Connecticut businesses outsource and how factors like taxes, regulations, energy, and healthcare costs contribute to this choice. The bill allowed state agencies to prioritize proposals from companies performing services within the U.S. when contracting and required transparency regarding service locations for state contract bidders. It even specified that contracts involving overseas service would have to include notification requirements and penalties for any unreported domestic changes—a condition that would have been helpful in the cases of Pratt & Whitney and General Motors. Additionally, the Attorney General’s office also assisted Connecticut businesses in protecting patents and other operations from unfair foreign competition. These details demonstrate the scope and political power of local concerns over manufacturing jobs in the early 2000s.

### ***Connecticut: Perceptions of NAFTA in the 2010s***

In the 2010s, the sentiment that machinist jobs were being drawn from Connecticut to Mexico was still popular. As the field began to shrink, lack of youth interest emerged as another common explanation for disappearing jobs. Simultaneously, the local government and media began to paint a picture of the still-growing employment gap as an affront to Connecticut culture, rooted in its manufacturing history and reputation as the birthplace of various notable inventions. Such cultural pride is evident in the Connecticut State Government account of local industrial history, which boasts the invention and production of the fuel cell that powered NASA’s first space suit, as well as the first nuclear submarine and helicopter. The website points to



these accomplishments as proof of the constituents' "Yankee ingenuity and stick-to-itiveness."<sup>55</sup>

A 2011 *Tribune Business News* article explored various perspectives on the decline of machine jobs in manufacturing companies.<sup>56</sup> One executive at the Kaman Corp., an aerospace manufacturing company located in Bloomfield, CT, answered the question of where jobs were going: "We're really competing with offshore companies. In aerospace, they're driven to lower-cost centers like Mexico and China."<sup>57</sup> Robert Desjardins of Granby, a CT machinist of 26 years who had been a victim of mass layoffs and was eventually re-hired by other companies multiple times between 2009 and 2011, subscribed to the idea that flat wages were driving the change. However, while some—like the Kaman executive—believed flat wages were a result of foreign competition, others complained that community colleges were not training machinists properly anymore, or that young people simply grew to regard manufacturing as "dirty." Whether this idea of "dirtiness" stemmed from the shift of many plant jobs abroad is not discussed in the article, but the two phenomena seemed to be occurring simultaneously.

The article concludes with the opinion of 52-year-old manufacturing worker Joe Morin on why job growth in the industry was slow and why it lacked so many young people. Mr. Morin himself had moved to Connecticut from Massachusetts because of manufacturing layoffs, and his wife, as a school-teacher, had a unique window into how youth saw manufacturing. Morin said all the volatility in the manufacturing job market had simply pushed high schools to encourage their students to attend college instead, and to seek a white-collar job as opposed to a blue-collar one.

Clearly, late into NAFTA, in the 2010s, manufacturing remained core to Connecticut identity, and the belief in the unfairness of trade policy for their industries also persisted. This phenomenon was still apparent in a piece written by Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy in the *Hartford Business Journal* in 2015:

Since I was elected to the Senate, I've learned that any factory in Connecticut can compete with those in China or Europe or Mexico. It's the wrongheaded trade agreements, like NAFTA, that harm our state's companies.<sup>58</sup>

Murphy's sentiments were not just a passing critique, but part of a broader political and socio-economic strategy. In 2011, industrial exports were the most successful sector of Connecticut's economy.<sup>59</sup> As such, Murphy emphasized local manufacturing as a priority in his campaign as early on as January, 2011.<sup>60</sup> His advocacy reflected a broader sentiment that had become increasingly common in the 2010s: the view that free trade agreements, especially NAFTA, had been designed without sufficient regard for the impact on U.S. manufacturing communities—high-skill industries included.

These frustrations in the 2010s blended with an acceptance of adaptation to a smaller workforce and a hope to maintain a competitive advantage, at

least in the most educationally demanding jobs. Not long after, though, the undercurrent frustration bubbled to the surface in the 2020s, where it was exacerbated by politicians. Representatives shamelessly used nationalist economic ideas as an easy unifier among U.S. workers, which soon turned to a hatred of Mexican workers.<sup>61</sup> All across the country, on both the right and the left, the nationalist argument has increasingly solidified itself as a tool to secure the working-class vote.<sup>62</sup> Nowhere was this nationalism more fervent than on Trump's campaign trail.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly following Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy emphasized how Democrats need "to listen to working-class Americans" in an interview with National Public Radio, attributing the election loss to a disconnect between the democratic party and the working-class voter base.<sup>64</sup> He spoke broadly, arguing, "We claim to be the party that represents working people, poor people. And yet, as you saw in this election, they are moving to the Republicans in droves. I think that is in part because we aren't listening to what is really driving people's emotional center right now." Murphy's success in a resilient, high-skilled manufacturing region like Connecticut indicates the strategic power of mobilizing emotionally resonant national narratives—like manufacturing decline—to win working-class votes.

### **PART III: CONCLUSION—SAME STORY, DIFFERENT TRUTHS**

#### **Ideological Trajectories of Guanajuato and Connecticut Workers**

Consider again the peaks and valleys of worker perception of and adaptation to NAFTA. If the trade deal itself were judged in a vacuum, workers might have an unchanging opinion, or a steadily worsening or improving view of it. Instead, each shift is dictated by a broader social, political, cultural, and historical context.

For Connecticut industrial workers, the 1990s marked a simmering disillusionment with globalization.<sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup> Many believed their livelihoods were becoming increasingly precarious. By the 2000s, the workers' experience of companies renegeing on agreements with unions combined with declining employment in the Connecticut manufacturing industry caused increased concern for the future among workers. Although revenues from exports in Connecticut were peaking, job availability was diminishing as cheap inputs from abroad flooded in and technological improvements made production processes more efficient.<sup>67</sup> In the 2010s, young people had begun to come to terms with the new structure and voluntarily train for other work. As fewer young people entered the field, the already shrinking specialty was left with growing vacancies. Subsequently, as NAFTA came under attack in Trump's first administration, the late 2010s ignited an all-time high of fear and anger at the deal.<sup>68</sup>

In Silao, however, manufacturing workers in the 1990s were cautiously hopeful, having been burned before by Salinas-era politics but desperate for job opportunity in the aftermath of the peso crisis.<sup>69</sup> The 2000s and early 2010s brought a slightly more optimistic attitude among workers, as governments in Silao and Leon began to adapt to attract and keep higher-skill manufacturing jobs.<sup>70</sup> Still, real wages remained low and many were quietly disgruntled with the persistence of poor labor standards even as business flooded in.<sup>71 72</sup> At the end of NAFTA and afterward, workers and politicians alike in the U.S. became more vocal about *their* dissatisfaction with the effects of the trade deal, and Mexican workers—including in Guanajuato—became outwardly wary of the stagnant wages and lack of adequate union freedoms.

In both places, it was in the years following NAFTA that the deal reached peak unpopularity among workers, based on evidence in the media and legal documents. Over the course of NAFTA, worker attitudes somewhat followed the economic conditions, but not entirely. Attitudes were mixed in both Guanajuato and Connecticut, where life was improving in some ways but worsening in others. In Guanajuato, this meant more high-skill jobs but stagnant wages and continued concerns over labor standards. In Connecticut, this meant revenue from cheap inputs and duty-free exports, but some outsourcing of labor and weakened unions. Ultimately, the strongest shift in perception of the deal came from the political weaponization of the effects of NAFTA. The perceptions manufacturing workers had of NAFTA, in both Connecticut and Guanajuato thus responded even more strongly to the politicization of NAFTA's effects than to the effects themselves.

## High-Skill, High Tolerance

The high-skill specialization of the Connecticut manufacturing economy maintained resilience compared to the American Rust Belt.<sup>73</sup> Aerospace and advanced auto parts, the predominant domains of Connecticut plants, proved far more resistant to outsourcing than the downstream metal products of the Midwestern plants. Low-skill labor is, after all, easier to source abroad. Meanwhile, engineering work—even at the assembly floor level—requires significant training and apprenticeship compared to simpler products.

Like Connecticut, Guanajuato is one of the few areas in Mexico today that still boasts a relatively high-skill labor force capable of producing complex automobiles and weapons. Largely thanks to the ingenuity of the local government, trade school and vocational training programs have flourished in Guanajuato, ensuring that the workforce is equipped with specialized skills.

High-skill workers “should,” according to the free trade philosophy, be quite happy as they gain more and lose less under NAFTA than other regions of their respective countries. However, it is evident that Connecticut’s “emotional center” is angry at the politicians who enacted NAFTA. What free-market enthusiast academics miss is that local culture, governance, and global political trends alter the public mind in important ways. The fact that



these two regions are full of “high-skill” manufacturers makes the emotional intolerance to free trade all the more surprising, and the weight of political influence all the more visible.

## Politicians Framing the Past

All of the worst “effects” of NAFTA were not inevitable, but rather hardline decisions made by private manufacturing firms to maximize profits. Despite this, by way of persuasive protectionist politicians, the predominant narratives around NAFTA in manufacturing communities have been framed as an issue of one country versus another, masking the true culprits.

One lesson embedded in the trajectories of worker attitudes in these two high-skill regions is that political will is incredibly powerful, as it cherry-picks which economic reality to emphasize. In 2018, Trump struck a deal with Foxconn, a Taiwanese manufacturer, to build a campus near Milwaukee, promising 13,000 jobs and calling it the “eighth wonder of the world.” Backed by \$4.5 billion in taxpayer subsidies, the project so far has only created 1,000 jobs, yet Trump still won the manufacturing vote in the 2024 election.<sup>74</sup> This scenario is reminiscent of the 2010s free-trade campaigns in Guanajuato. There, local government officials ran on a promise of worker opportunity and promoted that dream in the media, while also allowing union corruption and unlivable factory floor wages to persist. In both scenarios, optimistic and misleading political messaging eclipsed the politicians’ failure to address the issues at hand.

Although NAFTA is a story of the past, its history has many angles that can be emphasized. At least for now, the emphasis placed by politicians tends to become what is widely considered the truth. As evidenced in the case of *La Liga Sindical Obrera Mexicana*’s Rapid Response Mechanism petition against Pirelli, the USMCA has initiated a new wave of reevaluating trade history. If manufacturing workers in the United States and Mexico are ever to be free of the shared struggles against corporate exploitation, they should use the adjudication tools available in this new trade deal to their fullest extent. By bringing enough transnational labor cases to USMCA courts, it could be possible to collectively override political pressures and finally forge an accurate media narrative of cross-border worker solidarity that holds policy-makers accountable for their labor promises.

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# Strategic Alliances and Rhetorical Pivots: The Dangers of Germany's Contemporary Approach to Jewish History

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## Abstract

This article examines how two central tenets of German political life—a longstanding alliance with Israel and a firmly implanted culture of historical remembrance—have in recent years been manipulated by the state and by far-right nationalists to meet foreign policy goals at the expense of democratic freedoms. This shift is characterized by state censorship of academics and artists who seek to portray Jewish life as pluralistic and politically diverse. It is marked by extremist discourse that pits Christians and Jews as part of a culture war with Muslims. It is not solely a political or partisan problem, but has taken hold in the cultural and educational sectors, endangering the careers of educators, museum professionals, and creatives. It has even captivated a small minority of German Jews, who are fortified by the caustic rhetoric of anti-Islam politicians. Jewish history is at the heart of this conversation.

The politicization of antisemitism is an increasingly global phenomenon. From Europe to the U.S., right-wing politicians are using Israel and Jewish voters as political tools to prop up foreign policy projects and win domestic culture wars. While the security of Israel and the future of the Jewish people matter deeply to voters across the political spectrum in Germany, we must be attentive to the ways in which far-right parties and complicit governments are co-opting these fears to drive forward illiberal agendas. With an eye toward the future, this paper imparts the risks of promoting ethnonationalism and censorship as a solution to the problems facing Jewish populations.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the war in Gaza in 2023, Germany has reinvigorated its commitment to its Jewish constituents and to the Jewish homeland. Following World War II and the atrocities of the Holocaust, Germany developed the “Staatsräson,” now a cornerstone of German foreign policy, which identifies Israel’s security as a critical fixture of German statehood.<sup>1</sup> This post-war policy

has continued to color the nation's foreign and domestic policy doctrines, such that Israeli national interests are often elided with Jewish interests writ-large. This resulting dynamic is one in which the state views critics of Israel as de facto antisemites, which warrants interrogation.<sup>2</sup> Since the horrific attacks on Israel in October, the German government, led by center-left Chancellor Olaf Scholz, has developed a domestic strategy to combat antisemitism that, in practice, seems to erode democratic discourse more than fortify it. The state has chosen to privilege affirmations of support for Israel over democratic discourse about Jewish history and the future of the Jewish people. While this may appear to be a rational calculation given the legacy of the Holocaust and the contemporary resonance of the "Staatsräson," it's worth asking who the state is actually targeting with this campaign and who they are purporting to protect.

Though politically and ideologically distinct from the ruling party, Germany's far-right party, the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD), also maintains a conflicted relationship with Jewish history and Israel. The party has come under fire for antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust denial in the past decade, and has been labeled by the president of the World Jewish Congress as a "disgraceful reactionary movement."<sup>3</sup> Former AfD co-leader Alexander Gauland made national headlines with the comment that the Holocaust was but a "speck of bird poop" in an otherwise glorious millennium of German history.<sup>4</sup> Another AfD politician, Björn Höcke, criticized Berlin's Holocaust Memorial, lamenting that Germans are "the only people in the world to plant a monument of shame in the heart of its capital."<sup>5</sup> Recently, though, the party has changed its tune, with public statements about Jews and Jewish history that mirror the views of far more moderate sects of the German political sphere. The enduring centrality of the *Staatsräson* in German politics has made it such that radicalism in Germany is expressed principally through one's perspective on Jewish security and the State of Israel. The AfD's rapprochement with Israel benefits the party by quieting claims of antisemitism against them. Positive references to Israel thus align the AfD with the *Staatsräson* and Germany's governing coalition, enabling the party to move beyond the extremist fringes and into the mainstream.

Following Hamas' attack on Israel last fall, Germany's cultural sector—public intellectuals, museum educators and artists—has been disproportionately vilified by claims of antisemitism, while the true culprit—Germany's far-right—has largely escaped criticism. In the past sixteen months, museums have been encouraged to modify or eliminate programming that could be seen as sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.<sup>6</sup> At the Frankfurt Book Fair this past year, organizers canceled the award ceremony for the book "Minor Detail" by Palestinian author Adania Shibli, citing "the war in Israel."<sup>7</sup> Although the novel is set in 1949, the cancellation of the prize speaks to a desire within German cultural institutions to narrow Jewish history and identity such that all critiques of Israel, even historic or semi-fictitious, are off limits.

The AfD similarly subscribes to a rigid conception of the German-Israeli alliance, and of the German Jewish identity writ-large. The party seeks to

control the narrative on Jewish history from the top down, co-opting Jewish voices and casting the Holocaust as a historical anomaly disconnected from German ethnonationalist politics, while patching over their past mistakes with spirited overtures toward Israel. However, this strategic distortion of Jewish history is not limited to Germany's far right. The governing Social Democratic Party (SPD), who have steered Germany's response to the Israel-Hamas war, have increasingly relied on the censorship of artists and academics in order to squash discourse that is critical of Israel. Albeit in different ways, the AfD and the SPD both seek to narrow the state's conception of Jewish history for reasons of political expediency. Recognizing the pluralism of Jewish life and the depth of Jewish history threatens both parties, the AfD hopes that by reifying the *Staatsräson* they can gain widespread approval on the domestic political stage. For the SPD, maintaining Germany's alliance with Israel reinforces status quo foreign policy goals that stretch back to the mid-20th century. The AfD mimics the SPD and more moderate governing parties' kinship with Israel. This maneuver enables them to hide behind a politically expedient platform, utilizing the centrality of Israeli security to German political discourse to reach the minimum bar for entry into the mainstream, while allowing their more transgressive and discriminatory policy goals to go unnoticed.

### **The AfD: Rewriting History, Building Coalitions**

The AfD was established in 2013 by German conservatives Alexander Gauland and Bernd Lucke, who strongly opposed the multilateral economic policy promoted by Angela Merkel and sought to redirect the economy toward protectionism. Gauland and Lucke protested the government's response to the Eurozone financial crisis of 2009, when Germany bailed out many poorer European countries that had defaulted on their debt.<sup>8</sup> Although the AfD was formed primarily to promote German economic sovereignty, in subsequent years the party has gained traction with its emphatic anti-immigration platform. With each year since its founding, the AfD has gathered a larger vote share in the Bundestag (one house of Germany's parliament), from less than 5 percent of the vote in 2013 to over 10 percent of the vote in the 2021, and a staggering 20.8 percent in February of 2025.<sup>9,10</sup> This upward trend is representative of the AfD's increasing mainstream appeal among Germans of various demographics. Curiously, even German Jews have as of late been courted by the AfD with tailored messaging that pays lip service to the core tenets of Zionism. However, the party's campaign has made little progress in attracting the Jewish voting bloc, which has historically backed moderate and left-wing parties. While the AfD has strived to appeal to Jewish voters, a closer look at its wider political strategy is telling of the party's true intent.<sup>11</sup> The party's attempts to claim themselves as defenders of Jewish life in Germany are perhaps best exemplified by the formation of *Juden in der AfD* (Jews in the AfD) in 2018.

In a 2018 NPR interview, *Juden in der AfD* member Wolfgang Fuhl spoke candidly about his support for the AfD. Responding to claims that his support

for the AfD was unjustifiable given his Jewish identity, he asserted, “Believe me, I’m not being exploited by anybody . . . I’m a conservative person and I’d like to continue to live in Germany. We’re roughly 140,000 Jews in this country; it would only take a week for us all to leave. And we’d be leaving not because of the AfD or the right-wing extremists, but because of Islamic anti-semitism.”<sup>12</sup> Fuhl comments on a fundamental incompatibility between “Islamic antisemitism” and Jewish life in Germany. Whereas “right-wing extremis[m]” can coexist with Judaism, Fuhl explains, he asserts that it is Islamic hostility that could spell the end of Jewish habitation in Germany. This statement lays bare that Fuhl’s admiration of the AfD rests on its aggressive promotion of Zionism and ethnonationalism, not on some more fundamental appreciation of Jewish history and culture.

The AfD’s unrevoked antisemitic statements further suggest that their courting of Jews is insincere. The AfD has rehabilitated a number of terms highly associated with Hitler and Nazism, most notably *volksgemeinschaft* (“ethnonational community”) and *völkisch* (“folkish” but with ethnonationalist connotations).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the AfD of Saxony-Anhalt wished their Facebook audience a merry Christmas in 2015 with a post encouraging them to think about “shared values” and their “responsibility for the *Volksgemeinschaft*.”<sup>14</sup> Responding to backlash, the local head of the AfD described the term as “entirely unproblematic” and “highly positive.”<sup>15</sup> However, the concept of *volksgemeinschaft* was denounced in 2017 by Germany’s Federal Constitutional court, which stated that the term and its use “violates the human dignity of all those who do not belong to the ethnic *volksgemeinschaft*, and is incompatible with the constitution’s principle of democracy.”<sup>16</sup> The reclamation of the *volksgemeinschaft* and associated terminology speaks to a dramatic historical irony: Jews, who were once expelled from the *volksgemeinschaft*, have now been strategically incorporated within the ethnonational community and are being wedged between the German nationalists and their new enemy, Islam. We should see this tactic as evidence that the AfD is neither afraid nor ashamed to use the Nazi’s handbook for policy advice.<sup>17</sup>

Altogether, the AfD’s courting of German Jews can be understood as an electoral strategy to exit the fringe and become more politically competitive. This strategy does not signal an ideological shift whereby the AfD and its members no longer hold antisemitic stances. Instead, the AfD’s strategy to pander to Jews in order to make itself more politically palatable is just that: a strategy. Right-wing candidates appealing to Jewish populations is not unique to Germany, but the German case exposes the uniquely insidious ways the AfD has repositioned itself relative to Germany’s history of antisemitism. For much of the 20th century, antisemitism was an essential part of the intellectual framework of white supremacist movements around the world.<sup>18</sup> However, in the 21st century, blatant antisemitism no longer holds positive political weight; in Germany, it is particularly politically inexpedient.<sup>19</sup> Jews, Judaism, and Israel, however, are being increasingly employed as political tools by right-wing parties to gain leverage on other issues such as immigration and foreign policy.

In the decades following the fall of the Nazi regime, Germany began to positively identify with Jewish people and with Israel in a few key stages. In the era of Allied-occupied Germany, the four occupation zones underwent a uneven process of de-Nazification, whereby the occupying powers took different bureaucratic approaches to dismantling Nazi power and influence.<sup>20</sup> When Germany split into East and West in 1949, West Germany rehabilitated itself on the international stage by allying with the United States and with Israel, to which it paid reparations beginning in 1952.<sup>21</sup> East Germany, mainly controlled by the Soviet Union, is acknowledged by scholars as having undergone a much less comprehensive process of de-Nazification due to power struggles between the provincial government and the local population.<sup>22</sup> The West German alliance system of the mid-20th century persists in part today; Germany continues to maintain a special relationship with Israel, which relies on it primarily for military aid. For Germany, helping to defend Israel against outside hostilities is understood as a historical responsibility.<sup>23</sup> Germany's unique relationship with Israel, its *Staatsräson*, does not preclude German politicians from antisemitism, but it does help to explain why AfD members' positive references to Israel coherently fit with their nationalist agenda. Understanding that to be pro-Germany is to be pro-Israel, AfD party members seek to harness the rhetorical weight of Judaism, at the expense of a new national enemy, in this case, Muslims.

In order to claim Jews as a strategic ally, the AfD has relied on a de-racialized vision of Judaism and a highly racialized vision of Islam. As previously mentioned, the AfD has determined that German Jews now belong to the *volksgemeinschaft* alongside German Christians. Their inclusion is predicated on the minimization of Jewish ethnic difference, which was, less than a century ago, the motivating factor behind the Nazi extermination of Jews in Europe. At present, the AfD frames Muslim culture, from clothing and religious practices to food rules, as fundamentally incompatible with European life, and advocates for their removal from the body politic.<sup>24</sup> If Judaism is understood as a religion on a similar cultural plane to Christianity, and Islam is associated with racial difference and cultural foreignness, then the AfD can effectively push for ethnic segregation and redistribution. This approach would be similar to the Nazi deportation, ghettoization, and subsequent extermination of Jewish communities.

Since the refugee crisis of 2015, the AfD has redirected its focus from promoting fiscal sovereignty to building an identity based on anti-immigration rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> Between 2010 and 2016, 3.7 million Muslims arrived in Europe, the majority of whom were fleeing from violent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. For its part, Germany received roughly 1.3 million refugees from Muslim countries in these years, more than any other Western European destination besides the United Kingdom.<sup>25</sup> This influx of Muslim refugees to Germany resulted in an abrupt shift in policy priorities for the AfD and its adherents. A 2016 survey showed that 81% of AfD supporters strongly backed the idea of a cap on refugee acceptances.<sup>26</sup> In its 2016 manifesto, the AfD also

demanding a ban on burqas, Muslim head and face coverings, and minarets, the towers of mosques from which calls to prayer are projected.<sup>27</sup> Before long, the AfD's anti-immigrant sentiment found popular support. In the 2017 federal elections, the AfD won a historic 12.6% of the national vote and gained 92 seats in the Bundestag. The AfD fanned the flames of Islamophobia with new slogans such as "Der Islam gehört nicht zu Deutschland," (Islam does not belong in Germany) and "Burke? Ich steh' mehr auf Burgunder!" (Burka? I prefer Burgundy wine!).<sup>28</sup>

These slogans are consistent with the AfD's racializing of Muslims, emphasizing the racial and cultural difference of Muslims in order to depict Islam as incompatible with German identity. Björn Höcke, leader of the extremist *Der Flügel* faction of the AfD, explains that the threat of refugee settlement for Germans is "the death of their race."<sup>29</sup> By inviting refugees to seek citizenship in Germany, he claims, Germany faces "Africanization, orientalizing and Islamization."<sup>30</sup> These statements reveal the racial undertones of the AfD's complaint against immigration and Islam, which is again reminiscent of Hitler's racialized and caustic rhetoric toward Jews. Höcke appeals to a nativist camp that fears the integration of racial minorities (i.e., Arabs) into Germany.

The AfD and its supporters thus subscribe to an ethno-nationalist vision of state formation, whereby multiculturalism is a threat to national identity. This foundational viewpoint differs from extremist nationalist parties of Germany's past only in its vision of a solution. The AfD vehemently denies claims that it is a racist organization, and sees minorities returning to their home countries, their version of "social redistribution," as a solution they believe would serve both immigrant communities and German-born citizens.<sup>31</sup> This raises many questions: If the AfD claimed the chancellorship in Germany, how would Muslim relocation be enforced? How would the AfD go about physically redefining the *volksgemeinschaft*? It is imperative that we view the AfD's policy proposals not as empty words, but as genuine calls to action in order to create a state in which ethnic persecution en masse can emerge from its century old grave.

The refugee crisis and influx of hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees since 2010 has cemented the AfD's ethnonationalist vision by providing a perceived enemy to the ethnic order. A study of political rhetoric found that in 2017, 10% of all AfD rhetoric—spoken, written, or posted digitally—consisted of anti-Muslim statements.<sup>32</sup> At times, this rhetoric explicitly referenced the perceived clash between Muslim and Judeo-Christian religious practices. The AfD's 2017 manifesto at one point read, "the minaret and muezzin call contradict the tolerant coexistence of religions that the Christian churches, Jewish communities and other religious communities practice in modern times."<sup>33</sup> By showing favor to the "tolerant" Jews and condemning Muslims, the AfD has sought to distance itself from Nazism and recruit voters who are driven by anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant sentiments. The AfD's 2021 platform shared similar concerns over protecting Jewish people from Muslims, as this statement makes clear: "Jewish life in Germany is not only threatened by right-wing extremists, but also increasingly by anti-Jewish and anti-Israel Muslims."<sup>34</sup>



The constructed incongruity between Jews and Muslims is further marked by the AfD's assertion that Christianity and Judaism share a culture and historical legacy. Uli Henkel, an AfD representative from Bavaria stated in a 2019 interview that, "We also have Jews in the AfD. They are all people, yes, they are Jews, but they are Jews like I am a Christian and not much more." Henkel's statement, though convoluted, makes it clear that part of the AfD's co-opting of Judaism rests on the understanding that Jews are not meaningfully different from Christians in a cultural sense. This comparison dangerously disregards Jewish people's unique historical legacy in Germany, in what could be argued is a purposeful attempt to rewrite history. It also seeks to flatten sectarian differences between Christianity and Judaism, as well as within Judaism itself. With this warped vision of Jewish history, the AfD is able to frame German Jews as a societal monolith, which suits their nativist agenda. Broadly, it suits the AfD to view all stakeholder groups as distinctly homogeneous.<sup>35</sup> If Jews and Muslims are both monoliths, one righteous and ethnically incorporated, the other dangerous and foreign, the AfD can then pit the two against each other as opposing blocs.

## **Historical Memory and Contemporary Discourse in the Cultural Arena**

The flattening of Jewish identity and history has also played out in the cultural sector. Museums, particularly museums of German history or Holocaust memorialization, contribute to the production and reproduction of the modern German identity. Interrogating the country's role in the world and its fraught historical relationship with the Jewish people can bolster German historical memory, guiding future societal shifts while documenting the past. However, in a country that sees its *raison d'être* as linked to the redress of historical wrongs toward Jewish people, projects of historical interrogation are rarely seen to completion. Though more well-intentioned than the AfD's ahistoricism, the state funds exhibitions that narrativize troubling parts of German-Jewish history, particularly the Holocaust, into historical accidents rather than products of the ethnonationalist politics that thrived in Germany in the late 19th through 20th centuries. The AfD similarly attempts to minimize the history of the Holocaust, because by doing so, they mask the fact that their campaign against Islam is being performed on a similar ideological basis to Hitler's scapegoating of the Jews.<sup>36</sup> The Berlin History Museum, a state funded institution, is an apt site to examine how the state transcribes Jewish history for a national audience and silos Jewish identity and pluralism in the process.

The exhibition "Roads Not Taken. Or: Things Could Have Gone Differently," which opened at Berlin's Deutsches Historisches Museum this summer, examines the tension between reality and possibility in fourteen pivotal moments in German history. The exhibition, which works backwards in time—from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the 1848 revolution that failed

to democratize the German-speaking states—presents alternative historical trajectories which are brought to life with artifacts and analyses that seek to prove their plausibility. In doing so, “Roads Not Taken” looks to reject historical determinism and a rigid view of German history as inevitable. Dan Diner, a German-Israeli scholar of modern history, is the intellectual engineer behind “Roads Not Taken.” In his speech at the opening of the exhibition in December 2022 he remarked, “this exhibition aims to break with the teleological perception in that it not only focuses on the contingency, but also takes account of the events, happenings and tendencies that did *not* actually happen. To do this, it is necessary to jolt the predefined view that is fixed in the historical memory, to alienate it, as it were.”<sup>37</sup>

The process of “alienat[ing]” viewers’ preconceptions of German history is achieved, in part, through the reverse chronological ordering of historical information. This temporal reversal is designed to shake loose visitors’ mechanical understanding of German history, perhaps originally committed to memory in a primary school setting, and further reinforced by cultural institutions, memorials, and state-driven memory culture. The central “what if” question is animated by black and white stations that explain history as it happened, juxtaposed with colorful panels onto which historical possibilities are mapped.

The 1944 exhibition room is significant because it asks what would have happened had the 1944 attempt on Hitler’s life been successful. This is the only room in the exhibition that does not explore historical possibility; instead of colorful panels, the room is black and white in its entirety. The first wall explains history as it happened: officer Claus von Stauffenberg placed a bomb in Hitler’s meeting room on July 20, and Hitler miraculously survived the attack while much of the room was turned to rubble.<sup>38</sup> The adjacent wall, which in all other exhibition rooms is illuminated with creative historical reinterpretation, is painted with two words, “Zu Spät (Too Late).” No images or illustrations accompany the statement.

Where Diner could have explored a potentially altered timeline of the war, the political future of Germany under new leadership, or the geopolitical reverberations from Hitler’s death, the analysis of the historical moment focuses exclusively on the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Diner suggests that if Hitler were assassinated in 1944, it would have made a marginal difference to European Jews who by that point had been slaughtered by the millions in Nazi concentration camps and ghettos. While it has been statistically proven that the majority of Jews killed in the Holocaust died between 1941 and 1944, Diner’s analysis of the 1944 assassination attempt still rings hollow for certain reasons.<sup>39</sup>

First, Diner does not engage in the same rigorous historical interrogation for the 1944 room as he does in the others. He simply does not provide “roads not taken,” or alternative pathways for 1944, which contradicts the thesis and title of the project. Further, by declaring “too late,” Diner siloes Jewish history from German history, military history, and geopolitics. From one perspective,



Diner appropriately represents the tragedy of the Holocaust by removing it from the broader analytical framework. From this standpoint, it is a singular event in German history and should be treated as such. From another perspective, Diner doesn't respect the history of the Holocaust because he purposefully forgoes grappling with the topic on an intellectual level. The latter view appropriately acknowledges how a closed door for intellectual debate about Jewish history and identity is a dangerous path for Germany to tread. It is this view that guides the following critique of Diner's exhibition.

By treating Jewish history as static and uncontestable, Diner contributes to the mental and intellectual rigidity with which the German state promotes remembrance and historical teaching. There are numerous examples to show that the German state looks unfavorably on reinterpretations of Jewish history and will intervene to ensure that museums stay within the predetermined acceptable bounds of historical inquiry. Cultural institutions that center on German history are funded and steered by the federal government, which means that state-directed efforts to halt programming on German-Jewish history have the potential to seal off democratic discourse on Jewish life entirely.<sup>40</sup> Further, given how the AfD in recent years has used Jewish history as a political tool, it is crucial that museums remain the promoters of curiosity and the authors of historical analysis. Museums cannot forgo historical interpretation and allow far-right politicians to fill this gap and control historical narratives. If scholars cannot intervene in German memory culture, nor suggest that Germans consider the Holocaust in relation to a larger and more complex history of authoritarian politics and ethnic violence, the production of knowledge about Jewish history is effectively halted, and the state is to blame.

It is not a stretch to view Deutsches Historisches Museum's "Roads Not Taken" exhibition as participating in what is a state-led, purposefully narrow conversation on Jewish identity in Germany. What an exhibition such as "Roads Not Taken" should do is loosen interpretation of German history through creative curation, so as to emancipate viewers from their preconceived notions, and stimulate a fuller and more honest discourse around the German past and present. The way in which Diner's exhibit specifically failed to engage with the broader history of the Holocaust is representative of the limited conversation surrounding Jewish life in Germany. The treatment of Jewish history as unexamined or unfit for rigorous inquiry, however well-intentioned, is a weak point of the exhibition and a danger of state-led dialogue on Jewish identity. Further, if histories of state violence are not examined on an intellectual level, contemporary violence and scapegoating are more likely to go unresisted. The AfD is an example of this, capitalizing on the lack of rigorous discourse in order to villainize Muslims in Germany.

Museums such as the Deutsches Historisches Museum are part of the broader conversation on antisemitism that Germans have been grappling with for decades, albeit with renewed vigor since the Hamas-led attacks on Israel on October 7. Although many scandals in the cultural sector have centered on

the historical treatment of the Holocaust, state-funded cultural institutions appear willing to privilege Zionist interpretations of Jewish history even at its earliest moments. In 2018, an exhibition entitled “Welcome to Jerusalem” at the Berlin Jewish Museum generated criticism from high ranking Israeli politicians. The exhibition aimed to illustrate the city’s role as a site of religious importance and tension among Christians, Jews, and Muslims over time. Acknowledging the contentious nature of the subject, the Museum’s Director Peter Schäfer noted at the exhibit’s opening that it “does not aim to offer solutions” but rather was designed to “generate an understanding of Jerusalem’s special situation and help visitors to form their own opinions.”<sup>41</sup> Shortly after the opening, an unsigned letter surfaced entitled “German Funding of Organizations Intervening in Israeli Domestic Affairs or Promoting Anti-Israel Activity,” which was first reported by the German left-wing daily newspaper *Die Tageszeitung*.<sup>42</sup> The letter directly addressed the exhibit and condemned its supposed sympathy for the Palestinian cause. The Israeli government did not own up to writing it, but they publicly agreed with its contents. Emmanuel Nahshon, a spokesman for Israel’s foreign ministry, responded to the exhibit, stating that the Jewish Museum should not have “take[n] sides” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>43</sup> In Germany, an exhibit that aimed to stimulate constructive debate was not shielded by constitutional norms of unrestricted speech and pedagogy. Instead, museum employees were left unprotected to face a slew of backlash from a foreign government.

This suppressive action has only intensified since the war in Gaza began in 2023. In November of 2023, the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany closed a portion of a planned exhibition because one of the curators, Anaïs Duplan, had engaged with Pro-Palestine content on social media. The Museum statement on the curators release read: “This decision was made neither for artistic-curatorial reasons nor because of the exhibition’s theme, but solely because the curator personally takes sides with the BDS campaign, which questions Israel’s right to exist.”<sup>44</sup> The Museum took a curator’s personal convictions, as gleaned from likes on social media, as substantial evidence to omit Duplan’s work from the upcoming exhibition. In a startling episode in January, the Berlin Senate for Culture initially endorsed, then subsequently removed, a clause that tied public funding for artistic projects to organizations’ written recognition of Israel’s right to exist. The intervention of Israeli officials in the matters of German public education and the influence of German foreign policy on museum programming presents pedagogical as well as political problems.<sup>45</sup> The German state has a genuine commitment to counteract antisemitism, but it has become clear, particularly since the Hamas attacks on Israel in October, that attempts to protect Jews in Germany have coincided with an attack on political and intellectual discourse and an increasing tolerance of the AfD, which pays mere lip service to the *Staatsräson*.

## Conclusion

How is it that one of Germany's main political parties engages in Holocaust denial while intellectuals are thwarted in their attempts at historical reinterpretation? Germany's far-right actors and politically moderate cultural institutions have jointly contributed to a statewide myopia about the pluralism of Jewish life and the complexity of Jewish history. To best represent and promote the understanding of Jewish history in Germany, the state must allow cultural institutions to solicit the intellect of a diverse array of artists and academics. A forced halt on historical inquiry, as it relates to Jewish history, harms Jews and other religious minorities because it allows the state to designate in and out groups without being questioned by the broader public. This is what happened in Hitler's Germany, and it can happen again if the AfD's acquiescence to Israel at the expense of Muslims is not understood as what it is: ethnonationalism in the guise of protecting Germany's Jewish minority. By taking an uncompromising stance on Israeli politics, quashing democratic discourse on Jewish history, caving to the AfD, and policing the pedagogy of cultural institutions, the government is jeopardizing its relationship to its Jewish population and spelling its own democratic decline.

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# The U.S. Abandonment of the JCPOA: How Coercive Diplomacy Backfired

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## Introduction

In July 2015, Iran, the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany), and the EU reached a landmark agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that promised to relieve sanctions against Iran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear program.<sup>1</sup> After the JCPOA went into effect, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regularly verified that Iran was fully compliant with its terms, and the agreement achieved its goal of curtailing Iran's nuclear activities.<sup>2</sup> However, in May 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and instate a "maximum pressure" strategy of sanctions against Iran—both reimposing the U.S. sanctions that the JCPOA had lifted and adding new ones aimed at Iran's oil and banking sectors.<sup>3</sup> The Trump administration aimed to coerce Iran into negotiating a stricter nuclear deal on U.S. terms, but President Trump's intended negotiation never happened. In the years since the U.S. exit, Iran has incrementally abandoned its commitments under the JCPOA and escalated its nuclear activities, reaching unprecedented proximity to weaponization capability.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will address the question: *How has the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA impacted Iran's nuclear proliferation?* I argue that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA served as a decisive catalyst for Iran's decision to escalate its nuclear activities beyond JCPOA compliance. Specifically, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, compounded by the subsequent imposition of "maximum pressure" sanctions, undermined U.S. credibility as a negotiating partner, empowering Iranian nuclear hardliners and reframing proliferation as a necessity to resist Western coercion. Therefore, the attempt to wield coercive diplomacy by leaving the JCPOA not only failed but actively backfired, driving Iran to unprecedented levels of nuclear activity. I identify Iran's nuclear weapons proliferation as the dependent variable and the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA as the independent variable. The key intervening variables are Iran's decreased willingness to cooperate with the United States and the increase in the power of hardline factions in Iran.

Some argue that Iran's nuclear escalation has been driven by broader regional dynamics like Iran's conflict with Israel, not U.S. coercive diplomacy. This suggests that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA simply removed an external constraint, enabling Iran to pursue a preexisting goal of nuclear armament. While external threats are a large driver for Iran's proliferation, this argument ignores the backfire effect: the way support for nuclear weapons can change as a direct result of facing coercive diplomacy.

By demonstrating how coercive diplomacy backfired in this context, this paper contributes to existing scholarship on the limitations of coercive diplomacy, particularly when applied to authoritarian regimes. Iran is edging closer to nuclear weapons capability and has escalated its rhetoric around its intent to weaponize its nuclear arsenal.<sup>5</sup> As the United States crafts its next diplomatic steps toward Iran, policymakers must be aware of the inherent risks of coercive diplomacy.

This paper employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on theories of coercive diplomacy and regime behavior to analyze evidence, including Iran's post-JCPOA nuclear activities, domestic political shifts in Iran, and rhetoric coming out of Tehran. The remainder of this paper is organized into three parts. First, I outline a framework for analyzing the efficacy of coercive diplomacy and give a theoretical background for its tendency to backfire when used against strong authoritarian regimes. Next, I apply this theoretical basis to the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA, demonstrating how it failed as a coercive strategy and then how it actively catalyzed Iran's nuclear escalation. Finally, I discuss the implications this has—both theoretically and practically—for our understanding of coercive diplomacy and the future of U.S.-Iran relations.

## Theoretical

This section situates the research question within the broader literature on coercive diplomacy and authoritarian resilience. It grounds the preferred hypothesis in these theories and introduces the “demand-threat” model and the backfire effect as the primary theoretical tools on which the argument will rely.

### *Theory*

Coercive diplomacy is a strategy that uses threats to compel a target state to change its behavior.<sup>6</sup> The coercer's goal is to make noncompliance appear costly to the target while offering compliance as an opportunity to de-escalate and avoid further consequences.<sup>7</sup> By balancing pressure with a pathway to resolution, coercers seek to achieve their objectives without reaching full-scale conflict.

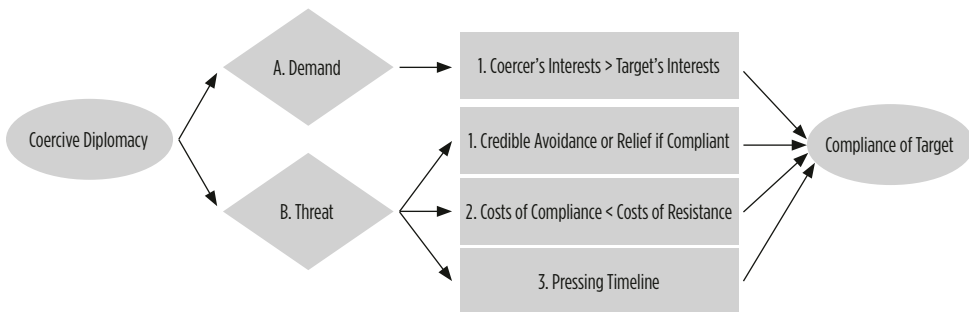
Political scientist Alexander L. George, renowned author of texts on coercive diplomacy, defines it specifically as a defensive strategy—one that is a response to an adversary attempting to “change a status quo . . . in his own

favor.”<sup>8</sup> He argues that the offensive use of the same measures must also be analyzed as a form of blackmail strategy. Since this paper focuses on the offensive use of coercive diplomacy, I considered this argument. However, modern scholarship uses the term coercive diplomacy in both offensive and defensive cases. While I continue to use the concept of coercive diplomacy throughout this paper, I am informed by George’s argument that offensive coercive diplomacy may have a different nature, and I use it to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the offensive nature of coercive diplomacy in the case of the U.S. exit from the JCPOA may have impacted Tehran’s reaction.

George explains three factors to evaluate coercive diplomacy’s efficacy. First, the coercer must convincingly communicate to the target state that the costs of noncompliance outweigh the benefits. Second, the target must also believe that acquiescing to the coercer’s demands would avoid or relieve the threatened consequences and potentially yield benefits. Finally, the strategy will be more effective if it operates under either an implied or explicit time frame, signaling urgency and reducing the target’s ability to delay or deflect consequences.

Building on George’s influential framework for coercive diplomacy, this paper introduces a refined model by organizing its key components under the two parts of coercive diplomacy they relate to: demands and threats. This organization aims to make it easier to identify where failures in coercive diplomacy originate and to show the necessity of both demands and threats succeeding in tandem in a coercive strategy. This approach does not seek to replace George’s model but rather to enhance its analytical utility.

**Figure 1:** My Adjusted Model of Efficacious Coercive Diplomacy—  
The “Demand-Threat” Model



### ***Proposed Demand Threat Model***

When analyzing the demand of the target state, which forms the first part of this model, it is important to examine how much the coercer demands and how willing the coerced state is to comply with those demands. George explains the concept of an *asymmetry of interests*, which is when either the coercer or the target has a much greater stake in the issue. If the coercer has a greater stake in the *asymmetry of interests*, they are more likely to succeed in their coercive diplomacy. However, if the coercer goes “beyond its own vital or

important interests, and its demands infringe on the vital or important interests of” the target state, then coercive diplomacy is far less likely to succeed.<sup>9</sup> In short, the more excessive the coercive state’s demands are, the less likely the target is to acquiesce.

Circumstances can warp each party’s perception of their own stake in the issue. Wallace J. Thies hypothesizes that “the longer the bureaucratic battles involved . . . the greater the stake each participant will have in ensuring that his preferred course of action is adopted.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if there is a history of coercive diplomacy between the two parties, both will perceive their interests as heightened when a novel instance of coercive diplomacy arises. Additionally, Drury and Li explain that the public nature of coercive diplomacy can raise both sides’ interests. Both parties feel the need to put on a show of strength in both the imposition of (for the coercer) and resistance to (for the target) coercion when they are exposed on the international stage.<sup>11</sup> All of these factors contribute to the balance described in A1.

Turning to a theoretical examination of the second prong of my framework—threats—B1 emphasizes the critical role of credibility. For a coercive threat to be effective, the target state must believe that compliance will lead to tangible relief or avoidance of the threatened consequences. Compliance will appear futile if the target perceives that coercive measures serve ulterior motives, such as signaling strength to the coercer’s domestic audience or achieving unrelated strategic objectives. Reid Pauly explains that if a target does not feel it has credible assurances, it is unlikely to acquiesce to a coercive demand.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, for a threat to be effective, a coercer must have credibility in their promises to remove the imposed consequence upon compliance.

Moving to B2, the costs associated with complying versus resisting coercive diplomacy can vary. One factor that can influence said costs is the method by which coercive diplomacy occurs. In particular, coercive diplomacy is less likely to be successful when conducted through sanctions, especially when used against an authoritarian regime. As Kirshner explains, sanctions are most effective when they target the government or the populations it relies on for its power, such as a key voting demographic.<sup>13</sup> Authoritarian regimes do not rely on citizens for elected power, meaning to be effective, sanctions would have to target the political elite themselves.<sup>14</sup> However, sanctions often affect the civilian population of a state, not its political elite who can insulate themselves from their effects.<sup>15</sup>

There can still be political costs for authoritarian leaders when sanctions create civil unrest among the populace. However, authoritarian leaders often suppress dissent and political competition and deflect blame for economic or social hardships onto external powers.<sup>16</sup> Hellmeier explains that since authoritarian leaders have influence over the media and public discourse, they can shape narratives that foster nationalism and an “us versus them” mentality, portraying foreign pressure as a threat to national integrity. This narrative is particularly effective in the case of Western pressure against authoritarian regimes.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, though sanctions can impact a nation’s economy, their

efficacy in driving acquiescence to coercive diplomacy is severely undermined when they are imposed on authoritarian regimes.

Finally, B<sub>3</sub> is crucial to the efficacy of threats. A well-structured timeline helps raise the stakes of noncompliance by tying immediate consequences to a failure to act within the specified period. If the timeline is perceived as overly flexible or indefinite, it undermines the coercer's threat and gives the target state opportunities to strategize around the coercion or even leverage it to rally domestic or international support.<sup>18</sup>

For a coercive effort to succeed, both the demand and threat prongs of this model must be fulfilled. A failure in one prong undermines the other. If the demand is perceived as infringing on the target's vital interests, compliance is unlikely, regardless of the credibility of the threat. On the other hand, even a reasonable demand will not succeed if it is matched with a threat that lacks credibility.

### ***The Backfire Effect***

However, focusing solely on the "success" or "failure" of coercive diplomacy overlooks a part of its impact. A "failed" instance of coercive diplomacy can involve far more than simply a failure to comply; it can actively drive outcomes that are counter to the interests of the coercer, creating a backfire effect. It is important to distinguish this effect from a lack of compliance, as the two are very different outcomes.

One factor that drives the backfire effect is the "us versus them" mechanism. Not only does this mechanism allow authoritarian leaders to avoid the costs of sanctions, but it also fuels anger that can lead to the "emergence of rally[-around-the-flag] effects," which is when support for a leader, government, or aggressive strategy rises in times of conflict.<sup>19</sup> Snow and Benford reveal that this effect is particularly strong when leaders offer a "solution" or a counter to the outside attack.<sup>20</sup> In the case of U.S. sanctions on Iran, the counter would be revitalizing the nuclear program. Therefore, in trying to weaken a regime, a coercive policy can end up catalyzing its militarization.<sup>21</sup>

Another major factor driving the backfire effect is the potential impact of coercive diplomacy on domestic politics in the target state. Kaempfer et al. established that "sanctions can alter the alignment of domestic interests and thereby generate a change in policy."<sup>22</sup> However, much of the literature on this subject focuses on opposition groups and how they can be mobilized by sanctions and simultaneously weakened as authoritarian leaders ratchet up repression in the face of criticism. This scholarship is important, but it presupposes the existence of a somewhat cohesive opposition group.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it is important to establish how sanctions affect domestic politics in authoritarian regimes where opposition groups are fractured like Iran's.<sup>24</sup> Beyond opposition dynamics, RezaeeDaryakenari et al. show that domestic priorities within a regime can shift in the face of sanctions to support more militant, anti-coercer ideologies.<sup>25</sup> This can bring individuals and parties into power who stand in direct opposition to the interest of the coercing regime.

## Empirical

This section demonstrates that U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA undermined previous diplomatic gains, decreased Iran's willingness to cooperate with the United States, and strengthened hardliners in Tehran, thereby catalyzing Iran's nuclear escalation.

### *Background*

Prior to the JCPOA, U.S. policy toward Iran overwhelmingly relied on coercive diplomacy.<sup>26</sup> Iran's nuclear program became the target of U.S. coercive diplomacy around 2002, marking the beginning of U.S. efforts to prevent Iranian nuclear proliferation through sanctions and threats.<sup>27</sup> However, Iran continuously showed resilience and an ability to adapt its strategies despite decades of economic and political pressure.<sup>28</sup>

The 2015 JCPOA was a rare deviation from coercion, yielding benefits for both Iran and the United States.<sup>29</sup> Iran received major sanctions relief, and the United States secured Tehran's agreement to stringent restrictions on its nuclear program. Importantly, by addressing Iranian concerns through negotiation rather than coercion, the agreement succeeded in reducing proliferation risks in ways that coercive measures had been unable to achieve over the previous decade.<sup>30</sup>

However, the JCPOA did not radically improve U.S.-Iran relations, nor was it intended to. It was a deal targeted specifically at reducing Iran's nuclear behavior, and U.S. sanctions on Iran over "rogue behavior" and human rights violations remained in place.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, a worldwide attitude of celebration surrounded this newfound diplomacy between Iran and the United States on nuclear matters, which was viewed as a major victory for nuclear governance.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, there were massive celebrations in Iran, fueled by the prospect of a post-sanction era.<sup>33</sup>

Importantly, the JCPOA worked to fulfill the West's goal of limiting Iran's proliferation activity. From 2015 until U.S. withdrawal in 2018, Iran complied with the agreement's terms, as confirmed by regular IAEA reports detailing compliance with restrictions on uranium enrichment and the dismantling of advanced centrifuges.<sup>34</sup> Tehran's compliance with the deal significantly lengthened the time it would have taken them to develop a nuclear weapon.

However, the JCPOA's fundamental weakness is that it was not a treaty. The Obama administration chose not to submit it to the U.S. Senate, recognizing that it would have failed to get the votes needed to secure formal treaty status.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the JCPOA was not binding for the United States, allowing any future president to exit the agreement. When Trump, who had openly expressed his intention to adopt an aggressive stance toward Iran during his 2016 campaign, was elected president, it became increasingly likely that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA, despite Iran's compliance with all the terms of the agreement.

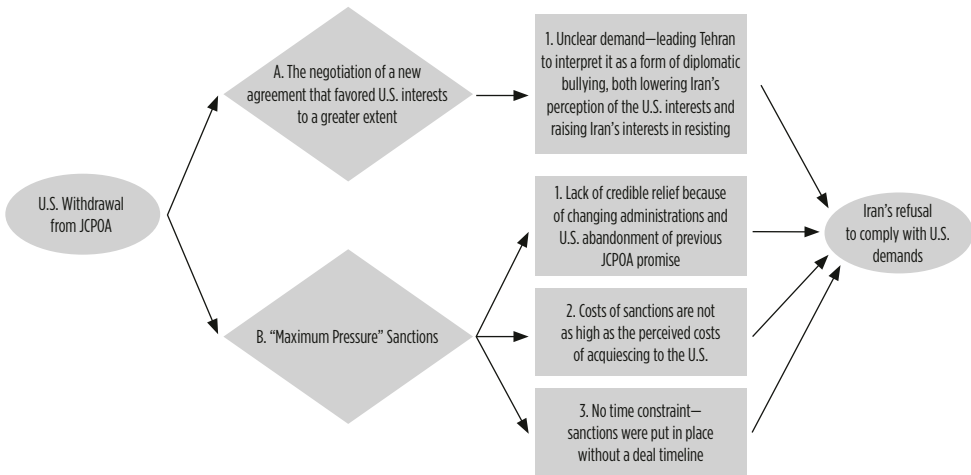


Early in the Trump administration, frequent threats to abandon the deal created significant economic and diplomatic repercussions. Specifically, international businesses were wary of the potential imposition of U.S. sanctions and avoided engaging with Iran.<sup>36</sup> This curtailed the economic benefits Iran had been promised in the JCPOA. Therefore, despite the United States still being an official signatory of the JCPOA, Tehran realized they would not receive all that they had been promised.

When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018 and imposed intensified sanctions, it marked a full return to coercive diplomacy in U.S.-Iran relations. The administration's "maximum pressure" campaign aimed to force Iran into renegotiating on U.S. terms by inflicting severe economic hardship.

### The Failure of Coercive Diplomacy

**Figure 2:** An Analysis of the Failure of Coercive Diplomacy Using the Demand-Threat Model



According to A1 of the demand-threat model, the U.S. demand created much higher stakes for Iran relative to the United States, because Trump's vague demand of a "better deal" for the United States was interpreted by Iranian leaders as evidence of the United States attempting to undermine Iran's sovereignty. For example, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that focusing on the nuclear issue was "just an excuse" for the United States to take hostile action against Iran.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, following the imposition of sanctions, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif posted on X, "Economic terrorism and genocidal taunts won't end Iran."<sup>38</sup> These two leaders' responses reflect the view that the sanctions were meant to pose an existential threat to Iran. Therefore, because Tehran saw U.S. demands as a threat to the regime's survival, Iran's stake in the issue—maintaining their sovereignty—was far greater than any stake the United States could claim.

Furthermore, because the Trump administration simply demanded a “better deal for the U.S.,” the U.S. stake in pursuing coercive diplomacy was unclear. But even if there had been more clarity in the Trump administration’s particular demands, there still would not have been justification for the United States to pursue coercive diplomacy. Under the JCPOA, Iran already faced stricter restrictions than other Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory states and had been complying with them. The U.S. demand had been fulfilled: the nuclear weaponization threat Iran posed had been effectively neutralized. Therefore, in comparing Tehran’s perception of an existential threat and the lack of a clear goal from the United States it is evident there is an asymmetry of stakes with Iran having a greater one.

There are additional factors that raise the stakes for Iran. Since Iran had already complied with strict restrictions on its nuclear program, agreeing to a stringent deal proposed by the Trump administration would likely mean accepting a far more degraded status than other NPT signatories. Publicly neutering its nuclear program, or even coming to the bargaining table after the aggressive nature of U.S. demands could have great implications for Iran. Tehran positions itself as the leader of the “axis of resistance,” a coalition based on defending against Western imperialism.<sup>39</sup> This status characterizes Iran as a steadfast power that refuses to capitulate to U.S. demands, even under extreme economic or political pressure. Iran’s allies had celebrated the JCPOA,<sup>40</sup> a deal that benefitted both parties. However, Iran feared that if it publicly acquiesced to U.S. pressure on the “maximum pressure” sanctions, its regional power would be undermined.

According to B1 of the demand-threat model, a threat’s efficacy depends on the coercer’s ability to convince the target that compliance will lead to relief of the threat. To Tehran, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA demonstrated that the United States was an unreliable negotiating partner and incapable of honoring agreements, regardless of Iran’s compliance. Then Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani lamented U.S. withdrawal: “The U.S. has announced that it doesn’t respect its commitments.”<sup>41</sup> Iran had no reason to believe that the United States would follow through on relieving the “maximum pressure” sanctions if Iran entered negotiations. Therefore, Iran determined that there would be no point in acquiescing.

Furthermore, despite the substantial costs of economic sanctions on crucial industries like oil and banking in Iran, they did not outweigh the costs of compliance, thus failing B2. This is partially because the economic hardship does not significantly affect Iran’s political elite. The political elite involved in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a military force that reports directly to Khamenei, are observed to “benefit irrespective of sanctions increasing or decreasing due to [their] monopoly on the Iranian economy.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the Iranian government was able to lower the possibility of public unrest due to sanctions by framing these hardships as a consequence of U.S. hostility toward the nation rather than any governmental failures.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, public support for the government and anti-Western sentiment

increased among Iranian citizens across ideologies following the imposition of “maximum pressure” sanctions.<sup>44</sup>

Addressing B3, the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign lacked a coherent timeline. It did not include dates by which Iran was to meet certain demands or risk being sanctioned. Sanctions were emplaced incrementally following the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA without Tehran being told how to avoid them besides giving the United States a “better deal.” This allowed Iranian leaders to view the sanctions as a long-term possibility rather than a short-term crisis and reduced the urgency Tehran felt to respond. In turn, Tehran deemed they had the space to establish their own timeline for counter-threats. On May 8, 2019, President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran would begin to abandon some of the JCPOA’s limitations—including enriched uranium limits and restricted nuclear reactor construction—unless the other JCPOA signatories attempted to protect the Iranian oil and banking sectors.<sup>45</sup> The Iranian parliament took action on this threat in December 2020, and voted for a law “that demanded an acceleration of the production of enriched uranium, the renewal of the heavy water reactor at Arak, the suspen[sion] of the IAEA Additional Protocol, [and the] reduc[tion] [of] cooperation with the IAEA inspectors” if sanctions on the oil and banking sectors were not removed within a few weeks of Biden’s inauguration.<sup>46</sup> By forcing the United States and its allies to react to Iran’s actions rather than allowing the United States to control the timelines, Iran was able to shift the dynamic of coercion.

### *The Backfire Effect in Action*

Iran did not simply resist the U.S. demand for a new deal, but actively began to scale up its own proliferation. This is a clear example of the backfire effect of coercive diplomacy.

When the sanctions were not lifted on its timeline, Iran fully abandoned its JCPOA commitments and began to proliferate at an unregulated rate. Tehran explicitly linked this choice to U.S. coercion. An official Iranian government statement read, “if the sanctions are lifted and Iran benefits from its interests enshrined in the JCPOA, the Islamic Republic is ready to return to its commitments.”<sup>47</sup>

Domestically, the “maximum pressure” campaign strengthened nationalist sentiment and consolidated support for Iran’s hardline leadership. Across all ideological groups, including those that usually criticized the regime, there was a rise in anti-Western and pro-government rhetoric.<sup>48</sup> After this “rally-around the flag” effect occurred, pro-diplomacy voices were discredited as naive or ineffective, while hardliners who favored nuclear expansion as a means of ensuring national security gained prominence.<sup>49</sup>

This sentiment was expressed by the overwhelming election of hardliners to Iran’s parliament, to 230 out of 290 seats,<sup>50</sup> as well as by the election of conservative President Ebrahim Raisi in the 2021 election.<sup>51</sup> Raisi was openly anti-Western and stated his refusal to engage with the Biden administration on nuclear matters. His campaign was “bolstered by prevailing negative

sentiments toward Washington,”<sup>52</sup> which clearly gained traction as a result of U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the “maximum pressure” sanctions.<sup>53</sup> As President, Raisi stated, Iran “cannot trust the Americans because of the behavior that we have already seen from them.”<sup>54</sup>

This sentiment became the guiding principle of Iran’s U.S. policy. Even as Trump left office, the general sentiment toward the United States remained. Tehran was resistant to engaging in JCPOA restoration talks with the Biden administration, saying they would only do so if all sanctions were lifted and they were given financial compensation.<sup>55</sup> Nascent talks were “dead” by November 2022.<sup>56</sup> First Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber Dezfuli, explained that Iranian leaders believe nuclear talks were useless because Iran could not rely on foreigners.<sup>57</sup> Having experienced the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA, Iranian leaders viewed any new agreement as inherently volatile and vulnerable to the whims of future U.S. administrations. The use of coercive diplomacy backfired, as it eliminated the possibility for the United States to negotiate any nuclear deal with Tehran, ending the dialogue that had previously existed under the JCPOA.

### ***Other Factors***

When considering the alternative hypothesis—Iran’s nuclear proliferation would have occurred regardless of U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA—we should consider that, for over a decade leading up to the JCPOA’s collapse, Israel and Iran were engaged in a shadow war, one that continues today with increasing escalation into more overt military confrontations.<sup>58</sup> Key events coincided with the U.S. exit from the JCPOA, including Iran blaming Israel for a cyberattack and Israel exposing Iranian nuclear secrets.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, both nations were engaged in proxy conflicts in Syria, which served as a theater for their rivalry. Iran had engaged in escalatory nuclear rhetoric after many military encounters with Israel.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that Iran pursued nuclear capabilities as a counterbalance to regional adversaries like Israel.

However, it is illogical to attribute Iran’s abandonment of the JCPOA’s terms and its nuclear proliferation solely to its regional conflicts. The shadow conflict has been going on since the 1979 Iranian revolution, and Iran had still chosen to enter the JCPOA. Therefore, it does not appear that the conflict with Israel was the catalyst for Iran’s sudden nuclear proliferation. Instead, we can understand these regional pressures as further inflammation that affected Iran’s strategic calculus in favor of proliferation.

### **Conclusion**

U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the implementation of a “maximum pressure” strategy not only failed to achieve its intended outcomes, but also backfired, catalyzing Iran’s nuclear proliferation. Some may argue that what this paper attributes to the backfire effect was the result of Iran’s conflict with Israel, but this explanation falls short in accounting for the radical change in

Iran's rhetoric and actions around the JCPOA terms before and after the U.S. exit. Instead, the increase in Iran's nuclear proliferation is largely a result of U.S. coercive diplomacy that failed to achieve its intended outcomes.

This is an important case study to highlight as the United States considers its next steps in approaching Iran's prospective nuclear arsenal. When former Iranian president and conservative hardliner Raisi was killed in a helicopter crash, reformist Masoud Pezeshkian assumed office after defeating another hard-line conservative candidate.<sup>61</sup> Pezeshkian's victory offers a possible glimmer of hope for negotiations, as he has expressed that he would engage in nuclear talks with the West, provided there are good faith efforts to address the significant harms caused by its abandonment of the JCPOA.<sup>62</sup> However, the Iranian president has very limited power compared to the Supreme Leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, and arguably even the IRGC—the latter two have shown reluctance to re-enter negotiations with the West.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, negotiations have become even less likely following Trump's full reimposition of the "maximum pressure" campaign upon returning to the White House, making it unlikely that President Pezeshkian's condition for good faith efforts will be met. Given these circumstances, Iran has reaffirmed its unwillingness to engage in any negotiations.<sup>64</sup>

The findings of this paper hold significance beyond the U.S.-Iran case study, offering both theoretical and practical lessons regarding coercive diplomacy. Theoretically, it introduces the demand-threat model by recasting previous scholarly work on coercive diplomacy through a structural analysis of why strategies succeed, fail, or backfire. Furthermore, the paper expands the literature around how failed coercive diplomacy can have a backfire effect and distinguishes this effect from a mere failure to compel a target to comply. This theoretical distinction can make a major difference in the way we label the outcomes of coercive policies.

These theoretical insights can have practical implications for policymakers. The demand-threat framework can be used when designing and evaluating coercive strategies. Additionally, understanding the backfire effect is critical if a state is engaging in coercive diplomacy. Backfire is an inherent risk in coercive diplomacy—particularly when targeting resilient authoritarian regimes—and understanding it should act as a further incentive to carefully assess instances of coercive diplomacy through the demand-threat framework.

While this paper presents a strong case for the backfire effect, the theory is applied to a singular case. Further research is necessary regarding the broader conditions under which coercive diplomacy backfires. This should include exploring previous cases of the backfire effect, further examining the impact of the factors I have identified in this paper on the backfire effect, and identifying additional factors that could contribute to the backfire effect. More research should be done on how coercive diplomacy influences domestic politics within authoritarian target states, such as the strengthening of hardline factions.

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA reveals many grounds on which a demand or threat made by way of coercive diplomacy might fail, as well as the

substantial risks associated with its failure. As the United States and other countries craft strategies to confront high-stakes matters like nuclear proliferation, they must take a careful approach if they intend to use coercive diplomacy, utilizing tools like the demand-threat framework to design strategies that balance pressure with realistic incentives. Ultimately, however, reducing the use of coercive tactics and committing to cooperative engagement may prove more effective, as it will avoid the perils of backfire altogether.

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# Senegal's Post-Independence Development: A Systematic Review of the Struggle for Land, Identity, and Autonomy in Casamance

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## Abstract

Scholarship in peace and conflict studies has long supported a state-centered approach to addressing the causes and consequences of internal conflict worldwide. Rejecting previous state-bias analyses, this paper aims to understand the impact of African geography's colonial legacies on local communities' daily conditions and political stability. Through a systematic review of Casamance as a critical rural geography—known for enduring one of Africa's longest-running conflicts, this study examines why, despite ongoing state efforts, uncertainty about the conflict's resolution persists. Identifying the major factors that cause political instability, this paper aims to provide insight into how historical injustices left unaddressed has caused a cycle of civil conflict in Southern Senegal. To resolve internal contestations, this review asserts the vitality of addressing ongoing inequalities rooted in land rights, political representation, infrastructure development, and economic disparities between urban centers and rural geographies in African nation-states. To achieve peace amidst internal conflict, this study recommends that the international community take an innovative approach to the development of localized and community-based solutions to problems hindering conflict resolution.

## Introduction

How do colonial legacies impact nation-states' efforts toward lasting conflict resolution? Scholars and policymakers alike have long overlooked the historical and culturally significant events that weaken governing institutions, stifle economic development, restrain political equality, and fragment shared national identity—fueling civil acts of violence.<sup>1</sup> By adopting a state-centered approach to studying peace and conflict, international institutions often respond with ill-advised peace operations, which have failed to support post-colonial states in managing and mitigating political instability.<sup>2</sup> Combined

with the enforcement of colonial-era policies, these operations have bolstered the power of oppressive governments to perpetuate the injustices of the past under a new facade of international solidarity, resulting in further destabilization. As scholars argue, the arbitrary borders and governing structures imposed during colonial rule have led to ongoing ethnic divisions and political exclusion, impeding efforts at nation-building and conflict resolution. This historical context continues to influence political behavior and stability in postcolonial states, where ethnic rivalries and tensions remain pervasive.<sup>3</sup> This systematic review will employ an in-depth case study analysis to understand how colonial legacies shape the capacity of African nation-states to maintain peace and stability.

To accomplish this, this paper examines the critical rural geography of Casamance to address contemporary state behaviors of marginalization that prevent long-term conflict resolution in postcolonial Senegal. Characterized by its unique geography, culture, and a 42-year conflict, Casamance serves as a valuable case study to demonstrate the impact of economic exploitation, ethnic divisions, political exclusion, and the erosion of local governance and autonomy on a nation-state's stability. Through the lens of southern Senegal's struggle for self-determination since the formation of the Mouvement des forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC) in 1947, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of what challenges prohibit lasting peace in Casamance and similar rural geographies across Africa.

After employing a literature review to identify the key variables in conflict resolution efforts, this paper specifically focuses on understanding Senegal's political geography, the primary obstacles preventing communities from engaging in non-violent collective action, and the social and economic pressures fueling the separatist movement carried forth by the MFDC. In conducting a literature review, this paper identifies a significant gap in current research. Although secondary literature highlights a series of negative impacts that sustain state building efforts, scholars have yet to provide a focused community-based analysis to understand the leading challenges in the post-independence context.

## Literature Review

Who inherits the state in the post-colonial context? Scholars have long explored this question by analyzing the similarities and differences of colonial empires' governing strategies. Using ethnic groups' geographical locations and the identity of imperial rulers as primary variables for ethnic inclusion in nations, scholars have rejected ethnic grievances, historical events that have disrupted ethnic social structures and therefore identities. Consequently, claiming that they should be treated as an exogenous factor in answering such an encompassing question.<sup>4</sup> For example, the British and French empires, two of the largest colonial powers during peak European colonial rule in Africa, were systematically different in their ethno-political power constellations.



Although both colonial empires upheld common principles to accomplish their objectives in exploiting resource-rich geographies for economic gain through divide and rule tactics, the degree to which this took form was inherently unequal.<sup>5</sup> In the African context, British colonial empires often adhered to “indirect rule.” This governing approach permitted ethnic leaders to control political power on the periphery, making it more likely for these nations to be represented and gain independence. In contrast, the French often relied on “direct rule” which was characterized by rigid administrative policies, centralized assimilation, minimizing indigenous representation in local decision-making, and ignoring governing institutions that pre-existed.

Despite the many shared tactics between the British and French colonial governments, such as the collection of taxes, the regulation of trade, and the maintenance of restrictive administrative policy, their differing philosophies in local rule created different realities across territories. According to the British colonial empires, maintaining African traditional systems of government was the most effective colonial governance model. In this way, state leaders were able to hide behind indirect rule while manipulating chiefs and using military force against opposition.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, the French colonial empire wanted Africans to gain citizenship, believing their language and culture to be superior.

What this caused was a direct rejection of traditional knowledge and practices, including that of governance, districting, language, and culture by abolishing such structures. And in its place, municipalities (*communes*), cantons, and prefectures were developed which allowed the French colonial empire to better enforce administrative policies aimed to assimilate forced laborers through direct means across a vast and ethnically rich territory. Ethnic groups, through the enactment of centralized administrative policy, had their cultural identity stripped to act solely as sources of production throughout arbitrary districts. Definitively, French direct rule was by nature designed to exclude such territories’ representation in their colonies’ geographical agglomerates. Indigenous chieftaincies were replaced by oppressive, violent elites who had no intent on advocating for their needs. As a result, administrative policies were enacted to eliminate the ancestral claims of forced laborers to their land, and to restrict their right to practice ethnic traditions. This was done to assert soft power in colonies through means of French culture and language. Unfortunately, much of the governing structure enacted by French colonial rule has survived unchanged today, despite respective territories gaining independence.

A study on colonial administrative policies’ impact on post-colonial conditions by Wucherpfennig and supporting authors found that despite common assumptions, a state’s political stability is unrelated to population size, per-capita GDP, center-periphery gradients, and conflict likelihood. Rather, the primary determinant of a post-independent state’s political stability was the degree to which ethnic groups could influence colonial administration’s policy development. As ethnic groups were excluded from politics during colonial rule, this negatively impacted citizens’ representation in state-building after

independence to varying degrees due to differing administrative approaches. Analyzing British and French colonial rule, their distinct implementation of divide and rule strategy have continued to affect the political stability of states in the contemporary.

Scholars have also studied colonialism's distortion of African nation-states' political and economic systems, focusing on the divide-and-rule strategy. By separating people and power into smaller groups, the likelihood of organized opposition was minimized, fostering ethnic conflict. As Wu explains, colonial rulers deconstructed shared national identities and limited the authority of chiefs and customary governing systems. These challenges have hindered nation-building in Africa. Wu blends quantitative and qualitative methods, contrasting with the previous studies reviewed. She identifies a range of factors contributing to Africa's political instability and economic underdevelopment, including conflicts, election violence, insurgencies, and cross-border crimes.<sup>7</sup> The argument that prevails in the literature is that the colonial hierarchical structure sustains political instability in the post-colonial context. Scholars have further examined how colonialism integrated Africa into the global economy, but for colonial benefit rather than for Africa's regional economies and communities. Scholars have attributed ongoing ethnic rivalry to the divide and rule strategy, which hindered African cooperation and national identity development.<sup>8</sup> However, this interethnic cooperation should be a sustained goal for the international community. Wu emphasizes three aspects of contemporary African institutions: political instability, economic underdevelopment, and local authorization. Findings outline that Africa can reshape its institutions through systemic dismantlement of colonial legacies and the adoption of democratic principles and decentralized governance.

In light of these secondary sources findings, it is evident that colonial legacies, as well as their development and administrative policies, bear a strong correlation with political instability in contemporary African nation-states. In the contemporary world, many centralized colonial policies and administrative structures have remained virtually unchanged since independence, thus limiting sustainable development and representational governing bodies. In the absence of addressing unequal appropriations of rights across geographies proceeding under direct colonial rule, exploited populations remain marginalized and are unable to participate in both regional and national decision-making.

By retaining colonial-era political institutions and development strategies, state elites have worsened political instability and internal conflicts. This systematic review aims to explore how colonial injustices have impacted rural communities' sense of identity and their ability to address conflict, evaluating the following variables: economic exploitation, ethnic divisions, political exclusion, and the erosion of local governance.

## The Fight for Self-Hood in Southern Senegal Ruralities

The Casamance is a rural region located in southern Senegal with small urban localities that are increasing as western development spreads through the area. Ruralities across African political geographies are of increasing importance as these regions are becoming spaces of political upheaval and insurgency. Being isolated both in representation and physical geography, the communities of Casamance face several economic, political, and social challenges that give insight into the root-causes of conflict in the region with specific regard to MFDC's movement and damage.

As a result of national development policies, the region's current local resources and livelihoods continue to be stressed by internal conflict and environmental pressures perpetuated by upheavals. This section provides an in-depth case study to understand how post-independence economic development, land-use rights, governance patterns, and domestic power dynamics have been a driving force behind the Casamance conflict. This study identifies the region as a critical rural geography to analyze perpetuated injustices imposed on the region's residents.

### *Post-Independence Power Dynamics in Rural Land Ownership and Development*

In the early 1960s, Leopold Senghor, the first Senegalese president, was inspired by the vision of African socialism manifested in the Negritude movement who synthesized African culture with politics.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, President Senghor embraced the implementation of a state-led development strategy, asserting that economic resources would be shared with the public. However, his goal to integrate a nascent "African" identity into an inherited Franco-phone cultural context was by nature frayed.<sup>10</sup> Despite rhetoric and promises to move beyond the oppressive European footprint on the African communities that composed Senegal, the newly appointed political leaders maintained the state's borders and policies that the colonial empire previously enforced.

To develop the new mixed presidential-parliamentary system in both economic and political terms, a center-periphery approach was employed. Under the umbrella of African socialism, newly appointed political elites in the developed urban-center—recently vacated by the colonial empire, controlled development models and land-use.<sup>11</sup> For many decades after independence, Senghor and French state leaders based in the north of the country dominated national development under geopolitical pressure.<sup>12</sup> By continuing the urban-focused infrastructure of the Western colonial development model, rural communities continued to be used for agricultural production. Despite the ideals of unity and self-hood that inspired his movements and supporters, President Senghor's primary objective was to achieve the status of a Western industrial powerhouse. Since 1960, he has explained that "Francophone states (such as Canada and France) can play a significant role in the development of Africa."<sup>13</sup> However, by reinforcing such development policies, the forests, rice

fields, and rivers of Casamance have become contested areas. Having lacked a clear definition of land rights since the formation of the state, local peoples have been forced to continue to search for clarity in a system based on colonial abstractions. Such policy ambiguity has often caused disputes between communities all while political elites maintained colonial governing and districting systems after independence.<sup>14</sup>

Using this framing to development efforts, farmer cooperatives—originally formed during the independence movement to amplify rural communities' voices and seek representation—became a mechanism for socioeconomic oppression against rural communities in the post-independence era. With the formation of the *Office National de Coopération et d'Assistance au Développement* (ONCAD) in 1966, the national government was able to directly control farmer's cooperatives to regulate the land they cultivated and crops they harvested. At the time of the office's formation, 80% of jobs in the nation-states were from groundnut farming in the peripheries, with textile production and government sectors in urban centers.<sup>15</sup> Through this office's power to dictate both agriculture inputs and outputs through controlling cooperatives, state elites maintain centralized decision making and economic power between urban and rural geographies.

By applying the previous colonial powers' divide and rule framework, it allowed local representatives to intervene in the rural context. Leaving untampered the role of *marabouts* (muslim religious leaders) in maintaining centralized political power as they had under French colonial rule. Consequently, these religious leaders acted as pawns for the state in upholding the validity of the colonial economy and avoiding political contestation from laborers. Building from pre-established agrarian sectors in the region, the state intended to maintain jurisdiction over the rural areas and control development policies that aimed to promote national strength through modernization.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, with the state's intentions to explore production maximization and agro-industrialization methods, the cooperative tended to function much as a mechanism for divide and rule.

State leaders preserved control over rural areas by exploiting land for their own economic and socio-political gains. Just four years after independence in 1960, the government declared a nationalization of approximately 95% of rural lands.<sup>17</sup> Although rural communities were already counterpoised by the state, elites used this model to stimulate production while administering the most basic aspects of rural life, like health care and education.<sup>18</sup> The *Loi sur le Domaine National* (LDN; National Domain Law) passed in 1964 and declared that land is not owned by the state, territorial communities, or individual users but instead belongs to the nation as a whole.<sup>19</sup> This policy is still in place today, as land is accessed and governed through the same districting methods and the leveraging of local rural authorities. Due to French direct colonial policy, local authorities were elites who endorsed western development methods influenced by newly appointed state leaders. As a result, post-independence land ownership policies further suppressed indigenous governance and

institutions. Therefore, these communities have never been given the capacity to lift themselves out of the shadow of their colonial oppressors.

### ***Senegal's Urban-Rural Divide in Development Policy and Political Representation***

Land-use policies were but one aspect of a series of neoliberal and extractive legislation that weakened the capacity of rural communities to influence decision making and feel a sense of belonging to national ideals. Decision makers located in Dakar, the state's urban center, incompetence in equitable resources and wealth distribution caused tension with the peripheral communities. National policies imposed on regions like Ziguinchor, Kolda, and Sedhiou located in Casamance, made certain that rural communities remained under top-down order to promote the state's engagement in international trade. Adopting the western development model, decision makers adopted intensive farming, a method of industrial agriculture that required large quantities of inputs, such as labor and capital (machinery, water, synthetic chemical, etc.), to produce maximum crop yields from a geography<sup>20</sup>. Through a rural diversification effort and the development of the mining industry, decision makers concentrated in Dakar often sought out the least developed, most resource-rich villages as best suited for supporting these production initiatives. Through commercializing the land and its fruit, Senegalese urban dwellers at the time of independence concentrated wealth in the urban center. This of course created a significant difference in economic and political freedom across the country's urban and rural populations, due to the state's uneven development approach.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the benefits and burdens of Senegalese independence and the rapid movement to regional development that proceeded were not equally shared. Development policies paved the way for significant regional disparities, with urban cities such as Dakar, Thiès, and Diourbel dominating nearly half of Senegal's economic activities which exacerbated the rural-urban divide.<sup>22</sup> Mandated policies under the Senghor's state building efforts, today known as the Senegalization, upheld the principle pillars of the colonial economy, retaining the groundnut model, commercializing indigenous crops of cotton, millet, and rice for agriculture production in the south, and engaging foreign French firms. These development mechanisms were both damaging to the environment and rural communities' autonomy in terms of development and identity as it maintained colonial infrastructures on the peripheries for agriculture production. As a result, ruralities became sources of extraction of resources, not of national identity. Consequently, this left a notable disparity between citizens' quality of life who live in urban centers and those that live in peripheries of their communes throughout the country. By retaining the same marginalizing development and land-use policies, these regions have then and now face uneven challenges in terms of land rights and resource scarcity. Since independence these ongoing efforts have created a cyclical drought. This is to say that even while resources such as water and grazing

paths were depleted, production was forced to continue by the ONCAD to fulfill the national trade commitments bureau made to external actors. This thereby created a dependence on industrial agricultural inputs, like fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides that continue to characterize the state's development and economic stability.

As droughts became more and more frequent in the 1970s, western development institutions, such as the IMF assisted the funding of these agriculture inputs.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the population's geographical location as the side effects of Senghor's African socialism began to unfold, people became unsettled. The period between 1962 and 1980 known as the *malaise paysan* was characterized by severe lows of groundnut production due to drought causing a deterioration of conditions and terms promised to farmers cooperatives.<sup>24</sup> Farmers in the peripheries could no longer maintain previous levels of production due to groundnuts, especially peanuts (the primary source of national income at the time) as the ecology was too fragile and the soil too degraded. In response to the decline in production, urban dwellers, often those who work in factories or the government's bureaucracy, became frustrated seeing stagnation of their purchasing power when groundnut prices became unstable.<sup>25</sup> Therefore many urban workers protested for higher wages during this long period of drought, development decline, and external economic intervention. Under the control of farmer cooperatives and marabouts, peripheral communities far from Dakar, had limited capacity to protest as there were neither the funds nor transportation mechanisms to fight against Seghor's oppressive development approaches in the name of African socialism.<sup>26</sup> Approaching economic collapse as the economy relied on groundnut production, this period of drought and political upheaval highlighted a serious challenge between fulfilling promises of improved quality of life and maintaining colonial development pathways, affecting communities across geographies differently.

This regional socioeconomic disparity signaled to both western and regional international financial institutions that Senegal would need support to achieve economic and political stability. Born from this national crisis was a series of plans and policy recommendations that aimed at decentralized governance, rural diversification, and efforts of socio-economic reconstruction. Despite such efforts to give rural communities more political representation and economic autonomy, these policies have failed to address the regional development gap. Maintaining a centralized economic policy approach from 1960 to 1985, the foundation of Senegal's governing system was to support political elites' agendas and promote the status of "urban-based national bourgeoisie" that concentrated wealth and resources.<sup>27</sup> A primary example of this is the ongoing acceptance of World Bank's and IMF's unsubsidized loans since independence in 1960, which created an dependence on external funding for economic stability.

From 1960 to 1987, the World Bank alone loaned Senegal 812 million dollars in which was largely allocated to agriculture, education and health, and Structural Adjustment Loans (SAL) which made up one-third of cumulative



funds.<sup>28</sup> SALs acted as open loans to support projects in accordance with western institutional financial institutions (IFIs) plans that asserted if implemented, they would stabilize the country.<sup>29</sup> Tied to these funds were recommendations that were required to receive financial support, known as Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). In Senegal, SAPs established permanent committees for planning at national and regional levels. This administrative approach exacerbated the damages of the centralized planning, putting the state of Senegalese citizens' future in the hands of external economic and political forces. Under these policies, loans increased the domestic production of the agricultural sector through diversifying crops and increasing the national transportation system.<sup>30</sup> However, the volume of export crops and their earnings did not produce enough revenue to afford such foreign investments. For the newly independent state, these policies had caused an enduring dependency on external sources of funding to maintain agriculture production as manufactured synthetics and trade relations were necessary after facing intense land degradation from western agriculture systems.

With elites primarily located in urban centers and farmers in the peripheries, engaging foreign investors and their western development agendas have further limited rural communities' rights in terms of identity and land. After years of limited representation, stability, and autonomy, politically exclusive and oppressive conditions have provoked rural communities to incite violence and protest. Even today, such political upheaval remains a means of bridging the regional gap between rural and urban communities' capacity and shaping decision-making processes. Local communities across the state, despite governmental elites' promises to revitalize African ideals and culture, were not fulfilled in the post-independence movement. In fact, communities have become means to an economic end that they can't reap the benefits of. It is why rural communities controlled under neocolonial development policies have become disconnected from the national pride that fueled the independence movement. Despite their commitment to peace, communities like Casamance resort to violence for representational power in a colonial system, which otherwise would leave them socially and politically isolated and their identity mangled. Due to this, there is no national or regional identity, and the region continues to be unstable, creating a cycle of conflict and instability.

### ***Outlining the Colonial Footprint on Life in Casamance***

In post-independence Senegal, the native Jolas and Bainuks ethnic groups who, primarily inhabited the region's coastline in the west, were spread throughout Casamance. As a result, after French colonial direct rule ended, it became unclear which ethnic groups owned which parts of the Casamance landscape. The mixing and partitioning of ethnic groups challenged the restoration of shared identity, local institutions, and land-use and ownership approaches. Thus, there have been ethnic tensions in Casamance since Senegal gained independence.



Between urban and rural communities, there is a notable difference in the wealth, and demographic concentration of ethnic groups across territories. As migration patterns have evolved with that of the geography's context, the region supports many minority cultures throughout Casamance, such as the Buluf, Mandinka, Mankanya, Pulaar, Manjak, Balanta, Papel, Serer, and Wolof.<sup>31</sup> In the years since independence, the Wolof and Serer have dominated the national urban centers, such as Dakar, Louga, and Mbour—located in the west of the state. While in Casamance, domestic ethnic diversity is more concentrated in rural areas, where several minority cultures are found<sup>32</sup>. In state-building, Wolof played a significant role in the process, sealing the fate of inter-ethnic relations when it was designated as the national language. By consequence, the Jola people that were farmers and traders traditionally have faced many challenges. With former President Macky Sall and those before him maintaining many of Senghor's ideals, national economic and social development remains uneven<sup>33</sup>. This has caused an urban-rural divide across geographies to increasingly widen. In terms of representation and resources, rural communities like Casamance do not enjoy the same rights as metropolitan regions. Due to the wealth gap between Casamance, a Jola majority, and Dakar, a French and Wolof majority, rebel violence by Jola groups in the region has generally targeted Wolof soldiers and peoples.

Regardless of destructive colonial labor practices, after independence, land continues to be the foundation of Jola culture and their animist religion. The Jolas maintained an interconnected legal system in the region prior to colonialism to maintain the intimate connection between land fertility and their religion. By the 1940s, it became much more challenging to practice *Huyaye* (a day of rest) or enforce the *Kumachala* (local police who supported justice and fairness in rural communities). Jola's religious observance of the land supported long-term fertility through influencing farmers' respect and practicing gratitude for the land.<sup>34</sup> By respecting ecological capacities and taking time to appreciate the fruits of the land, Jola were able to maintain principles of sustainability. The absence of such practices during colonial monocropping and amalgamation for cash crop production has resulted in degradation and land disputes. As the prophet Alinesitoué Diatta claimed, *Emitai* (the supreme being), saw the violation of *Huyaye* as "a primary cause of the droughts and crop failures."<sup>35</sup>

Today, in the post-colonial context, the oppressive state often marginalizes southern Senegal's ruralities from national political and economic systems. For Jola-majority rebel groups in the region, their efforts have been a means of retaliation against state leaders that have ostracized southern Senegal in decision-making processes since independence. In 1978, the Muslim northerners who relied on an interpreter for Jola-Fonyi because they only spoke Wolof and French, entered Mlomp, a rural community in Casamance.<sup>36</sup> The northern migrants announced that the Jola no longer owned the land they farmed and built their homes on but were restricted to usufruct.<sup>37</sup> Rural communities had no title to the groves of palm trees, silk cotton trees, or orchards

they or their ancestors had planted.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the profiteers planted Asian varieties of rice, cut down trees for groundnut cultivation, created state-led agriculture market boards, and converted the Jola to Islam and Christianity. This behavior by the state-urban elites from northern Senegal and foreigners in the 1970s was not just a premeditated “act of confiscation, but an imposition” by those who had no tie to the land and were not respecting the Jola’s religious traditions.<sup>39</sup> This limited the indigenous villages’ capacity to maintain the land of their people and their complex systems of lineage and spiritual ties. As Ousseynou Faye, Senegal’s Minister of Education noted, many felt “invaded” by Northern migrants as these wealthy elites revoked land ownership and extracted natural resources for the northern urban centers profiteering tactics.<sup>40</sup> This caused many to lose their local riches and cultural identity in relation to land.

In 1978, the Jola law was abrogated due to the lack of land rights, struggle for autonomy, and a common language between northern and southern Senegalese. Such circumstances, supported by national law, have caused built-up resentment. It is the political exclusion of centralized governing mechanisms and borders developed by colonial partitioning that continues to fuel social and economic inequality between Casamance and the state. French and Wolof are the national languages of the country, thus reflecting the fact that ethnic divisions restricted political action and community development using different languages and extractivism as an instrument of the state.

The presence of new ethnic groups like the land-hungry Buluf created additional unforeseen impacts on the local communities.<sup>41</sup> In the face of changing landscapes and ecologies from the presence of French direct rule, it caused migration to the Casamance wetlands by communities hoping to capitalize off the natural resources. Migration patterns to the region are also linked to those in surrounding states who are facing severe drought.<sup>42</sup> Applying the same colonial policies in post-independence, the 1964 National Domain Law permitted the alienation of land to *nordistes* and to French tourist operations. This allowed a continued monopoly of ancestral lands, allowing for a resurgence in rebel violence.

### ***Understanding the Enduring Conflict in the Casamance Region***

One of the most enduring and well-known rebel groups formed in the Senegambia region is the *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance* (MFDC). Formed in 1947 as a peaceful regionalist party (functioning similarly to farmer cooperatives), the MFDC was motivated by the Casamance people’s demand for independence from oppressive colonial rule.<sup>43</sup> In the French colonial context, the country was split into four districts: Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée and Saint-Louis. The three other districts bordered the primary port city, Dakar, severely limiting the capacity for the Jola majority of Ziguinchor to be represented.<sup>44</sup> Despite colonial claims that this institutional infrastructure granted rural populations the same rights as metropolitan residents, this infrastructure instead stigmatized the residents of these territories. This caused

the Ziguinchor villages, especially those which directly bordered the ocean, to bear severe exploitative and abusive conditions.<sup>45</sup> This ethnic amalgamation by the French colonial empire without knowledge of the unique and distinct groupings of the region, resulted in identity-based representative parties, like the MFDC, to emerge in the 1940s.

After almost a decade of advocacy on behalf of the Casamance people, the MFDC dissolved into the Senghorian party in 1954, believing in the vision and ideals of Léopold Sédar Senghor. However, after the 20-year reign of Senghor's oppressive land ownership policy and governance systems, the MFDC was reborn as an armed rebellion by the Casamance people in 1982. The first march was non-violent, but those after it resulted in intense bloodshed.<sup>46</sup> The group demanded, as the Casamance peoples did in 1947, independence from the Senegalese state,<sup>47</sup> and continued to fight against economic disenfranchisement from productive (rice and vegetable) agriculture and mining practices under the *Loi de Nationale Domain*.

Even though the Casamance people have made numerous efforts to end top-down decision making and the ecological destruction and development patterns they perpetuate, the state behavior that sparked the conflict remains in place. Despite peace agreements made by the MFDC that claim to advance autonomous land governance, the state continues to permit the operation of national mining practices that render 80% of the region's farmable land unusable.<sup>48</sup> It is these power dynamics that limit rural ownership and access to land that have threatened Senegal's rural communities.<sup>49</sup> Violent regimes have gone to great lengths to assert autonomy for "greater land ownership by larger-scale private investors," developed through centralized decision making that erodes connections to land and identity.<sup>50</sup>

Today, more than 60,000 people have been displaced due to the ongoing conflict in Casamance concentrated in the regions, Kolda, Sedhiou, and Ziguinchor.<sup>51</sup> The movement growing into Bussuan and Jola guerilla groups through external support from neighboring countries has created a war economy, allowing the Casamance peoples who join the MFDC to have more social and economic security than ever before. There is no incentive for the people to end the conflict, because the movement creates a mechanism for economic independence for the Senegalese state. This independence is possible only through Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia supporting the MFDC efforts to address unfulfilled agreements made by the state elites of Senegal located far from Casamance in urban centers.

It should be noted that the conditional limbo of the MFDC's existence highlights that neither peace nor conflict is best suited to serve the interests of the regime.<sup>52</sup> The MFDC's primary motivations are rooted in the Casamance sentiment of economic exploitation and political marginalization. Consequently, this is fueling an influx of drug trafficking, illegal logging, and heavy weaponry in southern Senegal. These activities create further negative public externalities, aside from violence, for the region from the insurgency's profiteering tactics. They perpetuate extreme uncertainty for rural communities,

as investment in urbanization grows and young people are uninterested in agriculture. Consequently, they commonly turn to violence or migrate from the region.<sup>53</sup>

Rural regions continue to suffer power imbalances and marginalization due to ill-representative development practices and geographical divisions sustained by French direct rule in the post-colonial state. This continues to limit transparent and accountable development practices, as well as sustainable agricultural productivity and equitable development throughout Senegalese ruralities.<sup>54</sup> This reality has fueled political upheaval and therefore, MFDC's existence. During the colonial era, arbitrary borders were drawn between different ethnic groups.<sup>55</sup> The result was a limited definition of shared identity between indigenous peoples like the Jolas and Bainuks and other surrounding communities that came to the region to maximize cash crop production for settlers' social and economic benefit. African socialist ideals of unity and shared identity unkindled by state leaders in the post-colonial state were traded off. To achieve Western industrial status state leaders' primary goal was not the ideals of the independence movement but instead how to maximize national GDP and production.<sup>56</sup> Today, the inability to transfer power to the Casamance peoples and incorporate them into the nation has led to the Southern limb of Senegal inevitably turning to violence to gain political legitimacy for over 40 years.

### ***A Changing Political Geography of Southern Senegal in Conflict***

The French colonial empire is historically known to have been one of the most severe and oppressive colonizers. Through direct colonial rule, the French had developed entire districts and with them local authorities.<sup>57</sup> These authorities were not picked by the local people, but by the centralized administration in Dakar. Local authorities, many of them there before, were chosen to serve the colonial power with utmost loyalty. This localized governing system was specifically to ensure that colonized communities would not develop a revolution as seen about 75 years prior through the Haitian Revolution. In addition to this, the French colonial power in the region mixed villages who spoke different languages attempted to break down communication methods that could be used to cause political upheaval against local authorities.

French colonial rule assimilated populations and caused prior local governance practices to be extremely weakened in southern Senegal, undermining the identity of villages that once operated under a shared code of honor, upheld by elders. By enacting similar local governance strategies in regions impacted by maintaining colonial policies and the system that they perpetuate, community members' autonomy in influencing economic activities of their localities remains largely restricted. Consequently, it has caused resentment and upheaval by young and ambitious people looking for freedom from the extractive mining industry and productive agriculture in the region. Therefore, this increased the level of internal violence in the region since the 1980s, affecting the entire country. In their pursuit of political inclusion and

systemic change, these citizens turned to violence, as a last resort, to demand that the local communities of Casamance be heard.

Through independence, the newly established Senegalese state centralized power in the national government system. As they had during colonial rule, the state leaders concentrated in Dakar, limiting their rural peripheries by creating dependency on the state. Since land ownership was nationalized, land use was primarily in the hands of political elites. By using the *quatre commune* (Saint-Louis, Dakar, Gorée, and Rufisque) as a basis for identifying and analyzing territories, Senegal's French colonial districting has greatly contributed to generating Casamance people's contemporary sentiments of frustration and political precarity. State leaders by inheriting the district system have limited southern Senegal's community members autonomy over the region's development, even in more densely populated urban centers such as Ziguinchor.

Beginning in the 1970s, the commune of Ziguinchor has undergone rapid developmental evolution under state efforts to industrialize and address economic and political instability in times of droughts. Despite policy actions that aimed to decentralize governance, such as the enactment of Law 72-75 of 1972, Law No. 96-07 of 1996, or the Law No. 10 of 2013, due to national government adopting a districting and economic model that resembles that under colonial rule, communities autonomy over development remain restricted.<sup>58</sup> With vital funding coming from external actors, the commune's development has been largely in the hands of the central government, influenced by IFIs and Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) recommendations, that then cooperate with local authorities that they appointed.

Undergoing four phases of urbanization, Ziguinchor and its respective districts' development have remained under top-down planning, deciding what economic activity would be concentrated in each district working directly with local authorities.<sup>59</sup> The first development period began under French colonial rule, the second during intense droughts after independence, the third following the re-formation of the MFDC as an armed political force in the 1980s, and the fourth in the 2000s as urban infrastructure matured.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of which development phase we review, this municipality is characterised by controlled planning that created uneven distribution to resources and land-use policy. Thus, even urban centers that were demographically diverse and dense, land legislation limits collaboration in development as local authorities greatly controlled by the central government remain the primary decision-maker. Community members who would like to become involved in regional development have limited capacity to influence funding streams that trickle down from external IFIs and IGOs.

In the post-colonial state, communities in Casamance still feel that they lack political representation due to feeling unheard by state leaders in comparison to farmers or urban dwellers who bordered Dakar and have the means to protest and acquire political legitimacy. Although state leaders implemented the World Bank's recommendation to decentralize local governing approaches in 1996, localities still lack autonomy. And unfortunately, due to

years of centralized governing systems, elders' capacity to govern the youth as they had for centuries today is limited. Without local institutions having the resource capacity to support communities' needs, the lack of nationally allocated resources from the state means that traditional governing institutions have significantly lost their validity and functionality. Consequently, the absence of support from the state to resolve the conflict caused further political contestation.

In southern Senegal, communities in the early 2000s, under President Abdoulaye Wade, continued to be plagued with violence from the MFDC factions. The most bloodshed was from 1992 to 2001 with battles that killed thousands of civilians.<sup>61</sup> In 2004, a two-page peace agreement was then signed by both the Senegalese government and the MFDC that *urged* the Agence Nationale pour la Relance des Activités économiques et sociales (ANRAC) to support mining clearance and rebuild Casamance socially, ecologically, and economically. With this in place, the MFDC agreed to put down its arms. However, until recently ANRAC had taken limited action to support either the MFDC or broader regional demands. This in-part has caused the continuation of the conflict between the state and the Casamance region. Recently, ANRAC determined that the region would need over \$21 million to demine southern Senegal, spurring much local skepticism.<sup>62</sup>

Although there are fragments of local and traditional governing systems in place today in southern Senegal—the Jola people having a king that is chosen by a *Dëmm* (witch doctor or sorcerer)—the authority must work directly with state officials to take actions to support local people.<sup>63</sup> However, there are minimal actions these institutions can take without the state because they do not have the resource capacity independently. That said, it is easy for local institutions to befoul the representation of local people because of sustained state dependency. Therefore, it is apparent the weakening of local governing institutions has been a major contributor to the MFDC subsisting today. It is evident that the impact of colonial policies' violent enforcement and centralized power in the state has revoked local institutions of their legitimacy. More importantly, by concentrating power, Dakar has fueled political constellations in the region. To avoid contributing to extractive industries that are ill-representative of the region's identity, citizens form rebel groups in hopes of having their demands considered legitimate by elites that have for many years been contrary to the region.

## Results and Analysis

### *Evaluating Identified Variables*

This investigation into the impact of colonial legacies on a nation's capacity to maintain political stability, and economic and community resilience has yielded significant findings. Based on the literature review, four key variables were identified: economic exploitation, political exclusion, the weakening of local



governance and autonomy, and ethnic divisions. When applied to the region of Casamance, these variables highlight the persistence of colonial-era policies and governing systems, and their consequences for Senegalese citizens.

The variable of economic exploitation manifests from the early geopolitical pressures to develop within a Western framework, as political leaders in Senegal continue today to employ extractive economic policies in Casamance. Since the 1970s, there has been a constant flow of funding from the World Bank and IMF to support state development. However, these funds were not only unsubsidized but were also unevenly distributed across the country. Under the usufruct system, the state exploited Casamance's agricultural production to compete in the global market, while not providing local communities with equal access to resources. The extraction of natural resources, such as groundnuts and rice, benefited the *nordiste* at the expense of Casamance's local population which forced locals to work on agricultural farms. With external funding supporting these inequities, political leaders distributed development unevenly, further limiting the regional economy. The resulting economic stagnation, coupled with restricted access to social resources and land rights, has exacerbated unrest in the region, contributing to the rise of the MFDC.

With respect to the political exclusion variable, state leaders also perpetuated oppressive systems of political representation to control natural resources. Under geopolitical pressures that urged the state to contribute to the global economy, political leaders' nationalization of land not only served to support national and private profits, but it also served to restrict political representation. Since the 1960s, Senegal has encountered many political leaders motivated to maintain centralized planning upholding the *Loi Domaine Nationale*, ONCAD (until 1980), and socio-ecologically damaging agricultural production systems. By applying western development models while maintaining colonial systems of production, land-use, and governance, the peripheral communities political representation across geographies to this day has been largely suppressed. Relying solely on groundnut production into the 1970s for economic stability, while enforcing the same arbitrary districting and local authorities such as *marabouts*, little has changed in terms of citizens freedom since independence. The centralized government in obeying external development models for financial support and having maintained economic infrastructure left behind the French colonial administration, has been a primary factor challenging political inclusion.

To this day, the ability for districts to engage in regional planning continues to be inhibited by the ongoing financial and political commitment made to external actors, such as the IMF and the World Bank. With the nation-state enormous public-to-GDP debt ratio, from years of corruption under centralized government and maintaining colonial administrative policy, even in a decentralized political context, is extremely restricted. For Casamance, the physical geographies isolated nature from the north where the majority of economic activity is concentrated provides an extra layer hindering

their representation. Isolated by the Gambia River and lacking transportation infrastructure, rural communities in Casamance under appointed local authorities, continue to have few spaces where their voiced concerns may be addressed and represented in legislative action. It is this reality that neoliberal policies, such as the depressed prices of ground nuts or the SAPs rapid advancement of the agriculture sectors through the rural diversification and the balance of payment to address the national debt, most affected rural communities, like those of Casamance. Therefore, in terms of land, political action, and development, Casamance highlights the effects of political exclusion and political stability.

Pertaining to the local autonomy variable, by maintaining mercantile development models and colonial governing structures, state leaders weakened local governance institutions, which left communities with limited autonomy and self-determination. Local institutions, which had been under centralized rule until the 1980s, were left fragile and ineffective. Today, local leaders lack the resources necessary to meet their citizens' needs in education, health, and economic development. Instead, these resources remain centralized in the national government, primarily controlled by political elites in Dakar. It is no surprise that when the MFDC reemerged in 1982 and began resorting to violence, it followed the failure of decentralization efforts that were unable to effectively support Casamance. The attempt to reintroduce traditional local governance structures after decades of centralization failed to resonate with younger generations, leading many to support rebel groups.

Regarding the ethnic division variable, the rich natural resources of Casamance have long attracted migration to the region, as people aimed to benefit from its fertile land and agricultural wealth. Since colonialism introduced different ethnic groups into the area, local governments have had a limited capacity to diffuse land tensions and conflicts. Land ownership remains contentious today, primarily due to the *Loi Domaine Nationale*, which has made land rights unclear and a source of ongoing tension. Consequently, the resurgence of the MFDC, created ethnic and land factions which have resorted to using landmines to prevent agricultural activities, making large areas of land unusable. This has deepened community divisions, not just along ethnic lines, but also along socioeconomic lines, as many local communities relied on income from working the land.

### ***Addressing the Conditions for Conflict Resolution in Southern Senegal***

The Senegalese state has made a whole host of efforts to address the conflict with the MFDC in the Casamance region. Beginning in 1982, the Gambia and Senegal have taken some steps to overcome colonial partition, which in the past has limited the Casamance's economic, social, and political autonomy. Yet, few measures have been taken to address the regional factors that drive Casamance's struggle for self-determination and MFDC's violent reestablishment. After the Senegambia Confederation collapse, a formal effort that allowed Senegal and the Gambia to become a unified state in 1989, there was

limited hope for conflict resolution. Both states ultimately defected while negotiating the functionality of the proposed confederation. Neither of the state's leaders were willing to give up their control over the region and its natural resources. This thereby caused MFDC's violent political tactics to continue in hopes of receiving autonomy over their land and identity.

After the first formal peace agreement in 1991, the military wing split into two factions: the *MFDC-Front-Nord* and the *MFDC-Front-Sud*, organizationally stunting the MFDC and therefore weakened its political power. The MFDC-Front-Sud is divided into two separate groups which were characterised by their loyalty between two military commanders, Sanga and Sadio. The division between the two groups was hostile, resulting in Sadio executing Sanga in 2001. Consequently Sanga was replaced by Cesar Atoute Biadade, who since has been accused of corruption due to his relationship with the Senegalese government.<sup>64</sup> The succeeding faction, MFDC-Front-Nord, now primarily located in Bignona, where it retains its weapon and de facto control over the northwestern region of the state. It is not a surprise that after 42 years of conflict, there have been many dissensions that have created a multitude of distinct factions and enemies.<sup>65</sup> Understanding that there is a presence of nuanced relations between factions, it's necessary to note despite many misconceptions by political leaders and the media, Cesar Atoute Badiate's, one of the current leaders of MFDC-Front-Sud, signing of the most recent peace agreement in 2022, does not necessarily signify "definitive peace."<sup>66</sup>

Given the rebel groups inherent structural complexities, there is no guarantee that the movement will remain dormant. Regardless of the Senegalese state of one of the three rebel groups, this is unlikely to end the control, and rather may create intertension between the factions.<sup>67</sup> In the past, political factions of the MFDC distanced themselves from their militants in the *maquis* (high-ranking leaders), who, in turn, felt no constraints from their political leadership. Many MFDC elites paid mediators off to agree to such ceasefires without fully uniting their movement.<sup>68</sup> As this accord remains confidential, it limits the capacity for community members and the public to hold all parties involved accountable as its terms are unknown. From the information released, the agreement promotes actions that will support long-lasting solutions to regional challenges that perpetuate the existence of MFDC and similar groups throughout West Africa. However, without the incorporation of all MFDC factions of interest, the conflict is likely to relapse.

In a time of extreme political and economic turmoil as neoliberal austerity faces all time highs and conflict grows due to ongoing tension on the western border, Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, announced a 25-year plan for supporting political stability. Known as *Sénégal 2050: Agenda National de Transformation*, this plan asserts western development models as a primary obstacle hindering Senegal's sovereignty, economic growth and planning.<sup>69</sup> Acknowledge the damage of ongoing economic systems that have degraded the state's stability and autonomy, the plan aims to seek sovereignty by rejecting weak financial structures and programs that cause dependency.

Focused on promoting food security, reliable energy, national security, and economic, cultural, and social autonomy, Senegal 2050 aims to create a development model for Senegal, for Africa's success rather than that of external actors. To improve the quality of life, this plan aims to focus on urban and rural disparities in terms of development, access to resources, and gender equality. The plan asserts that to transform the future of Senegal, a new economic map must be created, finding the value in every territory.

Despite the plans acknowledgement of leading challenges limiting the state's economic security and political stability, the avenues in which this will be achieved given the debt-to-GDP ratio as of 2024 is 72.5% percent is unclear.<sup>70</sup> Reviewing the agenda explains that economic self-hood will be achieved through developing a circular economy and creating markets to benefit from agroecological, mining, geography, and history assets unique to each territory. As this plan will promote natural resource extraction through industrial agriculture alongside a commitment to protecting biodiversity, the plan leaves many holes in how it will achieve these development ambitions and how rural communities in the long-term will respond to continued top-down development efforts that exploit the land and its fruit for commercial gain.

This plan, despite discussing many themes found in this systematic review, has largely created uncertainty in achieving goals as communities remain involved in the development process. When comparing it to the *Plan Sénégal Emergent* under President Macky Sall political regime, there is not much variation between the two plans in terms of priorities<sup>71</sup>. However, the condensed and targeted nature of Sénégal 2050 and President Faye's use of the plan to frame a public dialogue around neocolonial threats to the nation is unique. It is true that since his political campaign, President Faye used anti-western rhetoric to rekindle pride in ordinary Senegalese people who have felt ill-represented by previous administrations. By applying populist political strategies, President Faye won the election by a landslide with over 54% of the votes.<sup>72</sup> Surpassing about a year of President Faye in office, government actions remain fairly in alignment with the ideals highlighted during his campaign, as they have cancelled natural resource contracts with Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) that would be harmful to citizens' long-term quality of life and formed institutional infrastructure to limit corruption.<sup>73</sup>

Despite this, very little has been done to improve Senegalese citizen's daily life as the nation-states face unprecedented economic insecurity from the inherited state of public finances and the devaluation of the franc CFA, making it extremely challenging to manage Senegal's balance of payment without external financial support. Although President Fate's ideals invoke some optimism for the future, many of the necessary actions to gain political influence are not feasible as neoliberal austerity from the enduring colonial imprint on the nation limits this. As this study finds, international conflicts, like that of Casamance, cannot be solved without decolonizing systems and mechanisms of decision making.

Therefore, given the current state of affairs in Senegal, this paper recommends that by developing regional organizations focused on international conflict resolution which are designed and sustained by the state's local stakeholders directly facing the conflict's consequences, mistrust between countries can be mitigated. Future efforts could include enforcing taxes on the wealthy to alleviate the widespread effects of sustained economic exploitation, and promoting autonomy over land use in Senegalese rural areas. This requires state leaders to limit corruption in the government and to prioritize the inclusion of all their constituents, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Without accepting the legitimacy of local stakeholders and taking sustained actions to engage with communities directly affected by internal conflict, long term conflict resolution is unlikely to be achieved. By taking steps to support the collective well-being of citizens under the most unstable economic, cultural, and political conditions, communities like those in the Casamance, can begin to build a shared understanding. Through this recognition of commonality, they'll be able to begin addressing the injustices between the nation-state's urban and rural geographies to allow healing and genuine national cooperation. This will cheapen the cost of sustainable development and make the process more inclusive by taking a more integrated approach to addressing the leading domestic challenges shared across borders. Identifying historical injustices and committing to address them will create new opportunities to empower local communities, heal internal relationships, and ensure a more sustainable future for *all* citizens that have limited autonomy over their region's development practices.

## Conclusion

Southern Senegal and its long-sustained fight for self-hood underscores the enduring impact of colonial legacies that limit nation-states' capacity for conflict resolution and peace. Due to Senegal's oppressive colonial regime, there are four significant factors that have sustained the Casamance conflict for over 40 years. These include: economic exploitation, weakened local governance, ethnic division, and political exclusion. This systematic review highlights that southern Senegal's colonial practices of resource extraction and centralized governance have persisted in the post-colonial context, leading to continued instability and marginalization. The expansion of extractive industries has left many local communities, like the Casamance people, economically disenfranchised, driving them to seek autonomy through violent means.

Centralized power during and after the colonial period hindered the development of effective, representational local governance structures following independence. Such governance frameworks have caused communities to feel ostracized from decision-making, disempowered, and angered by exclusionary political processes. The root of the post-colonial state's neglect of local needs lies in land rights and economic opportunities by enlarging the wealth gap. These actions inherently exacerbate smaller inter-ethnic tensions

and the Casamance conflict. Consequently, the path toward lasting peace in southern Senegal hinges on addressing these structural inequalities—prioritizing political inclusion, respecting local autonomy, and investing in sustainable development that benefits the entire region. Development must take a localized approach, focusing on deconstructing the colonial infrastructure that has been upheld by state-led political agendas since independence.

Although the recent transfer of power to a new political regime offers some hope for long-term conflict resolution in Casamance, without decolonizing governing bodies, socio-ecological relations, financing pathways, and development models through intentional efforts to rectify historical injustices, the conflict is likely to continue. As such, national policies in Senegal must innovate in collaboration with local communities to address the challenges that permeate the conflict. Recommendations for further research would include conducting discussions with current and past MFDC members, not only to understand how a peace agreement might appease the group's elite but to address the core of the issue. Further research efforts should accept the temporality of rural-urban margins in Casamance and the defining impact of authoritarian populism on post-development. Additional scholarship should be from the perspective of local communities and will help foster understanding on the historical roots of the conflict as well as guide future mitigation efforts. Thus, local communities explicitly and implicitly impacted by globalization and geopolitical pressure can support sustained peace in regions plagued by conflict.

By including a more realistic compilation of stakeholders—citizens from states facing internal and external conflict—we can foster collaborative problem-solving between different communities. This approach can help create sustainable and peaceful solutions, while also enabling a sense of ownership and responsibility among all stakeholders. These actions will therefore alleviate the divisive conditions in the Casamance that are sustained by post-independence colonial development policies and property laws. By working with other nation-states who have a colonial legacy and internal conflict, Senegal can create peaceful mechanisms that are unique to the needs of their citizens and states' well-being. By facilitating a collaborative approach that includes diverse stakeholders, especially those from conflict-ridden regions, the nation can develop sustainable solutions that address the unique needs of each community. This not only promotes peace but also strengthens intercommunity relationships, paving the way for a more stable and secure global environment.

It is evident that the future state of Senegal lies in its capacity to develop participatory mechanisms that permit the community to directly influence national, regional, and local development. It is by finding value in the diverse knowledge and perspectives of citizens across geographical contexts that Senegal may understand how to eponymize national challenges prohibiting stability. By reimagining decision-making collectively, the nation-state can begin to dismantle the direct and implicit systematic methods linked to its



colonial legacy for a better tomorrow. In this way, Casamance and other contested geographies may heal from colonial cuts and redefine national identity, ecological connectivity, and economic development.

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# Interviews

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# Beyond the River: A Conversation with Luis Ramos Reyes, Magistrate in Exile

Interviewed in Spanish and translated by Alexa Licairac Solano and Lord Guy Toussaint

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Luis Ramos Reyes is a supreme magistrate of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in exile. He was appointed to office by the opposition-controlled National Assembly on July 21, 2017, following a plebiscite held five days earlier that—among other things—granted the body a mandate to make appointments to Venezuela’s Supreme Tribunal of Justice (STJ). This adjudicative body is composed of 13 principle and 20 alternate magistrates, of which Ramos is among the latter.<sup>1</sup> The terms of the magistrates on the STJ at the time of the opposition’s appointments were set to expire in 2016 and as such, any vacancies should have been filled by the National Assembly *in* 2016. However, after the opposition’s victory in legislative elections on December 6, 2015, an emergency special session of the Chavista-controlled National Assembly was called during the Christmas recess to pack the STJ with loyalists. The opposition declared this act to be illegitimate and when it took power in 2016, it moved to oppose Nicolás Maduro’s corrupt consolidation of power across Venezuela’s institutions and to make its own parallel appointments. Of the 7.1 million citizens who voted in the 2017 plebiscite, approximately 98 percent voted to approve “the renewal of public authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.”<sup>2</sup> Luis Ramos Reyes and his fellow magistrates were appointed to that end. Maduro decried them as illegitimate and declared on state television that “they will all be put in jail, one after another.”<sup>3</sup> Following a controversial opposition-boycotted election on July 30,<sup>4</sup> a loyalist National Constituent Assembly convened and declared itself Venezuela’s supreme legislative body.<sup>5</sup> Nearly all of the opposition-appointed magistrates fled the country and a loyalist STJ remains installed in Venezuela.

This interview was conducted on November 9, 2024, shortly after the re-election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump and in the broader context of Venezuela’s uncertain fate following the country’s July 28 presidential election. Venezuela’s co-opted National Electoral Council declared that President Nicolás Maduro won the election with a 51 percent share of the vote. However, international election observers universally recognize that the opposition’s candidate, Edmundo González Urrutia, backed by Democratic Unitary Platform leader María Corina Machado—who was herself barred<sup>6</sup> from running—won the election.<sup>7</sup> In the days that followed, Venezuelans took to the streets in

mass protests against the electoral fraud perpetrated by the Maduro regime.<sup>8</sup> Individual election receipts published by the opposition indicate that Urrutia garnered 67% of the vote.<sup>9</sup> In the interview, Ramos frequently references January 10, 2025, the day marking the expiration of Maduro's second term and the day that Edmundo González Urrutia should have been sworn-in as the president of Venezuela. Ultimately, Maduro took the oath of office in Caracas at the legislative palace, securing—in principle—a third six-year term that is set to expire in 2031.<sup>10</sup>

1. *Can you tell us about your formative years and early career trajectory?*

Yes, those are very tough stages of life. For me, my mother formed an integral part of my elementary school education. She was a teacher in a rural town. Later on, we moved to the city, where I finished elementary school in a public school. When I started high school, like every motivated student, I was restless, and a fighter. I created the first Student Council of the Liceo Villavicencio high school. Unfortunately, I soon had to leave school because of my mother's economic situation; my father abandoned us, and it was just my mother, my siblings, and me. Being the oldest of my siblings, I had to work and fight. That forced me to study at night to get my high school diploma in order to achieve my dreams of becoming a lawyer. Obtaining my [law] degree proved a struggle akin to that which characterized my high school years. I had to move to the capital, Caracas, where I had to adapt to living in a student residence and to a city I had never lived in before.

When I graduated as a lawyer, I left my previous job as a chief of staff at a hospital in order to dedicate myself to my practice. Over the years, I was recognized for my aptitude and knowledge. In June of 2017, the contest for magistrate was announced.<sup>11</sup> The citizens of Venezuela—with more than 8 million votes<sup>12</sup>—supported the appointment of a new Supreme Tribunal, rejecting the one unlawfully installed by the Maduro regime. I chose to submit my name for consideration together with 700 other lawyers, and in 2017, I was selected and appointed as magistrate by the legitimate National Assembly. However, the same day of the swearing-in, Nicolás Maduro ordered [the opposition-appointed] magistrates to be captured and jailed for 30 years. He disseminated this order through national television and radio and so I went into hiding. I never thought that I would be persecuted and that I would have to abandon my family. I have not committed any crime except that of aspiring to be a magistrate of the Republic; to serve my country and the causes of freedom, democracy, and justice.

2. *How did you escape from Venezuela?*

I escaped to Colombia via an underground railroad of sorts. Over three months, I hid anywhere I could, in the bushes, across different sectors. Everybody knew that they were chasing the magistrates. Orders to turn us in were being broadcasted on the radio and on television. People were afraid to give me refuge for obvious reasons—they knew that if I was found out, that they

too would face jail time. I decided to wait until the regional elections in October of 2017 to make my run for the border, knowing that the government's post-election crackdown—led by the police and military—would give me an opening to escape. In those circumstances, I reached the border town of San Cristóbal where those who would accompany me during the last leg of my journey were waiting for me. Around four in the afternoon, I arrived at the rendezvous point. They hid me in a vehicle and drove me to the banks of the river. It was dry enough that I was able to cross by foot; I knew the way to walk in such terrain because I am a plainsman—*un llanero*. On the other side of the Táchira, I was received by my Colombian associates who shepherded me to the Colombian zone, and when I crossed the border at nine o'clock, they told me: "You are free." I looked up to the sky and thanked God.

The Colombians treated me excellently. By eleven o'clock that night, we reached the immigration office in Cúcuta. There was a great mass of people outside to greet me even though by that time the office should have been closed. The officials present were given orders to grant me legal status and they did so. The next day, I met the governor of [Norte de Santander] as well as the staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I spent four days in Cúcuta and was then transferred to Bogotá by the UNHCR. The Colombian government—thank God—had already assigned apartments to me and the other magistrates in exile. In addition to this display of generosity, the Colombians acted to acknowledge our legitimacy. During my time in Bogotá, I had an audience with the Colombian Supreme Court. Moreover, all of these accommodations—the apartment, the legal status—were granted under the impression that I would be staying in Colombia indefinitely, but I ultimately decided against it for fear of the long arm of the Maduro regime. They are infiltrated everywhere and I felt that in Colombia they might still get to me. In Chile, for example, an ex-Venezuelan military man was murdered—according to Chilean authorities—by agents of the Maduro regime.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in Colombia, they have kidnapped Venezuelans pursued by the regime and have taken them back to Venezuela.<sup>14</sup> I refused to allow the possibility that my children might see me die in a dungeon in Venezuela. This is what led me to flee to the United States.

Before 2017, I had been visiting the United States frequently for the past 20 years, either on vacation or to run errands. So, when I came here, I was warmly received by friends who offered me their support. Soon thereafter, I started the process of requesting political asylum—a process that is still ongoing. In the meantime, I have worked to survive and to support my children and family who are still in Venezuela.

### 3. *What was the process of applying for political asylum like?*

I informed the same people who rescued me and helped me get to Colombia of my arrival to the United States, and they sent me documents and information to help me apply for asylum. Magistrates who were already in the United States sent me documents of my designation and appointment as magistrate; and with all of those gathered, I requested asylum.

In spite of the United States being a first world country and being so exemplary in anything associated with democracy—for which I am eternally grateful—I have not been treated in the manner appropriate for a magistrate—especially one who has been so brutally persecuted. All the magistrates who fled to the United States have not been treated with the same care as our peers who fled to, say, Chile. Chile received them warmly. They were assigned an apartment, a pension, and were given protection by the state.

There are 11 magistrates here in the United States, three others in Chile, three others who stayed in Colombia, and so on. Three magistrates were caught in Venezuela and were imprisoned, but they were eventually released. Two of them were forced to resign, while the other was imprisoned and negotiated for his release.

4. *You have been in the United States for about eight years. How has your life been in Miami?*

Well, since I arrived here in Miami it has been tough. I find peace and tranquility in knowing that I am not being persecuted; in knowing that there is at least that guarantee. We've had many interactions with the political sphere of the country. We have met with governors and with mayors who have received us and listened to us.<sup>15</sup> We have gone to Washington, D.C.

Within the United States, we have been contributing our input, our expertise, our knowledge—all we can offer—by doing radio, television, and interviews; always in the interest of maintaining our fight for freedom. We have done all we can to ensure that the rights of Venezuelans are respected; that we do not lose our homeland; and that we live in freedom once more.

There is no reason why, in the 21st century, one man should be allowed to take control of a country and subject it to barbarism while the international community stands idly by.

5. *Have you spoken with opposition leaders like María Corina Machado, former Interim-President Juan Guaido, and President-elect Urrutia?*

As magistrates, our main job in exile has been to work toward restoring democracy in Venezuela. We've had conversations with María Corina Machado on what needs to be done to rescue Venezuela from authoritarian rule and reestablish its institutions. The regime has appointed illegitimate magistrates who serve Maduro's whims rather than justice, and it has dismantled the constitutional order through a fraudulent Supreme Court and unlawful National Assembly. Our duty as magistrates is to expose these violations and ensure that Venezuelans and the international community recognize the legal truth.

While I was still in hiding, some magistrates met with the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro. There they were formally constituted as magistrates of the Republic, giving us legitimacy and ensuring that we continue to act as the judicial authority, countering the unconstitutional and illicit actions of the regime.<sup>16</sup>



We have also had meetings with the president-elect, Dr. Edmundo Urrutia and Former Interim-president Juan Guaidó where we discussed how to ensure the recognition of President-elect Urrutia's landslide victory in the July 28 election. It is important to highlight the distinction between previous leadership and the current president-elect. In 2019, Juan Guaidó assumed the interim presidency based on constitutional provisions due to his role as head of the National Assembly, while Urrutia was directly elected by the people. This is a crucial difference that reinforces Urrutia's legitimacy and the need for international recognition of his presidency.

The magistrates have always acted as an institutional body, offering legal support to legitimate democratic forces. Moving forward, our focus is on ensuring that the regime complies with the electoral outcome and hands over power to President-elect Urrutia on January 10.

The reality is that Venezuela's institutions have been embroiled in a cycle of illicitness, where magistrates were removed by the National Assembly and replaced by others appointed by a so-called "constituent assembly" that itself operated outside the Constitution and the law.<sup>17</sup> This illicit assembly, in turn, appointed other magistrates, leading to an entirely unconstitutional and illegitimate Supreme Court composed solely of lawyers serving the interests of the ruling party. From that moment, the powers of the republic began to be usurped—both the executive power, with a president that was not legitimately elected, and the judiciary, with an illicit supreme court and an illicit attorney general.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this, the Venezuelan opposition—under the same rules set by that illicit regime—participated in the election on July 28. The opposition won overwhelmingly, with no less than 70 percent of the vote against 30 percent.<sup>19</sup> This decisive result should have prompted the immediate concession of Nicolás Maduro and the universal acknowledgment of Urrutia as president-elect by all national institutions. Nevertheless, Urrutia has been forced into exile by the regime's persecution. He took refuge in the Spanish Embassy which protected him and got him out of the country. Currently, he is doing a titanic job visiting different governments of Europe and the world to rally support for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. Soon, he will even come to the United States. I think there needs to be support from the international community, multinational organizations, as in the case of the OAS, the United Nations, and the European Union, which are already backing our cause.

The Venezuelan regime is obliged to hand over power. It lost the election with the rules of the game that it established itself, and 90 percent of the Venezuelan people do not want this regime.<sup>20</sup> What the governments, the heads of state, the international institutions, the regional organization, and NATO have to do is unite, demand, and force the regime to hand over power and recognize President Urrutia as the constitutional president of Venezuela.

This is what has to be done.

6. *Do you think that the Maduro regime will take part in a peaceful transfer of power? If not, how can the regime be forced to acknowledge Urrutia's victory and relinquish power?*

It all depends on how things are handled. If the international community ignores and sets the regime aside, because it usurps power and violates human rights, rest assured this will force him to negotiate an exit and surrender his power. Perhaps he does not want to hand over power, and perhaps those who are with him do not want to hand over power—but when the situation becomes dire, when the state does not have the resources and cannot manage international relations—when they cannot sell their exports or buy imports—then Maduro will surrender.

The armed forces must make a decision to remove Maduro because he is doing too much damage to the country and the republic. The armed forces have to place themselves on the side of justice, the side of the people. The armed forces serve the people, therefore they have to guarantee sovereignty and enforce the nation's laws. The only way to enforce the constitution and the laws is by ignoring and removing the [Maduro] government and re-establishing a legitimate democracy.

7. *Do you support the idea of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela to enforce the transfer of power from Maduro to Urrutia?*

Though everything is feasible, I hold that military intervention is not necessary in Venezuela, not even for humanitarian reasons. Military intervention is not necessary because that is what economic and coercive political measures are for. China, Russia, and Iran are giving Maduro support. They do so because it is convenient for them to keep Venezuela in their sphere of influence. [Venezuela] is a cheap source of oil for China, a cheap source of gold for Russia, and a way for Iran to undermine the United States. However, when sanctions that are coercive enough are enforced, the support of the regime's benefactors will be choked off and the Venezuelan armed forces will be compelled to act in order to guarantee the security and defense of the nation and the welfare of its citizens. The armed forces must end their backing of this government, which is nothing more than a band of criminal usurpers.

The Biden administration, unfortunately, relieved pressure and in so doing, greatly damaged the struggle for freedom and democracy in Venezuela. Biden made too many concessions. He freed two of Maduro's nephews who were imprisoned in the United States on drug trafficking charges.<sup>21</sup> He pardoned Alex Saab, who made his fortune by defrauding the Venezuelan people.<sup>22</sup> He eased sanctions on oil.<sup>23</sup> Overall, he did a lot of damage to the cause of freedom for Venezuelans.

In light of the election on November 5, there is more hope for Venezuelans. That is what Venezuelans across the world are saying. President Trump in his first administration was stalwart in waging the fight for freedom; this is

proven by the measures that the United States took from 2017 to 2021. Now, in his second administration, he will re-implement and double down on his past policies.<sup>24</sup> That will lead the Maduro regime to negotiate an exit deal and as a result we shall see the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. The clear-eyed sanctions policy advanced and implemented by the Republican Party and President Trump offers a viable path for rescuing democracy in the American continent and for putting an end to the Cuban interference that is a plague across the continent.<sup>25</sup> The case of Bolivia, the case of Venezuela, the case of Nicaragua—horrible as they are all on their own—are only possible because of the Cuban menace and the parasitic symbiosis that defines their relationships to one another. Encircling these regimes and targeting them with stricter sanctions is the only way to bring about a shift toward democracy.

8. *The Cuban Embargo has remained in place since 1962. It has not worked; the Cuban regime remains intact. Given this track record, what makes you so certain that a sanctions regime is the right path for promoting change in Venezuela or Nicaragua, let alone Cuba?*

First things first, I do not believe that the sanctions on Cuba are properly enforced. I do not believe that they are real. They are a great fable that has been sold to the Cubans, to deceive the people, and excuse economic mismanagement. Flights arrive in Cuba every day and flights leave every day. Ships laden with foodstuffs arrive on a daily basis. Venezuela alone has spent 25 years giving oil and fuel away to Cuba. But it is not just cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba that keeps the Castro regime in place. France, Canada, Spain, and Italy have masses of hotels there, which they build for the exploitation of the island's touristic appeals.<sup>26</sup> This gives the regime access to foreign currencies. It oxygenates the regime, preventing its collapse.

Now, take into account the question of exports. Cuba is known as a producer of sugar, yet in Cuba there is no sugar for the people.<sup>27</sup> Why? Because the sugar is sold to other countries to finance the regime's oppression of the Cuban people. Though food shortages in Venezuela today are not as bad as they are in Cuba or as they were in 2018, the same principle is true of its exports. It is also true of Nicaragua's exports: one can buy all the Nicaraguan staples they would like here in the United States.

What must be implemented is an economic siege. With the exception of medicine, for obvious reasons—or, say, books—nothing must be let in. Sanctions targeting individuals and their families have been enacted and must be maintained. Their assets abroad should be targeted and seized. They cannot be allowed to move money in the international market, they cannot be allowed to export, they cannot be allowed to import; they cannot be allowed to do anything at all. Crushing them economically, that is what *really* leads to them surrendering power.

9. *Venezuela is often called a narco-state. How do you believe an Urrutia government should go about breaking the ties between the government and drug cartels?*

Yes, citizens within Venezuela and military deserters outside her borders have publicly and notoriously denounced the narco-state that has arisen.<sup>28</sup> There is the “Cartel of the Suns” in which military groups and the national government have been involved.<sup>29</sup> The regime has recognized these groups and has imprisoned many of them, but there are still military forces involved in drug trafficking. In addition, planes, boats, and vessels loaded with drugs have been seized. This is a problem that threatens legal order in the country. Venezuela is now known as a “Cartel of the Suns” and a narco-state, whereas it used to be known for its prosperity and natural beauty. These labels are truly shameful for our armed forces, as well as for the Venezuelan state and its citizens.

It is very simple: once democracy and the rule of law are restored in Venezuela, the executive branch must take action. The legislative branch must also ensure institutional integrity. No individual in any public institution or the armed forces should remain in service if there is documented and verified evidence of their involvement in criminal organizations, criminal gangs, or drug trafficking networks. Those engaged in criminal activities in Venezuela clearly have no interest in a change of government. That is the core of the struggle. That is why the international community and governments worldwide must recognize the will of the people, which is the appointment of a legitimate president who has already been elected, Dr. González Urrutia.<sup>30</sup>

That is what this fight is about.

10. *The concept of an illicit or informal economy is well known; Venezuela's economy is increasingly driven by the drug trade. Sanctions would not affect this segment of the economy. How do you reconcile this?*

The sanctions I am referring to target the economic duplicity of the regime. Its hidden sale of oil, the clandestine shipping of petroleum, and its dealings in the shadow market. Drug trafficking needs to be tackled by mobilizing institutions against the production and illegal movement of drugs. This requires collective efforts from the international community and the new Venezuelan administration to ensure that Venezuela no longer serves as a hub for global drug trafficking.

The situation in Venezuela should not and cannot continue. Drug trafficking only benefits criminals and those who use drug money to buy yachts and airplanes. This must come to an end.

The fight is not just about sanctions; the real battle is to dismantle this criminal economy. That is the role of the legitimate government, which will take charge in Venezuela [on] January 10.

11. *If democratic government is re-instituted in Venezuela, would you go back?*

I am a magistrate—a legitimate magistrate of the republic—my term is still ongoing. I would have to return to the country immediately in order to

re-establish the legal institutions and to guarantee the constitution and the law. All of us magistrates who are in exile would be obliged to return immediately to Venezuela to guarantee order and security of the country.

12. *How does an authoritarian country transition into a democracy?*

It is a gradual process. To me, the support of the international community, as well as the momentum behind the rightfully elected president of Venezuela, Edmundo González Urrutia, indicates that this transition will occur. The regime will not be able to continue being totally unrecognized by the world. It is impossible for a regime—for the government in Venezuela—to claim legitimacy while being unrecognized by the world.

If the international community takes measures, they must implement and enforce personal and economic sanctions. [If so,] [r]est assured that the government—the Venezuelan regime—is going to relinquish power. Venezuela will recover its freedom and reconstruction will begin.

## Update

In the interview, Ramos eagerly awaited the arrival of the second Trump administration and what he assumed would be its speedy re-imposition of the first term's signature "maximum pressure" campaign against the Maduro regime. As of this writing, though, it is unclear whether Ramos will get what he bargained for. Indeed, a paradox in the administration's Venezuela policy is coming into view. It appears that certain voices in Trump's orbit are successfully eroding his first administration's inclination toward a policy of total isolation. The president's desire to make good on his promise of "mass deportations" necessitates a working relationship with the Maduro regime in order to succeed, and the administration's dialogue with the Maduro Regime provides the sort of acknowledgment that undermines its policy of isolation. As a means of ensuring continued cooperation, some have argued for a policy of *More Oil for fewer Migrants*, which would see sanctions relief on PdVSA, Venezuela's state-owned oil company, in exchange for acquiescence on the issue of immigration.<sup>31</sup> In short, the desire for an immigration crackdown could *trump* the desire to effectuate regime change in Venezuela.

On March 4, 2025, the U.S. Treasury issued General License 41A "Authorizing the Wind Down of Certain Transactions Related to Chevron Corporation's Joint Ventures in Venezuela," an action in keeping with the harsher policies of the first Trump presidency.<sup>32</sup> On March 22, 2025—following the Trump administration's controversial deportation of Venezuelan nationals to El Salvador<sup>33</sup> the week prior—the President of Venezuela's regime-backed National Assembly, Jorge Rodríguez, announced that the Maduro regime and the Trump administration had come to an agreement which would see the resumption of repatriation flights to Venezuela.<sup>34</sup> Two days later, on March 24, the U.S. Treasury Department extended Chevron's wind-down window until May 27.<sup>35</sup> In a contrasting statement, President Trump then declared that all

countries purchasing Venezuelan oil will face a 25 percent tariff on any trade with the United States starting on April 2.<sup>36</sup> Then, on March 29, the U.S. Treasury Department ordered Global Oil Terminals—the company of billionaire G.O.P. donor Harry Sargeant III—to cease operations in Venezuela, also by late May.<sup>37</sup>

On the whole, it appears that the voices of Venezuela hawks like Secretary of State Marco Rubio are currently winning out. This does not, though, negate the legitimacy that direct negotiation with Maduro on the issue of immigration affords his regime. In the same vein, it is reasonable to believe that renewed economic hardship promoted in Venezuela by a maximum pressure campaign will foster yet another wave of immigration, amplifying an already 7.7 million person exodus.<sup>38</sup> How the administration will reconcile these fundamental contradictions remains to be seen.

## Notes

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11. Venezuelan Magistrates are appointed by the National Assembly through a selection process led by a Nominations Committee. Candidates are vetted based on legal experience, public consultation, and a clean legal record. Then the National Assembly votes requiring a two-thirds majority (or a simple majority in a second round) for approval. Magistrates then serve a 12 year term and can be reelected as there is no explicit term limit in the constitution.
12. Actual vote count stood at 7.1 million with 95% of the votes counted.
13. Ronald Ojeda's body was found "packed amid quicklime [in] a carry-on suitcase buried under nearly five feet of concrete."
14. *Semana*, "Nicolás Maduro persigue a sus opositores en Colombia: estos son los dramáticos testimonios de las víctimas del régimen." *Semana.com*, April 21, 2024. <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/nicolas-maduro-persigue-a-sus-opositores-en-colombia-estos-son-los-dramaticos-testimonios-de-las-victimas-del-regimen/202446/>.
15. Daily, Space Coast, "Florida Governor Rick Scott Meets with Exiled Venezuelan Supreme Court Magistrates." *Space Coast Daily*, January 30, 2018. <https://spacecoast-daily.com/2018/01/florida-governor-rick-scott-meets-with-exiled-venezuelan-supreme-court-magistrates/>.
16. According to Miguel Angel Martin, Chief Justice of the T.S.J. in exile the meeting at the O.A.S. constituted their "acto de apertura" or opening ceremony. As such the words "formally constituted" are misleading. The OAS has no jurisdiction over Venezuela's internal affairs.
17. The National Constituent Assembly was a constitutional convention called by the Maduro regime. It was opposed by the public in the 2017 plebiscite.
18. One of the opening acts of the National Constituent Assembly was to fire Venezuela's long-time attorney general, Luisa Ortega Díaz.
19. According to the Carter Center the count was 67% to 33%.
20. The 90% number was used sarcastically to indicate that the vast majority of the Venezuelan people are opposed to the Maduro regime. One 2016 poll found that 84% of Venezuelans would like to see Maduro removed.
21. Maduro's 'narcosobrinos' Efraín Antonio Campo Flores and Francisco Flores de Freitas were arrested in 2015 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti by the the United States Drug Enforcement Administration after attempting to smuggle 800 kilograms of cocaine into the United States. In October 2022 they were released in a prisoner exchange which was part of a broader detente with the Maduro regime.
22. Alex Nain Saab Morán is a Colombian-born Venezuelan businessman indicted in the United States for money laundering, who after being pardoned by Biden was appointed as Venezuela's Minister of Industry and National Production.
23. Here, Ramos is referring to General Licence 41 "Authorizing Certain Transactions Related to Chevron Corporation's Joint Ventures in Venezuela" issued by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Office of Foreign Assets Control on November 26, 2022. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/929531/download?inline>.
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27. Here, Ramos refers to the collapse of the sugar industry and the corruption associated with the Cuban regime. "Cuba Laments Collapse of Iconic Sugar Industry." May 18, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-68935247>.
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# The Past and Prospects of Russian Liberalism: An Interview with Sergey Aleksashenko, former Deputy Finance Minister of the Russian Federation

Interview by Grayton Goldsmith

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## **Sergey Aleksashenko Biography**

Sergey Aleksashenko is a Russian Economist and former Deputy Finance Minister of the Russian Federation. After graduating from Moscow State University with a PhD in Economics, he was invited to join the Soviet government, where he joined a team that worked toward the liberalization of the Soviet economy. In 1993, Aleksashenko was named Deputy Finance Minister of the newly-independent Russian Federation. From 1995 to 1998, Aleksashenko served as the First Deputy Chairman of the Central Bank of Russia. His extensive experience in government, as well as his subsequent ventures into the private sector as head of Merrill Lynch Russia and as a board member for prominent Russian corporations such as Aeroflot and the United Grain Company, have equipped him with unique insight into Russia's current economic and political realities.

Since his permanent departure from Russia following the 2014 invasion of Crimea, Sergey has become a vocal critic of Putin's regime. He is a founding member of the Russian Anti-War Committee, a big-tent Russian opposition group formed in 2022 to oppose Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. He is also a founding member of the Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom, a group formed in 2015 following the assassination of its namesake Russian politician. The foundation supports students, journalists, and human rights activists who hope to affect change in the Russian political sphere with scholarships and grant funding. Aleksashenko has amassed upwards of 150,000 subscribers on his Russian-language YouTube channel, where he posts unfiltered commentary on Russian domestic and international politics. Designated by the Russian government as a "foreign agent," there has been a warrant out for his arrest since 2023 on the grounds that he "was engaged in shaping sanctions against Russia."<sup>1</sup>

1. *To begin with your experience in the Russian government, how did you first ascend to your position as Deputy Finance Minister?*

I graduated from Moscow University and became a senior research fellow [there]. My boss, Yevgeny Yasin, in September or October 1989 got an invitation to join the Soviet government. [At] Gorbachev's direction, a special commission on economic reform was established, and Yasin was nominated as a head of one of the departments in this commission. He invited four people from his staff to join him, and only I accepted. In the beginning of 1990, I became a very junior expert in the government of the Soviet Union. So my mailing address was Moscow, Kremlin, USSR Government—Aleksashenko, which was funny.

When I got this invitation from Yasin, I was unsure if I should accept it, because by that time, my career in the university was going rather well. I got my Russian equivalent of a PhD or doctorate, so I got a promotion. Yasin told me, "Look, even if you spend a year, two years in the government, you will understand much more about real life and how policy operates on a governmental level. You will never be able to get this experience otherwise." That was true. I gained a very strong understanding [of government], and I believe that today, I'm one of very few people who knows how the Soviet system operated. Although I was at a very junior level, discussions on economic reform and economic transformation of the Soviet Union [through the 500 Days Program] were very active. As Yasin was one of the key members of this team, he started to invite me to meetings of this group. I was just 30 years old and a very junior expert, but I was known by the Soviet Prime Minister [Gorbachev], the deputy prime ministers, and other ministers. I became a part of this group—discussions with them were interesting and provided a lot of information. However, the results of this commission were not very satisfactory, because Gorbachev did not have enough courage to make a jump.

One of the brightest pages of this story was a visit to Poland at the very beginning of my job in this commission. In February 1990, I organized a trip of experts to Poland, where [Leszek] Balcerowicz had launched his reform in January 1990.<sup>2</sup> We were in Warsaw in the first week of February, so it was impressive to see empty streets, [likely] because gas was so expensive that no one was able to purchase it. We were also able to receive information first-hand from Polish reformists. Another bright spot was in August 1990 [when the government instituted] the so-called 500 Days Program.<sup>3</sup> Gorbachev and Yeltsin organized a joint group to draft [the 500 Days Program], a plan of transformation of the Soviet economy that should have been sponsored by two of them. In the end, Gorbachev refused. In April 1991, the commission was dissolved following the replacement of the Prime Minister. Valentin Pavlov succeeded Ryzhkov, and he didn't need such an entity. I then joined the Russian Industrialist Union, managed by Arkady Volsky, who was the former head of the Committee on the Operational Management of the Soviet Economy.

Historically, I had a highly competitive relationship with Yegor Gaidar's team, so when the government was established [with him as finance minister,

and later as acting prime minister], I was out.<sup>4</sup> However, it was interesting to observe from the outside. I spent the first half of 1992 in the Bank of Finland's research department, in a division called BOFIT (Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies). In December 1992, Gaidar was replaced by Viktor Chyromyrdin as prime minister. My good friend, Boris Fyodorov, was nominated as Minister of Finance. He was a member of the 500 Days Program team, and he invited me to become the Deputy Minister of Finance. So that was my way.

2. *Did you find it different working under the Soviet Government versus that of the Russian Federation?*

Yes, of course. The main difference was that the Soviet government had a hierarchical structure. In every department and any commission in the government, there was a boss who decided what was right and what was wrong—if he was against your ideas, you had no chance of [pursuing them]. Saying that, I should remind you that I was at a very junior level [in the Soviet government] and I had no executive power. My official job was to prepare papers, draft answers to letters, and analyze trust in legislation. When I became the Deputy Minister of Finance, both Boris Fyodorov, my boss in the ministry, Sergey Dubinin, who replaced him, and Victor Chyromyrdin, the Prime Minister, followed the Russian saying, “Power is not what is given to you, power is what you take.” Russia needed to build everything from scratch: every piece of economic legislation [and] economic practice—that's why in both the Ministry of Finance and in the government, the overall behavior was to allow people to do what they believed was right.

Therefore, I had an informal agreement with Fyodorov, Dubinin, and Chyromyrdin, that in my capacity [as Deputy Minister of Finance]—I was in charge of tax policy, macroeconomic policy, accounting, budgetary planning, and negotiations with the IMF—I was allowed to do what I believed was right. I was advised to recognize my limits, but if I was sure that I didn't require agreement from above, I could proceed. If I believed that [the decision] should be made by someone at a higher level, I would know [to go to them]. It was a very flexible structure of decision-making. The same style of decision-making continued when I moved to the central bank, when Dubinin became chairman. I used this practice [of discretionary power] with my subordinates.

But this spirit of transformation disappeared by the end of Yeltsin's term. Around 1999 he became ill, and prime ministers were replaced very often—Primakov, Stepashin, Putin—therefore this was no longer the time for any breakthrough in state policy, but during Chyromyrdin's time, it was very efficient.

3. *How did you find the political and economic atmosphere of the Yeltsin years? Obviously, it was a very turbulent time for Russian history, but also a very hopeful one. What was it like working under that government, and more generally, what were the feelings amongst the Russian populace?*

From the viewpoint of the ordinary people, the period of the 1990s was very tough. Though it was very inefficient in the end, with shortages of everything,

the collapse of the old system was bound to be painful. Russia experienced a significant decline of economic activity. Of course, when inflation exceeds 100 percent per year, it's very difficult to measure any statistical indicator [of the economy], and, moreover, to compare GDP, for example comparing industrial production with market prices and with fixed prices. Regardless, [the situation was indeed dire, [as] many companies were closed. People were forced to change their jobs, [and] to look for other business, even if these jobs were not tailored to their skills. The healthcare system and education system changed, and their quality declined. The state budget was very often, at least within my time, insufficient and not all budgetary commitments could be fulfilled. So for ordinary people, it was a tough time.

If I must make a general assessment, if you take the end of 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Boris Yeltsin—under whom I spent much of my bureaucratic career—became the president, as a starting point, and 1999, when he resigned, as an endpoint, there was a clear vector of the development of Russia as a country, as a state, and as a society. There was a movement from a planned economy to a market economy, from totalitarianism to democracy, from a unitarian state to a federation with power-sharing, and checks and balances, with efforts made to build an independent judiciary. It was a movement from a country that was in a Cold War with the United States and the West, to a country that tried to build a friendship with the West. So, there was an enormous transformation in all aspects of life. It's [also] very important to mention that when the Soviet Union collapsed, it was not possible to use any piece of the old structure to build the new one. Yeltsin's results were [produced] from scratch. It's like after an earthquake, you have to live in the same place and build a new house without being able to use all the trash that remains there. Yeltsin managed to show this [newfound] direction, and despite all problems, concerns, and troubles, it was evident where the country was going. That's the main result of Yeltsin's era, and that was, I believe, what I'm a part of.

4. *Do you find that your experience in economic governance during the Yeltsin years and otherwise informed your later work in the private sector?*

Yes, of course. As in any country, when you work in the government, you build relations with different people in different sectors. Moreover, if you are capable of demonstrating your capacities in the government, people know about you. They know who you are and what you're able to achieve, and they know your strengths and weaknesses.

Being in private business and international business, I use the skills I developed through negotiations with the IMF that I held in the Ministry of Finance and in the Central Bank. One of the main skills was the ability to understand your counterpart's wishes. It's much easier to run negotiations when you can put yourself in the shoes of your opponent. If you understand his interests and you understand your interests, that allows you to find the path to compromise. In Merrill Lynch and in Interros,<sup>5</sup> [this skill] was very useful because we run a lot of [merger and acquisition] transactions and negotiations with Russian

partners and with international companies. So it was much easier to negotiate and understand what your opponent wanted. This experience is valuable, and I use it even today, because there are still a lot of people in the government or in Russian business who remember me from that time.

5. *What drove you to leave Russia when you did, in 2013?*

I left the Central Bank at the end of 1998 after the financial crisis. In the beginning of the 2000s, though Putin's government under [Prime Minister] Kasyanov initially invited me to several of their discussions, they later decided that I should not be included. [In their eyes], I was responsible for the debt default and for the financial crisis, so I was a scapegoat. I believed at that time, while I was at Interros and Merrill Lynch, that my career in government was over, and that I would have to be in private business, though it's not completely what I would have wanted. But suddenly, when Medvedev became president, something started to change. One of the first steps [his government took] was replacing governmental representatives on the boards of directors in the companies where the government has a stake. I got an invitation to become a member of the Aeroflot board, then the United Grain Company, as well as the United Aircraft Company. All three were companies in which the government either held a majority stake or maintained control. It was interesting working in different sectors, and I was happy having this job while at the same time being in academia at the Higher School of Economics. However, looking back, I have to recognize that Medvedev's liberalization was very slow and inconsistent. Nevertheless, it did continue.

Medvedev also liberalized political life, and I became one of the co-founders of a party named PARNAS.<sup>6</sup> I became involved in political activity, and I was among the organizers of the Moscow protests in December of 2011 just at the time when Medvedev and Putin announced [that] Putin [would be] returning to the Kremlin. If you recall, in May 2012 there was a huge demonstration in Moscow just before Putin's inauguration. [There were] severe clashes with police, and by that time, Putin had started his political repressions and had begun to prosecute political opposition. I saw that many people involved in political activity and in the events of December 2011 were prosecuted or punished. I also started to recognize that my business contacts and business contracts started to diminish. So even with old contracts, my counterparts would say, "Okay, we have to close it, to cancel it," and my negotiations about new contracts were terminated. They would say, "Okay, we changed our minds, we are shifting into other directions."<sup>7</sup>

Suddenly, in June 2013, there was a very crucial turning point—perhaps this was the "last drop in the glass of water." There was a shareholders meeting of Aeroflot, where I was nominated to the board once again. A representative of Alexander Lebedev, who holds a big stake in the company, was not registered for the meeting. After that, I realized that I had no contracts at all, and I had a lot of free time. I talked to my wife, and I said, "It seems to me that the political situation is changing. I do not see any danger at the moment, but

I see the movement. I see a movement in a direction I don't like." Moreover, we had a son who was four years old by that time, and I said, "Look, I have no duties in the country that I cannot fulfill being outside of the country. Let's take a gap year. Let's travel." We decided that we would spend three months in the U.S., three months in Europe, and then, once again, three months in the U.S. We would leave in August 2013 and return by May 2014, coming back to Moscow for the summer. We thought that [after we came back] something might change and life would become normal once again.

In March 2014, Crimea was annexed by Russia, and I recognized that this was not just a temporary movement [in the wrong direction], but a significant shift. I was opposed [to the annexation] and I criticized the idea. The NTV channel called me a traitor [to] the nation, and I recognized that I had to [stay abroad indefinitely]. I assessed my personal risks, and I talked to some friends within security agencies in Russia, and they told me, "At the moment, you can live in Russia, but you will have no job, and you will have no money. Nothing will happen with your safety right now, but we don't know what will happen one month later, six months later, or one year later." My wife and I agreed that this was the end of the Russian story, and we would have to return to Moscow to pack our stuff and to move from Russia to the U.S. for an unpredicted period of time. In September 2014, I left for the States on a permanent basis, and I am here for the eleventh year in a row.

6. *How has your experience in and knowledge of the inner workings of the Russian government and political system informed your later work as an opposition activist and researcher in exile?*

Being in exile from a country with a dictatorial political regime does not make your life easier, and the longer I stay outside the country, the more attention I draw from the Kremlin. My life is becoming more and more difficult. I have a criminal case against me, I'm called a foreign agent, and very often today, when I try to communicate with people in Russia, they refuse to [speak with me] because they are afraid. Whether friends or people in government or business, communication is not easy. My previous experience—my previous life—does not make it easier, because they treat me today more like a political activist or political enemy of Putin, rather than recognizing my other capabilities.

In research, I have unique experience analyzing life from different viewpoints. I was in the government, I was at the central bank, I was in academia, and I was in both Russian and international business. Each of [these areas] have their own values, principles, and interests. That is why when I look at different stories and different situations, I am able to view them from different angles. This helped me to write my book, *Putin's Counterrevolution*, because I was able to examine the history of Putin's rule from 2000 to 2018 [from different angles], analyzing Putin's behavior as a political actor. Having this multi-sectoral experience paints a brighter and fuller picture of the current situation.



7. *From what I understand, one of the central arguments of your book is that Russia's road to authoritarianism was long and winding—the result of various different manipulations by Putin, rather than an abrupt and heavy-fisted consolidation of power or move toward authoritarianism. Do you agree with this characterization?*

I agree to a certain extent. First of all, there was no plan. You are right when you say that there was not an abrupt decision [to move toward authoritarianism]. It was a slow and steady process, though it was not a straight line. We can say that it was like a staircase with steps that have gaps at different heights. The initial step was in the very first days of Putin's rule, when he started his offensive against free speech and media and dismissed the Federation Council. The next step was sometime in late 2003 to the beginning of 2004 when he organized the criminal prosecution of Khodorkovsky and Lebedev, destroying the biggest Russian company by market capitalization, Yukos.<sup>8</sup> The next step was in 2011, when Putin decided that he was above the Constitution and came back to the Kremlin for a third presidential term. From then, he became not more authoritarian, but more dictatorial. He started to prosecute his political opponents and destroy political competition. The next step came in 2020, when he re-drafted the Constitution so that he could stay in power indefinitely, or at least until 2036, and the next step after that was the Ukrainian war.

8. *I want to challenge you a little bit there and ask: Was Russia ever truly on the path to democracy, or do you think that the relatively open atmosphere of the Yeltsin years and the early years of the Russian Federation were more a result of the weakening of the state apparatus of The Soviet Union?*

First of all, of course the collapse of the Soviet Union was not the result of any democratic movement in Russia. We may say that there was a democratic movement or anti-colonial movement in the Baltic countries, but the Soviet Union collapsed [primarily] because of the failures, mistakes, and corruption caused by the rust of the Soviet system. The Soviet system faced tremendous problems that it was not able to solve, and the attempt of the hardliners to solve the problems via coup d'état—by dismissing Gorbachev—resulted in the collapse of the country and of the system.

Democracy is another part of the story. Democracy is a process. The U.S. was a democracy in 1800 and the U.S. is a democracy today, but American democracy in 1800 and in the present are not the same. When Russia emerged as an independent country and Yeltsin became president, there was a desire, not to keep or to restore the authoritarian system, but to start a movement toward democracy. The pillars of democratic governance are checks and balances, sharing of power, freedom of speech, and an independent judiciary. All of that was being built in Russia. They may have emerged in other places more successfully or quickly, but nevertheless, it was a process in Russia, and it was a process that was going on for all of Yeltsin's eight years. So I don't buy your thesis [that the openness of the Yeltsin era was the result of a weakened state apparatus rather than a true movement toward democracy].

9. *So, if Russia was democratizing, how can we get back on track? Is there a path forward after Putin?*

If there is a will, there is a way. Still, we have to remember that democracy is not an overnight experiment. Putin has been in power for 25 years. If we imagine that Putin stays in power for another ten years, most of the individuals alive today that will be drafting policy in the future will not have experienced life under a different political system.. After the Soviet Union, this was the biggest difference between the Baltic countries—where there were still many people who remembered life before the Soviet era—and other parts of the Soviet Union, where historical memory was demolished completely. After Putin, it will be very difficult to explain to people that life should be different, and that political life should be organized more openly. Twenty-five years is a human generation. If Putin is in power for a generation and a half, I do not believe that it is possible to make Russia a more or less democratic country in less than a generation.

Much will also depend on those who will be in power after Putin. What will be their desires and intentions? Will they be looking for Putin 2.0: less cruel, a little bit softer, but still an authoritarian leader? Will they be in opposition to the West, or will they say that Russia should go back to the Euro-Atlantic community? That's one side of the coin. Another side of the coin is the political behavior of Western countries toward Russia. How will they treat Russia after Putin? Will they treat Russia as an eternal enemy, despite who is in charge, or will the West be ready to cooperate with new Russian leaders? I cannot predict the future, but there are a lot of options.

10. *After the tragic death of Alexei Navalny last year, who do you think will be the next standard-bearer for the Russian opposition movement?*

I do not believe that the Russian opposition has any chance to take power [electorally] after Putin. To take power, you can either organize a revolution and change the regime completely, or you can be elected. All polls in Russia show that the support of pro-Western, pro-Democratic ideas in Russia does not exceed 20 to 25 percent. Therefore, in the very best scenario, all opposition combined will be able to obtain 20 to 25 percent in the parliament. [In this case] the presidential candidate of the opposition, if a single person, would advance to the second round of elections [but would pose no real electoral challenge]. This [scenario] assumes that the opposition vote is not split amongst different interests, which it very likely would be. The only way for the opposition in exile to be in power after Putin is to draft a plan for the transformation of Russia, [which would have to be] accepted by other strong actors who are in Russia today.

I do not believe that the Russian opposition will have one leader. I believe that there will be several sectors with different leaders, but I do believe that we will identify Putin's successor. Under Putin's regime, saying, "After Putin, I will do this," is something that you cannot discuss even with your wife at night, in bed. It's too dangerous. [Because political discourse in Russia is so repressed,]

there is an opening for the [exiled] opposition to draft a plan of transformation. When Putin passes away, it will be the only plan on the table. Still, even if Putin passes tomorrow and all of us return to Russia, it will take months, if not years, to build relations with the Russian electorate. However, that is my dream scenario.

## Notes

1. via Reuters, "Russia Places Former Central Banker Aleksashenko on Wanted List," November 18, 2023.
2. Leszek Balcerowicz was the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister of Poland from 1989–1991 and from 1997–2000. He is the namesake of the Balcerowicz Plan, the shock therapy program under which Poland transitioned to a market economy. (Balcerowicz, Leszek "Poland's Transformation" in *Finance and Development*, 2000.)
3. The 500 Days Program (программа "500 дней") was a Soviet shock-therapy program designed to liberalize the Soviet economy in a span of two years.
4. Yegor Gaidar was one of many economists vying for influence during the early days of the Russian Federation. He advocated for a comparatively accelerated transition to a market economy than did his counterparts. (*Economist*. "Yegor Gaidar," 2009.)
5. A multinational wealth management firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts and a Russian conglomerate, respectively.
6. PARNAS (ПАРНАС), or the People's Freedom Party, was one of the first opposition political parties to emerge in the final years of the Soviet Union. Founded in 1990 as the Republican Party of Russia, it re-emerged in 2010 as PARNAS. It was dissolved by order of the Russian Supreme Court in May 2023 because it did not meet the requirement of having offices in at least half of Russia's 83 federal subjects. PARNAS disputed the ruling, arguing that it could not feasibly have offices in any of the four annexed territories of Ukraine. (*Moscow Times*, "Russia Dissolves Oldest Opposition Party," May 25, 2023.)
7. Aleksashenko felt that his business and governmental contacts were diminishing due to his opposition to Putin and overall involvement in the political sphere.
8. Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev are former executives of the now-defunct Yukos Oil Company. Both were convicted of tax evasion and embezzlement and subsequently imprisoned. There was widespread speculation that the charges were politically motivated. Their imprisonment was seen as a major obstacle in attracting foreign investors to Russia and convincing outside observers that the country's legal system was fair. (via [www.khodorkovsky.com/resources/other-victims](http://www.khodorkovsky.com/resources/other-victims).)



# Conflict, Humanitarianism, and Global Rivalry: An Interview with Professor Alex de Waal on Peacebuilding in Sudan and the Horn of Africa

Interview by Ishika Gupta and Mary Anna Joyce

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## Alex de Waal Biography

Alex de Waal is the Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and Professor at the Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He is one of the leading experts on Sudan and the Horn of Africa, having served on the mediation team for Darfur from 2005 to 2006 and on the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan from 2009 to 2011. Professor de Waal has also worked for several human rights organizations and the Social Science Research Council. His 2017 book, “Starvation: The History and Future of Famine,” explores the weaponization of starvation as a war tactic through a close examination of the history of modern famines. He was included in Foreign Policy’s list of the 100 most influential public intellectuals in 2008 and named one of Atlantic Monthly’s 27 “brave thinkers” in 2009. Additionally, he received the Royal Anthropological Institute’s Huxley Medal in 2024.

1. *I understand you were a senior advisor to the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan. How did your work on this panel begin?*

The most important point here is actually how the panel started. It was established in 2009 as the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur. At that time, the issue of Darfur—the massacres, mass displacement, and starvation had been the focus of an enormous student movement here in the United States. [This movement] had pressed and pushed the United Nations (UN), as well as the U.S. government—initially under President Bush, and then under President Obama—into action.

However, the actions that were being taken to send peacekeepers, to send the blue helmets, to protect civilians, and [actions] to invoke the International Criminal Court (ICC), were not making progress in creating peace. The African Union (AU) [then] stepped in with a high-level panel on Darfur, and they asked the former South African President Thabo Mbeki to head the panel.

Now, Mbeki's first question when taking this position was: "What is the definition of the problem that we're trying to solve?" You cannot solve a problem unless you understand it. He listened—he heard many different definitions from the diplomats, the experts, the political leaders. Then he posed the question: "What do the people of Darfur have to say about this?" It turned out nobody had consulted them. The first thing he said coming out of the background of the African National Congress in South Africa and the democratic revolutionary movement intended to bring an end to Apartheid was: "Let's go and talk to the people and listen to what they have to say. So, he assembled the team, and I was a member of that team. We had 40 days of town hall meetings in communities in Darfur, in government-held areas, in rebel-held areas, in camps for internally displaced people, in places where the government couldn't go, and in places where the UN was even reluctant to go. We listened to what people had to say, and on the basis of that, we formulated a report that took the conflict in its entirety, defining it around the issues that the people themselves had articulated as most important. Now, unfortunately, what then happened was that the United States and the UN still persisted in the approaches that they already had undertaken and were not ready to, as it were, flip the script and say that we will adopt the priorities of the affected people—that are a mixture of reconciliation, justice, peace and above all democracy. The process got stuck at that point. The Panel then later went into a negotiation with the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement on the issues facing Sudan as a whole, because the next issue that arose was the independence of South Sudan.<sup>1</sup> That was fascinating in a very different way, but what it was not was an exercise in emancipation through mediation, which was what the panel on Darfur intended to achieve.

2. *Shortly after independence, South Sudan experienced a civil war from 2013–2018, which formally ended with the signing of a peace agreement known as the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. Very recently, this Peace Agreement has come under threat due to the arrest of First Vice President Riek Machar, the country's main opposition figure, by President Salva Kiir's regime. Do you believe that there were any flaws or unresolved issues during the 2011 independence negotiations that might have laid the groundwork for conflict in South Sudan post-independence?*

When we, as the AU High-Level Implementation Panel headed by President Mbeki, addressed the northerners and the southerners in Sudan, our first question [again] was: "What is the problem that we're going to try and solve? How do we define this?" [We addressed this] in consultation with the leaders of the parties—we didn't go to the people, because the mandate of the panel was to implement an already agreed upon comprehensive peace agreement from five years previously. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 did not have provisions for what would happen if South Sudan separated, so we asked the question: "What could be the key problem that arises [in the event



of secession]? What is the problem that needs to be solved?” President Mbeki, in consultation with the parties, came with a twofold definition. Part one was that both Sudan and South Sudan needed to be economically viable states. In order to do that, there needed to be an agreement on a number of fundamental economic issues: the division of the oil wealth, the allocation of the huge external debt, and issues around trade, migration, and residency. This was not achieved because the two sides could not come to an agreement. The failure of that agreement led to a crisis in oil production. The South Sudanese shut down their oil, which led to a major economic crisis in both countries. This economic crisis was the direct driver of the conflict in South Sudan. This was foreseeable at the time—I actually wrote an article for the *New York Times*, called “South Sudan’s Economic Doomsday Machine.” Then, a similar crisis and slide to war happened in Sudan, though it took longer.

The other dimension of the problem was that there was a conventional view of the division between North and South Sudan—that the North will be Arab and Islamic, and the South would be African and Christian. However, with Mbeki and the rest of the team, we identified this as an error. We believed that when Sudan divides, it will not divide into an Arab Islamic north and an African Christian south. It will divide into two African countries, each of them characterized by diversity, and that the problem of each country will be solved only when they recognize that, in principle, they are diverse countries. Sudan, the north, was the first to violate that principle. The moment that South Sudan became independent, it initiated a new war within northern Sudan against a group called the Nuba, who were just north of the north-south border, because [the Nuba] did not accept the Arab Islamic identity that the ruling party in the North wanted. That war, in turn, caused an outcry internationally and made it impossible for the United States to lift Sudan’s designation as a state sponsor of terror. This meant that sanctions stayed, and there was no debt relief and no economic normalization. This self-inflicted wound contributed to the economic crisis that unraveled the government in northern Sudan. So, when a non-violent civic revolution came in 2019, the incoming democratic government faced an insurmountable economic crisis, which doomed it. So, northern Sudan experienced the same trajectory into civil war that South Sudan had followed between 2011 and 2013. The South Sudanese could not handle the political pressures unleashed by this really severe economic crisis. The northern Sudanese went through the same process just a decade later, and that led to the civil war today. So the war was foreseeable, and indeed it was foreseen.

The resolution of the 2013 to 2018 Civil War was not done according to a correct definition of the problem. The model of the peace agreement that was imposed was a standard template, which would have worked only in the context of a much more prosperous economy, where there were enough resources to divide among the different parties in order for all different contenders to be happy. Those resources were not available, so designing a peace agreement on a false premise of those resources was destined to fail. There was no real peace,

just the diplomatic pretense of peace. Exactly the same thing happened in northern Sudan after the democratic revolution—there were mediators, from the AU, a fellow called Ambassador Hacan Lebatt, and then a representative from the UN, both of whom just failed to get to the core of the problem. The Khartoum Declaration of 2019 that set up the civilian government and the Juba Agreement a year later which brought former rebels into government were fundamentally flawed. That same cycle of having an agreement that appeared strong on paper, but in practice just postponed the problem, was replicated. In both South Sudan and Sudan, some form of conflict was inevitable.

3. *As you said, northern Sudan has been in the midst of a Civil War since 2023. What are the interactions between the war in northern Sudan and the conflict in South Sudan? More broadly, what have been the regional implications of those two wars happening so geographically close to each other?*

If we go back about 15 years, there was a lot of trouble in the Northeast Africa region—Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia. There was a lot of actual war in Somalia, and a lot of potential war in Sudan and South Sudan, as well as an autocratic regime in Eritrea that was destabilizing its neighbors. Two factors were preventing the region as a whole from descending into overall chaos and turmoil. The first factor was Ethiopia's role as an anchor state. Ethiopia was the state that could be relied upon to provide peacekeepers and to provide the diplomatic skills for convening parties in Sudan and South Sudan. They were less successful in Somalia, but they were at least an active participant in international efforts to rebuild the state in Somalia and to contain the threat posed by the extremist group al-Shabaab.

The second factor was a multilateral peace and security architecture that was quite fragile and elaborate, but it was beginning to work. The AU, which is based in Addis Ababa, was developing different mechanisms for political peace missions, and also providing troops, especially troops into very dangerous situations like Somalia, where the UN would not dispatch peacekeepers. The UN was very supportive of the AU role, as well as the Obama administration and the Europeans.

Both these factors collapsed, approximately in the period of the first Trump administration. The Trump administration had a hand in this because in order to keep these delicate structures intact, [the region] needed international support, care, and understanding. But, the Trump administration was not interested—not in the UN—and probably had never even heard of the AU.

When there was a move toward democratizing Ethiopia, which was very hopeful at the beginning, the democratization turned very bad very quickly. From an anchor of stability, Ethiopia turned into a spread of instability—it turned into a war zone, with several wars instigated by its own government [in 2020], with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in power. That happened partly because of his own failings as a vain and erratic leader, but also because the international community, and especially the United States, did not see the danger of a reckless and irresponsible leader. They actually encouraged some

of [Ahmed's] crazy actions, instead of remaining invested in keeping Ethiopia as a nature of stability. As a result of that, what we see is a cascade of wars. The most terrible of these was the genocidal onslaught on Tigray, including the weaponization of starvation.

The war in Ethiopia meant that the country was no longer playing a stabilizing role in Sudan and South Sudan. We then saw the AU and the UN surrendering their role, partly because they didn't have the backing of the US and other international partners. So, [in 2020], not only is there an essentially unmanageable conflict in Ethiopia for the first time for many years, there are also conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, and in Somalia—where we see the disintegration of a fragile federal system and the resurgence of al-Shabaab, which is now mounting attacks within the national capital, Mogadishu. By the time this interview is published, it's possible that they may have taken over the city. If they do that, it would be a bit like the Taliban taking over Kabul a few years ago. The whole region is in flames, in one way or another, as we speak.

4. *Given this backdrop of “the region in flames,” what is the path forward in addressing the conflict in northern and South Sudan, and in the region more broadly? What is the role of the African Union and the wider international community?*

Before going down that path, we need to look at the next layer of complication, which is that the whole region has now been brought within the security perimeter of the Arab world. The key Arab states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and to a lesser extent, Qatar and Turkey—are very active in their region. They have a lot of money, and they are not interested in using multilateral peace mechanisms like the UN, or the AU and the Arab League. They do direct transactional business, and they do it with massive financial resources that none of the players within the region of Northeast Africa can match.

Now, if you take the war in Sudan, for example, you have the two major belligerents. You have the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) of General Abdul Fattah al-Burhan. The armed forces call themselves the government of Sudan, and are backed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Even though the economy of Sudan is now essentially destroyed, they have enough resources—from their patrons in the Middle East—to carry on fighting indefinitely. On the other side, you have the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of General Mohammed Hamdan, who is known as Hemedti. He is backed by the UAE, and like SAF, has the resources to fight indefinitely.

There is a similar configuration of external support in Ethiopia and in Eritrea, which are on the point of going to war with each other. There is a different configuration in Somalia, but the Middle Eastern rivalries are very much alive there. The question then is, why have these countries gotten involved in this way? For one, they see that U.S. power has been waning—the United States used to provide a security umbrella to this whole region, including the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa. Now

that this [security umbrella] has been folded, these countries want to secure their positions. [The] key to this is the Red Sea, which is one of the world's most strategic waterways, and is a major route for maritime transport from Asia to Europe.

The most immediate threat to the Red Sea is posed by Yemen, controlled mostly by the Ansar Allah group, known as the Houthis. The Houthis claim they're acting in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza by firing on ships, saying they are targeting Israeli, American and other allied ships. Attacking merchant ships is a crime. They are also more indiscriminate and target other ships. They say they won't target Chinese ships, for example. But the amount of maritime traffic through the Red Sea has dropped enormously because ship owners are not confident. Insurance rates have gone up. What is the solution to this? Well, some 15 to 20 years ago, there was a problem of piracy off the Somali Peninsula. When the government collapsed in Somalia, coastal fishing communities were left unprotected, allowing foreign trawlers, including those from South Korea and other countries, to take the fish. In response, Somalians turned to piracy. The immediate response to piracy was to dispatch military vessels to patrol the waters off the Gulf of Aden and the Somali coastline. However, it soon became clear that the only [sustainable] solution to piracy was not in the sea, but on the shore—it was essential to establish functioning civil authorities and promote employment development and protect the fisheries to keep the shipping lanes safe. There needed to be a protective onshore peace and stability order so that the shipping lanes could be safe.

The question of the Houthis is a lot more complicated because it's much more political. However, the same basic rule applies. The immediate problem is the safety of shipping, but the larger problem is peace and security onshore—which applies to both the Arab and African shores of the Red Sea. Before the Houthi attacks began, Egypt used to get about \$9 billion in revenues from the Suez Canal every year. That dropped by about 60 percent [when the Houthi attacks began]. The Saudis have enormous investments along their Red Sea coastline. The Emirates have been investing in ports in the Gulf of Aden. So, they all have a vested interest in promoting peace and security. However, the way they are seeking maritime security, through military action and military bases, is only ratcheting up the problem—the arms-and-bases race is only making it worse. Even if the Houthis are defeated now, you will have other problems arising. So, what is needed for this region is a cooperative security framework—a peace and security framework—that spans the whole of what we call the Red Sea arena. An arena is like a geographical region with a difference. It's somewhere where people go to fight—it's not a region that is bound together by institutions and customs. Until the Red Sea arena becomes a stable region, this problem is not going to be solved.

So President Trump and his national security team can shoot as many missiles as they'd like at the Houthis, and they may destroy a lot of the Houthi military infrastructure, but they will not achieve lasting maritime security by doing so—and they know that. In fact, they made it very clear in that famous

Signal that the United States does not want to bear the cost of sealane protection alone, and it's a valid point. The United States spends about \$40 billion per year on the US Navy for international sea lanes protection—China spends next to nothing. The only two other countries that spend significant amounts, though much smaller than the United States, are the UK and France. This is not sustainable. Similar issues around who should pay for NATO have become very prominent. As for the issue of who should pay for maritime protection—while the cost may be smaller, the implications of who bears that cost are huge. I think this part of the world is a sort of microcosm of the global issues that are arising in the era of the second Trump administration.

5. *As you said, Africa as well as the Red Sea region serves as a microcosm of great power rivalry and global shifts in power. How might these developments on the global stage affect conflict in the region itself?*

What we have seen developing in the Red Sea arena over the last eight years is an augur of what has begun to happen elsewhere. What we're seeing in the global arena, with the Trump administration, is just what we have seen already in that arena over the last eight years writ large. The same forces, the same issues, the same ways of doing business that the Trump administration wants to make the norm for the world as a whole have already been taking shape in the region.

There's another implication of this—mass starvation. If you look at the data for famines, where are the famines in the world? The UN has a Famine Review Committee. Whenever the data of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System (IPC), which is a standardized system for generating data on food insecurity, indicates a risk of famine, the Famine Review Committee is convened. It has been convened about 20 times in the last 12 years, and on top of that, a famine was also declared in Somalia in 2011 before it was constituted. If we take those 21 cases, 19 of them are in the Red Sea arena. So why is it that almost all the famine cases are in the countries that are either adjacent to the Red Sea or just one country away? The two exceptions are Nigeria and Madagascar. The reason for this, I would argue, is precisely this conflux of factors that we've been discussing. The dissolution of a security order that was based upon one stable state—Ethiopia—combined with the evaporation of the multilateral system and the dominant role played by middle-ranking powers that are in ruthless pursuit of resources, influence, and strategic real estate. What we see, as they do that, is that the types of conflict that they spark and that they sponsor tend to create humanitarian emergencies. Now, all conflicts in poor countries create humanitarian emergencies, and this part of the world is in many ways more vulnerable than others because of its history.

However, the key aspect is not that this region is poor, but that wars are not restrained by humanitarian principles and laws. These mechanisms, according to international procedures, ought to be invoked to restrain wars being fought in this way and to provide humanitarian relief. But, that isn't happening; it's blocked systematically. The blockage starts with the information itself

being blocked—the UN’s IPC can’t get access to complete or reliable data, as in Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen, or it is thrown out, as in Sudan or Ethiopia. Often, reports are also challenged and denied. So, first, the information is blocked. Then, without that information, it’s possible for those who are inflicting famine through siege, starvation, or pillage to deny that anything is happening and to prevent action being taken. There was a UN Security Council resolution on armed conflict and hunger, resolution 2417, that was adopted in April of 2018, seven years ago. Among other things, this resolution stated that starvation of civilians in war may be a war crime, and that when armed conflict threatens famine or widespread food insecurity, it should be brought swiftly to the attention of the UN Security Council. This [mechanism] has not been used, it has been blocked along with human rights investigations and other attempts to call out starvation as a war crime.

Essentially, there are three factors at play. One is that you have these wars occurring in a region that is already vulnerable. Next, starvation crimes are not being stopped. Finally, in the last few months, you have seen what has happened with the world’s largest humanitarian donor, USAID. Responsible for 42% of humanitarian funding in the world and more than 50% in this region, USAID has essentially been shut down. While some of it may resume, the damage is enormous.

6. *Building off of our discussion, in what ways do governments weaponize starvation and famine as a form of political strategy? How has this weaponization been employed in Darfur and in other global conflicts?*

The definition of the war crime of starvation in international criminal law is found in the Rome Statute of the ICC. It reads:

“Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions.”

The key point is that the war crime of starvation is not just [the lack of access to] food, but also water, medicine, shelter—anything that is necessary for survival. It is not just the obstruction of food, but also the destruction of all of these necessities. We see many different configurations of this. In the war famine in Tigray, Ethiopia, between 2020 and 2022, you saw a combination of siege—of obstructing not only relief food, but all commercial food. This included cutting off the banking system and trade, combined with massive destruction of the agricultural, health, and water infrastructure.

We see similar things in Sudan. Both sides are responsible, but the RSF is primarily operating as a sort of pillage machine. They loot, stealing everything, and then they often vandalize things that they don’t steal, which is bizarre. Why would you destroy a hospital? Why would you destroy irrigation infrastructure, if your intention actually is to capture it? They’re also laying



siege to places that they haven't captured, like the city of Al Fashir in North Darfur, along with the surrounding camps for displaced people, particularly a camp called Zamzam. [Individuals living in these camps] were displaced 22 years ago in the previous round of war in Darfur, who were still living in that camp [far after the war], and were [still] very dependent on humanitarian relief. As soon as the war began, their rations were stopped. Therefore, the RSF is responsible not only for all that pillage and destruction, but also the siege on Al Fashir, and particularly on Zamzan and some other camps. That is where we have seen the worst starvation.

The other side, which is the Sudan Armed Forces, has not been so destructive, but has attacked critical infrastructure and obstructed relief supplies. Their argument is that allowing international relief assistance and international relief workers into the areas controlled by the rebels will consolidate the resources and garner international sympathy and support. Essentially, they argue that those relief workers on the ground will end up sympathizing with those supporting the cause of those rebels. Therefore, they want to block [humanitarian aid], even if the cost is the starvation of the people.

In Gaza, we've seen a different configuration. Even before the Hamas attacks and atrocities of October 7, the Gaza people were extremely dependent on imported food, fuel, and other necessities. It was very straightforward for Israel to cut [these necessities] off, which it did. What was equally, perhaps more devastating, was the massive destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. This included massive destruction of housing, health infrastructure, water infrastructure, and electricity supply. This led to a speed of deterioration of humanitarian conditions unlike anything we have seen certainly in the past 20 years, and probably not in the past 70 years.<sup>2</sup> Depending on your definition of famine, the majority of the population is either in what's called catastrophe, which means the worst stage of food insecurity, or indeed some of the population is in a famine, which according to the IPC approach, is a combination of both acute food insecurity, acute malnutrition, and elevated mortality. Now, there's a reason for caution as the data for mortality is not good—it has not been possible to conduct the kinds of surveys that humanitarian agencies normally do in crises. My view is that the obligation to collect data is on Israel, which obviously wants to deny the gravity of what is happening. Additionally, the United States has not pressed for better data. The U.S. has its own family warning system network—it was the best data source, but its reporting on Gaza was blocked under the Biden administration, and then the entire system was fully shut down by the Trump administration. So there's a tendency to say there's no data for famine. However, the absence of evidence is not the same as evidence for absence. We're not able to properly ascertain what's going on. Until we can ascertain what is going on, I believe we should take a precautionary principle and assume that the situation is dire.

7. *Would you be able to share more about your experience on the African Union mediation team for Darfur? Given that the crisis is now widely recognized as a genocide,<sup>3</sup> it would be valuable to understand what measures you implemented as part of the team to address the conflict. Additionally, what is the status of Darfur now, as a particularly vulnerable region in Sudan?*

So the situation is really awful now, and there is no viable peace process at the moment.

The mediation efforts up to now have been extremely feeble. The Biden administration couldn't decide whether it should do a principled, multilateral negotiation using the African Union and the United Nations, or a sort of realpolitik, transactional bargaining dealing with the Arab sponsors of the two sides. They ended up following neither approach, and the US mediation completely failed.

Now, the Trump administration is paying, so far as I know, no attention to Sudan.

Some in Washington have said that there is an opportunity for the Trump administration to get the Arab leaders together and fix the problem. It's not likely that the current administration is going to use the African Union. The United Kingdom has recently taken the lead on seeking to lead a Sudanese peace process—it is convening a ministerial conference on April 15, and is looking at different options. I would hope that it's able to get a formula that brings the external power brokers together, to incentivize them to disengage from Sudan. This would then create the space for the Sudanese to find their own solution. The key aspect to that solution being sustainable is that it can't just be a deal between the military leaders, and it can't just be a return to the old formula of power sharing and an unrealistic roadmap to democracy. It needs to go back to where we started in this conversation: consulting the people of Sudan themselves about what it is they need in terms of peace, reconciliation at local levels as well as national levels, democracy, and disarmament—all these issues need to be on the table, because the only solution that will be legitimate will be one that the Sudanese have truly been brought into.

8. *With the backdrop of the second Trump administration, do you have any insights as to what students who will enter careers in public service might expect over the next four years? Amid the crackdown on USAID and humanitarian databases, how can students respond to these challenges?*

This is a very disorienting and frightening time. I think many students who anticipated having a professional career in the system of international aid, human rights, conflict resolution, and related fields are looking in with horror as all of their opportunities are evaporating. I started my career 40 years ago, and this apparatus didn't exist—there were very, very few careers available [in this field]. Over time, that apparatus was built by humanitarian entrepreneurs, essentially small, local NGOs. Over the years, I would argue that much of the field was not taken in the right direction. What I have called

the “humanitarian international” was inefficient and unaccountable in many ways. It was not working very well, but it was working better than not having a system at all.

Given the current political climate, don’t think of rebuilding [the system] as it was. We must go back to a much more local, community-based, accountable system of humanitarianism. A grassroots, emancipatory humanitarianism would actually allow those who are most affected to have their voices heard and their priorities reflected. Because the previous system, yes, it fed people, but it didn’t meet the needs that people were demanding.

In the case of Sudan, one of the things that was actually most shocking was that when the war broke out two years ago, in the middle of April 2023, all the international agencies withdrew, and they stopped their operations in Sudan. Who took up the mantle of humanitarian action? It was local groups. They set up emergency response groups at the neighborhood level. They were extremely effective, very cheap, and very flexible. However, when access to humanitarian funding came online, these local response groups didn’t receive it due to administrative barriers—they were not able to fill out forms and check certain boxes or say, “Yes, I have a project,” with all the necessary documentation. Therefore, the money went to the World Food Program instead, which was an extremely inefficient, old-fashioned way of using convoys of trucks for aid delivery, with many trucks either being diverted or utilized by the warring parties. [This system] wasn’t useless, but it was extraordinarily inefficient. If those modest resources had been put into community groups instead of the World Food Program, the situation would not only be materially different, but also politically different, because it would have empowered those groups. As we look to rebuild the system, don’t rebuild what has been demolished. Create a different system based on real human solidarity with the people who have been affected in these countries. They are skilled and perfectly capable of articulating their own needs.

The reason I went to Sudan in 1984 to do my PhD was that the humanitarian workers in Sudan, and those who were studying humanitarian issues in Sudan, were more advanced. They had more to contribute compared to Oxford University, where I was. So, I went to the University of Khartoum. If they knew what to do then, 40 years ago, then they must be even more advanced today. So, let’s take that as a new opportunity. What I’ve always encouraged my students to do if they want a career in this field is to not start here in the United States, but start there, in Sudan or in Bangladesh or in Colombia. It’s more difficult, but it’s far more rewarding, because the people you will learn from are based on the ground.

## Notes

1. South Sudan officially gained independence from Sudan on July 9, 2011, when approximately 99 percent South Sudanese citizens voted in favor of secession in a referendum. This followed the landmark 2005 Comprehensive Peace

Agreement, which brought an end to the second Sudanese Civil War, 1983 to 2005. (Center for Preventive Action, “Instability in South Sudan,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 21, 2025)

2. The reason we cannot definitively claim that this speed of deterioration in humanitarian conditions has not been seen in the past 70 years is due to the lack of data collection from more than 20 years ago. However, it is probable that this rapid deterioration of conditions is unlike anything we have seen in the past 70 years.
3. Full scale war broke out in Darfur in 2003, when rebels in the region attacked national troops in Al Fashir. In response, President Omar al-Bashir recruited and armed local Arab militias, named the “Janjaweed,” to violently suppress the rebellion. The Janjaweed, as well as the Sudanese Armed Forces, are responsible for the deaths of an estimated 400,000 people and the displacement of over three million others. Both the Janjaweed as well as President Al-Bashir are accused of genocide and war crimes. Today, in the midst of Sudan’s civil war, conflict remains rife in Darfur, with the Rapid Support Forces led by Hemedti responsible for mass and ethnically targeted killings in the region. (Tubiana, Jerome “Darfur: Between Two Wars,” *Al-Jazeera*, June 30, 2023; Sudan: Ethnic Cleansing in West Darfur,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 9, 2024)

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# Editorials

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# Sweeter than Honey: Revenge and Honor in the International System

Maxwell Lee Turnacioglu

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*“Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again.”*

—Leviticus 24:20, King James Bible

*“The equation is clear: you are killed as you kill and abducted as you abduct.”*

—Osama Bin Laden, 2010

Eye sockets bared to an equally pitted gaze. Honor metered in scales of limbs, tooth, and tallow. Fire fought with fire; cruelty met in like kind. This is the world of talionic justice. First articulated in ancient Babylonian law, the talion has sated honor societies throughout time, appearing similarly in Palestinian, Judeo-Christian, Roman, Germanic, and Nordic codes of law and practice.<sup>1</sup> As inscribed in the Twelve Tables of Rome, talio esto enjoins the uncompensated victim: “let there be retaliation.”<sup>2</sup> Under the talion, the integrality of one’s honor and one’s body are equivalent in the eyes of the law. Physical loss can be recouped through reprisal—literal addition (to honor) through subtraction of another’s physical wholeness. This law appears almost instinctual, as we seemingly delight in seeing harm befall those who have harmed us, and it continues to underlie modern criminal and civil justice systems. However, the right to retaliation, particularly the right to pursue justice yourself, is conspicuously missing in one notable legal system: the international legal system.

Aimed at maintaining global security and peace,<sup>3</sup> the international legal system holds “no place for responses based on retaliation, retribution, or punishment.”<sup>4</sup> Responses to armed attacks may only be motivated by a *need* for proportional self-defense,<sup>5</sup> reacting *immediately* (not in delayed retaliation) to secure oneself against further attacks and bring an enemy back to the bounds of international law.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, international law notably holds human rights to be absolute and totally intrinsic, upheld not “by virtue of reciprocity,” nor any other rational or normative justifications for the right to life, but by the inexplicable, assumed merit of one to their own life.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, states victimized by an armed attack must ensure their response comports with these international norms regarding global security and the sanctity of human life. A state operating outside of the international system is only restricted by its domestic laws, precedent, and social acceptability of retribution when

responding to an armed attack. Within the international system, a state would be subject to these domestic considerations as well as universal principles of human rights and response mechanisms. Thus, any sort of response—retributory or otherwise—would have to be measured, slow, and restricted by international consensus and precedent.

Further wrinkles to this framework are introduced by the modern prevalence of terrorism, forcing the international system to consider violent exchanges between states and non-state actors. While the landmark 1986 *Nicaragua v. USA* ICJ Ruling clarified that irregular combatants (terrorists) acting on behalf of a state license a victim to self-defense,<sup>8</sup> self-defense is not so clearly guaranteed against non-state actors devoid of a strong affiliation to an established state, leaving the legal standing of true individual actors largely ambiguous. This presents a misalignment of scale, as international law must attempt to square the role of states as combatants with that of individual civilians in the equitable distribution of justice. How can a human and an omnipotent state fairly engage in the regulation of conflict and combat? Somehow, they must be equivalently empowered by the legal system. Furthermore, although protecting civilians is an espoused priority of the fundamental tenets of international law, notable parties to Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, such as Britain and Germany, have reserved the right to attack civilians in reprisal.<sup>9</sup> Appeals to the efficacy of the international justice system's gradual, bureaucratic enforcement mechanisms are ineffectual in the face of effective terrorism that targets primarily civilians and generates intense fear, as people turn towards their home nation—not distant international/global bureaucracies—for assurance. There are, thus, two tensions acting on the international legal system: the “disequivalence” of justice afforded to a state and to an individual human, and the absolute authority of international law versus the practical authority of state policy—twin tensions whose explosive resolution began to emerge from the charred rubble of the Twin Towers.

## The War on Terror

The mechanisms of enforcement for international law are non-existent, save for the collective responsibility of states to act pursuant to the demands of norms and obligations. When an issue of contention arises without strong historical precedent, it is ultimately the responsibility of states to engage in the creation of novel norms through action. When the state in question is the United States of America, the ability to craft new international norms is magnified immensely, granting the hegemon a great unilateral normative power. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. received condolences from over 100 countries.<sup>10</sup> As the entire world watched in shocked silence, the U.S. spoke. President George Bush vowed “justice will be done,” bringing “far more than instant retaliation” along with it.<sup>11</sup> To this end, the U.S. conducted the War on Terror through drone strikes and extensive domestic surveillance, using entirely novel behavior to define the war and its scope to

the world. It thus demarcated terrorism as anomalous in the regular world of conflict and warfare, a blemish and blight upon the American well-being. In a state of exceptional suffering, the path to wholeness and glory lay in an exceptional response: retribution.

Therefore, I argue that the American response, both rhetorical and physical, to victimization at the hands of terrorism was founded not on security, peace, nor even victory, but on honor—the honor associated with appearing to provide peace. To borrow from the language of Germanic honor societies, the September 11 attacks were a violation of the American *mund*—a word that singularly encapsulates hospitality, dignity, and domain.<sup>12</sup> The land of the United States held an implicit sanctity of peace and security that was trespassed by the horrific violence of 9/11. The aftermath saw the disruption of this sanctity in whole, as 58 percent of Americans were “very” or “somewhat worried” that they or family members would suffer from terrorist attacks immediately following 9/11, despite the improbability of this.<sup>13</sup> Although there have been 140 jihadist attacks attempted since 1994,<sup>14</sup> suggesting a present threat of real violence, there have also been 800 Islamophobic hate crimes perpetrated since 9/11 in the U.S.<sup>15</sup> In reality, only 18 percent of terrorist attacks since 2004 involve contact between jihadists and international terrorist organizations, with 80 percent of would-be-terrorists being American citizens or residents since 9/11.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, jihadist terrorism is real, but the overwhelming threat of international terrorism is not entirely tangible, manifesting instead in the ideological hold it places on jihadist adherents. Terroristic violence had not severely compromised physical American security, rather it had compromised the state’s ability to instill faith in that security in the face of an ideological threat. As such, the price for attacking one’s *mund*, one’s fundamental honor, is clear: an attack of equal severity. This repayment eclipsed the War on Terror entirely, eventually supplanting manifestly absolute doctrines such as democratic governance or universal human rights under the watchful eye of Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, in turn.

The initial barrier to retaliation lay in the centralized, efficient nature of terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda, standing at odds with the slow, methodical operation of American governance. In order to make things even—in terms of honor and warfare—the consolidation of power at the expense of democratic institutions became seen as a necessity. This urgency was reflected in the almost immediate passage of an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) on September 18. This short resolution (barely more than a page in length) grants the president a mandate “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines” aided or committed the September 11 terrorist attacks.<sup>17</sup> Proponents of a “unitary executive” within Bush’s cabinet quickly seized this initial cession of power, using it to justify torture and covert operations as necessary expansions of executive authority in order to more effectively counter terroristic activity.<sup>18</sup> Unilateral executive decisions and the use of secrecy became key features of the War on Terror, beginning with Bush’s secret order on September 17 to grant the CIA

authority to capture and kill terrorists<sup>19</sup> and continuing in Trump's removal of oversight and transparency mechanisms from counterterrorism operations.<sup>20</sup> While Congress was likely briefed on the possibility of extreme counterterrorism methods being employed by the executive branch, such as the use of torture by the CIA, there was little initial pushback to clandestine unitary operations, since effective security took priority.<sup>21</sup> Thus, a physical state of security, beginning to extend far beyond the immediate borders of the United States, overshadowed domestic precedent and the restrained responses ascribed by international law, rendering allowable military responses informally limitless.

Empowered by a *justification* lying outside of international or domestic law, the *means* of American retribution were enabled to persist beyond allowable precedent. Indeed, President Bush declared the War on Terror existed in a realm "to which the Geneva Conventions did not apply."<sup>22</sup> The normalization of torture in interrogations, extraordinary renditions in concert with abusive regimes such as Egypt or Syria, unlawful detentions in Guantanamo Bay and black sites, and mass surveillance of American data all persisted during the War on Terror.<sup>23</sup> Although the Obama administration attempted reforms to regulate the National Security Agency's collection of data<sup>24</sup> and minimize civilian deaths in the conduct of air strikes and capture operations,<sup>25</sup> the net result was the institutionalization of intrusive surveillance measures and armed conflict against terrorist groups around the world.

I find the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki on September 30, 2011, to be an instructive example of how extraordinary violence was normalized with appeals to informal justifications in place of concrete law. Al-Awlaki was the first American ever killed in a drone strike, targeted for his leadership within al-Qaeda. Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA, classified him as "first and foremost a terrorist"<sup>26</sup> exhibiting how al-Awlaki's identity as an antagonist to the U.S. superseded his rights as an American citizen. His assassination was not conducted with due process, nor was this type of action explicitly authorized by Congress. Furthermore, the legal justification for such an extrajudicial killing was "a slapdash pastiche of legal theories"<sup>27</sup> resting primarily on his status as an "imminent threat" subject to "necessary and appropriate force."<sup>28</sup> While the imminence of the threat posed by al-Awlaki is debatable, the fact remains that the unilateral authority of the CIA to conduct war on enemies of the American state supplanted foundational tenets of domestic and international justice. During his first term, Donald Trump took this approach even further, dictating that "you have to take out" the families of terrorists as well, after the death of al-Awlaki's 8-year-old daughter in 2017.<sup>29</sup> Standard patterns of short-term retaliatory warfare had grown to replace supposedly fundamental aspects of just governance.

Even if al-Qaeda were to be entirely eliminated, the U.S. would not be fully satisfied, for our stated cause "has always been larger than our nation's defense,"<sup>30</sup> signifying the potential to revisit retaliation upon allies of combatants as well, a possibility heavily discouraged in international law. In order to justify such redemptive redress, the U.S. began to forge a grounds, beyond

the literal precedent of international law, on which to conduct global operations. In addition to Al-Qaeda, Bush quickly extended guilt to the Taliban for “committing murder” due to their complacency in allowing al-Qaeda to operate within their country, demonstrating how international law could be distorted to allow retaliation on purported allies of combatants.<sup>31</sup> Bush associated “murder” with first a government that “sponsors”<sup>32</sup> terrorists and then one that “supports”<sup>33</sup> them, ultimately undertaking operations in Afghanistan as well as Somalia and the Philippines. However, the Obama administration carried the scope of operations further, targeting groups in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Syria.<sup>34</sup> ISIL formally split from al-Qaeda in 2014, yet continued to be under AUMF jurisdiction as a legacy of Bin Laden, and continued to “denounce the United States as its enemy.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, part of the rationale behind the 2003 invasion of Iraq rested on Saddam Hussein’s alleged, and unclear, connections to al-Qaeda,<sup>36</sup> thus the overthrow of an entire nation’s government was partially sustained by association to a group that had inflicted harm on the U.S. Additionally, even after the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the Biden administration did not rule out the possibility of continued aerial strikes against al-Qaeda and ISIL, suggesting that the mandate of counterterrorism is both malleable and enduring.<sup>37</sup> By failing to contest the extension of ‘self defense’ into a wide network of operations, the legislative and judicial branches tacitly endorsed executive decision-making,<sup>38</sup> as “associated forces” became targets of intense focus.<sup>39</sup> Association, not an immediate threat or necessity as international law requires, thus justified engagement.<sup>40</sup> Jihadi terrorism as a whole—a nebulous, malicious ideological force—had hacked off the ‘hand’, or *mund*, of American security. In response, the United States intended to exact justice, incising global terrorist movements with the same fear and suffering as it once experienced.

Populism, as particularly embodied by Trump, introduces a wrinkle into the moral language of honor, as populist rhetoric speaks to a present humiliation of victimization and a “redemptive pathway” to former glory.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps somewhat ironically, this cognitive structuring mirrors the role of honor in Jihadi cultures where glory serves as “a denial mechanism against humiliation.”<sup>42</sup> Through an insistence on a past state of satisfaction being disrupted and thus justifying revenge to restore the status quo, the United States inadvertently embodies the jihadist *Sharaf* and the general intuition of the talion that it purportedly rejects. Moreover, by practicing violence against, occasionally, civilian antagonists as a means of lawful reprisal, the United States mirrors the collective punishment employed by terrorist groups, essentially operating within the same moral framework as their enemy.<sup>43</sup> The taking of an eye answered only with the same.

We labor, desperately, for a return to Pax Americana—if such an era ever existed. A time of our apparent former glory. Yet the Latin *pacare* is rooted in ‘pax’—to pay has always been to pacify, in some senses.<sup>44</sup> The world we long and physically fight for is a world where all debts are paid, where all scores are settled, and peace can emerge. Even the execution of Osama bin Laden, whose

death rather than capture was preferred by 60 percent of Americans, brought limited settlement—62 percent of Americans still feared acts of terrorism immediately following his death.<sup>45</sup> Fear, insecurity, violence yet afflicted the American mind. Therefore, as long as we regard the blood debt of 9/11 unsatisfied and retribution as the legitimate means of satisfaction, pax, peace, can never return.

## Türkiye

On July 15, 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkish regime faced an overwhelming assault. Dubbing themselves the "Peace at Home Council," portions of the Turkish armed forces sought to take power in an attempted coup d'état, motivated by a perceived erosion in Türkiye's founding principle of secularism and a democratic decline. Still today, the true intentions behind the coup, as well as its true perpetrators, remain disputed. Through direct, emotional appeals to his people, the once unpopular Erdoğan was able to weather the storms of governmental discord. In the months and years that followed, he was met with the formidable task of restoring Turkish domestic security. Erdoğan declared the Gülenists—a former political ally to Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party that had since turned strongly against it, posing a threat to the regime's stability—responsible, although the global Gülenist movement that purportedly abetted the 2016 coup was embedded in the Turkish diaspora and lacked a strong unifying ideology or military agenda. Instead, I argue that Erdoğan's extension of culpability well beyond immediate wrongdoers is a generalized retaliatory response rooted in honor, much as the U.S. extended their war to terror more broadly. The generally pacifistic activities of Gülenists, such as the operation of schools and charities, made it harder still to ground a case for war within international norms. Fortunately, 15 years prior, the U.S. had begun to lay a blueprint for waging war on global, ideologically-driven groups, offering both a justification for just punishment extending well beyond Türkiye's border, as well as institutionalized means through which to enact legitimate harm. My contention is that Türkiye's war on the Global Gülenist movement, which Türkiye refers to as 'Fethullah Terrorist Organization' (FETÖ), although they are not recognized as a terrorist organization by the entirety of the non-Muslim world, is a succession of the American War on Terror. Although the object of these respective campaigns differ significantly, as Türkiye perverted American precedent ultimately towards the abduction of schoolteachers, not violent criminals, the tangible mechanisms for conducting war and the moral underpinning of retribution presented to the world remain the same.<sup>46</sup>

To leverage counterterrorism towards these ends and begin drawing upon the American model, Türkiye broadly defines terrorism to include all crimes against the "internal and external security of the state,"<sup>47</sup> giving their own interpretation of terrorism a legal basis. Even "making propaganda" for or aiding a designated terrorist organization is criminalized under Article 7/2 of



Law No. 3713, much as affiliations with enemies of the state were just grounds for criminal conviction in the U.S. under the AUMF. Furthermore, Erdoğan's administration operated "through executive decrees that sidestepped judicial scrutiny"<sup>48</sup> to restrict the potentially subversive activities of civil society, which places the unique responsibility of action and interpretation in the hands of the executive. This internal centralization of power and a reliance on domestic interpretations of global security to justify extraordinary operations mirror the beginnings of the American War on Terror, suggesting that such actions are no longer demarcated as exceptional in the international system.

Türkiye has embedded itself deeply into the global counter-terrorism status quo. It holds bilateral counterterrorism agreements with over 70 countries, has been party to all UN counterterrorism efforts, and served as founding member of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Türkiye serves as an active member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which prosecutes terrorist funding across 39 countries.<sup>50</sup> By acceding to and openly supporting internationally recognized, anti-terrorist institutions, Türkiye frames itself as a wholly legitimate actor, completely aligned with the formal, juridical War on Terror. However, it maintains this image while ultimately taking the US precedent to the extreme in order to justify encroachment on civil liberties. Like any good country, it battles hard against "terrorist organizations like the PKK/KCK, DAESH [ISIL], Al Qaeda . . . as well as FETÖ."<sup>51</sup> However, an ordinary participant in global counterterrorism would not prompt the Venice Commission to issue an opinion condemning the country's "curtailment of the right to freedom of association of foreign partners . . . without convincing arguments that they are engaged in the financing of terrorist groups." This opinion was prompted by the Turkish parliament forcing through an "omnibus bill" ostensibly aimed at bringing Türkiye within FATF recommendations which actually empowered the government to curtail civil society and critics of Erdogan. By implementing these policy guidelines on terrorism financing promoted by FATF, first developed following 9/11, Türkiye has successfully weaponized good-faith financial regulations to silence civil actors who nominally critique the virtue of Erdoğan's governance. Moreover, Türkiye's abuse of the INTERPOL system was so extensive that it led the agency to create an internal policy to pinpoint requests specifically related to the 2016 coup.<sup>52</sup> This enabled Türkiye to exploit INTERPOL, an established justice organization, to forcibly return enemies of the state without facing significant scrutiny or clandestine activity.

Where formally sanctioned counter-terrorist methods fall short, Türkiye has turned towards informal practices utilized in American campaigns against terrorist groups. They make particularly brutal use of extraordinary renditions, "secret detentions," and torture<sup>53</sup> to reclaim the blood, normative and physical, spilt in the 2016 coup. According to official figures, the state has conducted 114 renditions in 28 countries,<sup>54</sup> although Freedom House recorded only 58 and the UN reported 100.<sup>55</sup> Often working in conjunction with domestic intelligence services, as the U.S. did during the War on Terror, Türkiye has

exacted barbaric justice.<sup>56</sup> Zabit Kisi, a primary school teacher who survived rendition from Kazakhstan in 2017, recounts his underwear being “soaked in blood” after repeated kicks to the genitals, as well as how he was confined to a freight container for 108 days at a CIA-reminiscent “black site” before standing trial.<sup>57</sup> He was tortured into a confession and ultimately sentenced to 13 years in prison for his affiliation with the 2016 coup.<sup>58</sup> Within Türkiye, the *Daily Sabah*, a pro-government media outlet, routinely boasts of large-scale arrests of groups of up to 70 people for alleged affiliation with FETÖ.<sup>59</sup> In both domestic and foreign cases, the justifications for arrest and imprisonment are often as simple as ties to Gülenist charities or schools, or even the use of the app ByLock, which is a secure communication platform used, though not exclusively, by Gülenists.<sup>60</sup> The Gülenist movement posed a minor threat to enduring Turkish stability, yet the wound inflicted by their coup and the subsequent survival of their ideology left Erdoğan’s Türkiye incomplete and their *mund* broken, requiring retribution, even through extreme methods, to achieve national restoration.

Undertaking retaliatory violence is no longer a bold or risky prospect, as the U.S. essentially condoned the use of such practices through their repeated use. The exception displaces the rule, in that the exceptional conduct of the U.S. in response to an exceptional act of violence codified new norms of justice beyond the internationally established ones. A senior Turkish official defended renditions by directly stating that the American War on Terror allowed “authorities to do whatever they wanted with impunity.”<sup>61</sup> The parallel is clear: Türkiye’s extensive campaign of counter-terrorist repression rests upon the foundations of American campaigns. Through the association with legitimate, security-oriented counter-terrorist operations, Türkiye blurs the lines between civilian and government; victim and assailant; war and repayment. Attacks on the state, whether physical or rhetorical, are regarded with the same gravity, and response: retribution. The state is equivalent to the individual—it has a unique right to security, a right to glory, a right to revisit harm upon any who harm it. Creation of this equivalency has been undertaken by domestic conceptions of justice, rather than international, as the U.S. and Türkiye have acted unilaterally to level themselves with individual enemies. An international, state-driven honor system has emerged in the silence of international law, commanding thusly: if a group carves an eye from the placid countenance of the state, each individual in that group emerges eyeless in turn. Our collective life for every one of yours. What develops is an imagined world of absolute justice—not international justice, but talionic. A land, beyond lands, where equivalence defeats virtue; loss begets gain; weapons silence law.

## Notes

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# Getting Tough on China: An Exploratory Analysis of Sentiments in Washington and in American Media Toward China from 2016 to 2024

Theodorus Ng and Miles Bondi

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## Introduction

The commonly heard phrase “politics stops at the water’s edge” appears to hold increasingly less credence in today’s climate of increasing polarization over U.S. foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, one policy stance has continued to garner bipartisan support since its unequivocal hardening during President Donald Trump’s first administration—getting “tough on China.”<sup>2</sup> Washington’s strategy for getting “tough on China” varied under both Trump and his successor, President Joseph Biden. In light of the 2024 Presidential election, it has become increasingly apparent that, today, no candidate can run as a legitimate contender without framing China as a threat to American interests that must be managed.<sup>3</sup> Our study undertakes sentiment analysis, powered by computer programming, to answer the question: how and why has the “tough on China” rhetorical and policy stance changed in the United States between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration? Although being “tough on China” has become a bipartisan stance, studying trends of *how* and *why* American sentiments toward China have evolved, particularly those displayed by the government and media outlets, could evince a feedback loop between the two entities. Through an analysis of documents from the U.S. Department of State (DOS), as well as news articles from Cable News Network (CNN) and Fox News, which are prototypical of left- and right-leaning outlets respectively, we find that:

1. All analyzed political entities maintained decisively negative sentiments toward China, regardless of their political affiliation.
2. The DOS maintained a relatively restrained level of negative sentiments, regardless of the president’s political affiliation, phase within an election cycle, or developments in international affairs, while CNN and Fox News expressed greater swings in the intensity of these same negative sentiments.

3. Variations in sentiments expressed by CNN and Fox News are heavily contingent on the administration in power, as well as intervening events like elections or exogenous shocks.

## **Tough on China: A Precis on the Concept's Emergence in U.S. Politics**

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, U.S.-China relations remain tepid at best and near conflict at worst. Early tensions, driven by Cold War geopolitics, shaped Washington's cautious stance toward China. Only with President Richard Nixon, who took strategic advantage of the Sino-Soviet split, and whose 1972 visit to Beijing culminated in the Shanghai Communiqué, did the normalization of U.S.-PRC relations commence its gradual course.<sup>4</sup> However, because this rapprochement did not resolve latent Cold War-era tensions, subsequent administrations oscillated between cautious engagement and overt confrontation.

When President Jimmy Carter assumed office, he condemned human rights abuses in China and oversaw the passage of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which committed U.S. arms provisions to Taiwan for its self-defense but remained ambiguous about sovereignty over the island.<sup>5</sup> The same year, Carter also formally recognized the PRC and granted it "most favored nation" trade status.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, President Ronald Reagan issued his "Six Assurances" in 1982, which promised continued arms sales to Taiwan and explicitly refused the idea of Chinese sovereignty over the island.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he also authorized U.S. arms sales to China.<sup>8</sup> Continuing this balancing act, President Bill Clinton broke with a 15-year-old policy prohibiting U.S. visas for high-level Taiwanese officials when he authorized Lee Teng-hui—who would win Taiwan's first Presidential elections—to visit his alma mater Cornell University where he gave a speech trumpeting Taiwan as a bastion of liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Still, Clinton normalized U.S.-China trade relations and supported China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization.<sup>10</sup>

A decisive shift occurred under President Barack Obama. His administration initially pursued collaboration, hoping China would emerge as a "responsible stakeholder" capable of drawing actors like North Korea and Iran into negotiations—a concept first introduced during the preceding George W. Bush administration.<sup>11</sup> However, China's ambitious economic expansion, militarization of the South China Sea, and pursuit of technological dominance, prompted Obama to pivot U.S. strategy toward containment. In 2011, his "Pivot to Asia" strategy redirected resources to counter China's ambitions. This included strengthening defense alliances with Japan and South Korea and promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership as an economic coalition to counter China's growing influence.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequently, Trump institutionalized bipartisan skepticism toward China by explicitly designating China as the primary competitor of the United

States in the 2017 National Security Strategy.<sup>13</sup> His administration's confrontational approach included imposing substantial tariffs on approximately \$370 billion in Chinese imports, alleging intellectual property theft and unfair trade practices,<sup>14</sup> while bolstering support for Taiwan through the 2018 Taiwan Travel Act, which enabled mutual visits by high-level officials of both countries.<sup>15</sup>

Under Biden, the bipartisan commitment to a "tough on China" stance persisted. Biden retained Trump-era tariffs,<sup>16</sup> augmented military support for Taiwan through record-breaking arms sales,<sup>17</sup> and demonstrated U.S. resolve through naval operations in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>18</sup>

We will thus temporally situate our analysis starting from the first Trump administration—under which "tough on China" as a rhetorical and policy stance became observably ubiquitous in Washington—through to the Biden administration. By observing trends in how the stance developed rhetorically and manifested in policy, we will examine prospective similarities and differences between administrations. In particular, we will employ documents published by the DOS, which represent Washington's foreign policy stance, for our analysis.

## **A Typology of American Media: Situating the Left and the Right**

The Fourth Estate is at the pinnacle of its historical influence on U.S. politics.<sup>19</sup> Filled with bounds of information, often manipulated to gain viewership, each media outlet occupies their niche along the political spectrum.<sup>20</sup> Right-wing media is dominated by Fox News. Typically, Fox News promotes traditional social values and conservative economics, aligning more with Republican than Democratic candidates.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, Fox News has adopted a candidate-first approach, supporting Trump's populism by amplifying his inflammatory rhetoric, albeit occasionally compromising core conservative values.<sup>22</sup> Left-wing media is a battleground for dominance among outlets with similar stances. Leading outlets include CNN, NPR, Politico, ABC News, CBS News, and the New York Times Company. Left-wing news outlets generally champion liberal policy, emphasizing the need to reform social programs and enshrine progressive movements into law.<sup>23</sup>

The U.S. political spectrum and the values of Americans are more intricate than news agencies present. Some Americans occupy the center, selecting stories from a variety of news outlets. Others lean farther left or right than mainstream news appeals to. Many more hold mixed views on different issues; such is the saying, "fiscally conservative, socially liberal." As of September 19, 2023, a quarter of Americans feel that neither party represents them.<sup>24</sup> Overall, the American media, protected by the First Amendment, is a collection of voices clamoring to be heard, with the end-goal of selling the most advertisements.

## Methodology

Through a large-N study involving sentiment analysis of texts, we aim to answer the question: how and why has the “tough on China” rhetorical and policy stance changed in the United States between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration? Our study serves to be exploratory rather than predictive. We uncover trends in the Department of State’s and the American media’s treatment of “tough on China,” suggesting potential explanations by referring to coinciding events and observable policymaking, rather than testing or forming theories. As such, our study prioritizes construct validity, while striving to offer a useful reference for other studies that might seek to attain internal and external validity in theorizing about U.S.-China relations or U.S. political polarization.

For our input data sets, we compiled documents, articles, press releases, and communiqués from DOS archives as well as news reports, op-eds, and television transcripts from CNN and Fox News between 2016 and 2024.<sup>25</sup> Our data collection process was automated by a Python script filtering search results for “China” with a list of keywords to select paragraphs relevant to our study.<sup>26</sup> We then arranged our strategically sampled paragraphs, in chronology of their publication date, into text documents; namely DOS archives, CNN articles, and Fox News articles, under the Trump, then the Biden administration.

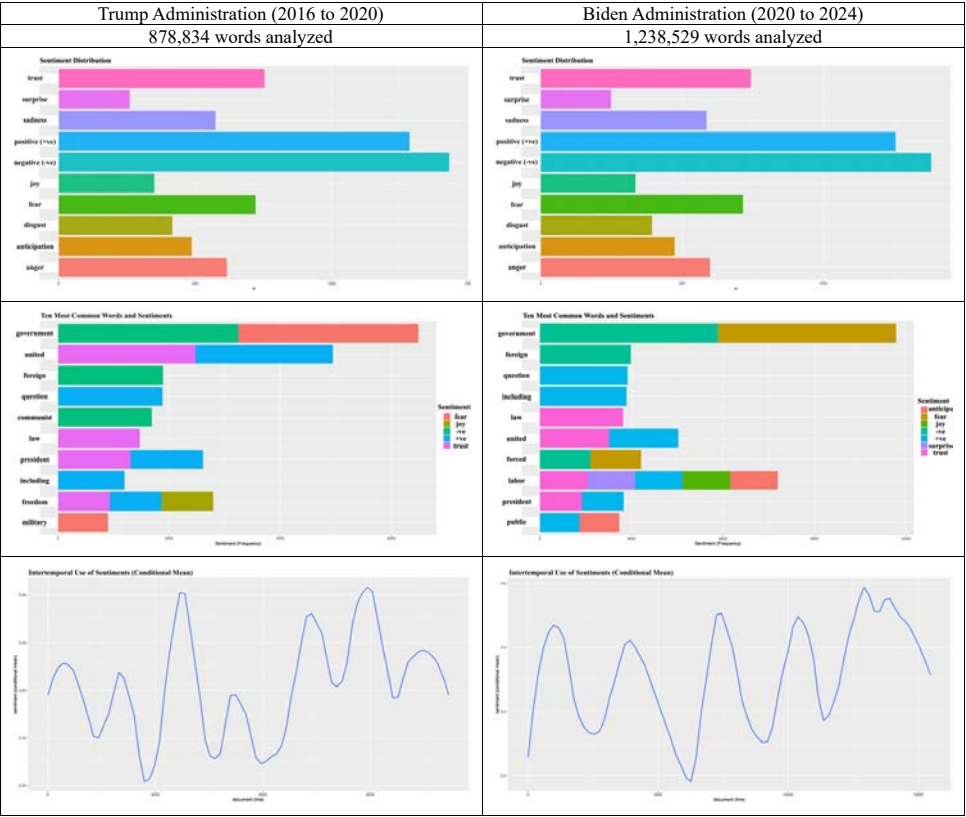
Each document was then fed into an R program which matched words to their sentiments. The ten sentiments analyzed for are: trust, surprise, sadness, positive, negative, joy, fear, disgust, anticipation, and anger. Since sentiments are highly contextual—for example, using the same word in two different contexts could express two different sets of sentiments—we base our program on an R package designed by researchers at the National Research Council of Canada (NRC). The NRC’s Word-Emotion Association Lexicon is a large-scale annotation project that parses through texts online, labelling words with their associated sentiments determined by the contexts of their usage.<sup>27</sup> The extensive nature of this project produced a generalizable metric optimal for our study. Using this metric, our program generates quantitative visualizations for each document: the ten most expressed words and their associated sentiments, the distribution of sentiments within each document, and a trendline showing the mean sentiment distribution over time. Thus, if “negative,” “fear,” and “anger” are expressed more frequently, an increase in the mean sentiment distribution would reflect a disproportionate increase in these sentiments. In sum, our graphical outputs elucidate *how* the “tough on China” rhetoric has changed between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration.

Recognizing rhetoric offers incomplete understanding of the “tough on China” stance, we complete our analysis by relating rhetoric to policy implementations. Drawing these connections allow us to examine *why* “tough on China” as a rhetorical and policy stance has changed between the first Trump administration and the Biden administration.

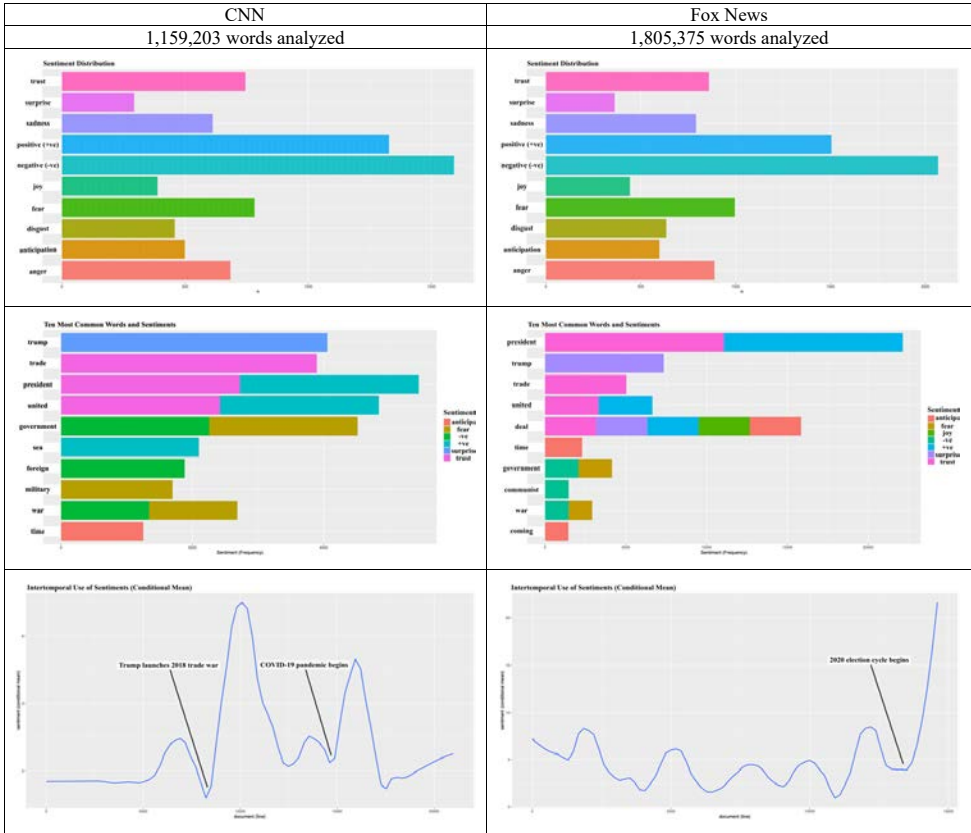


Results

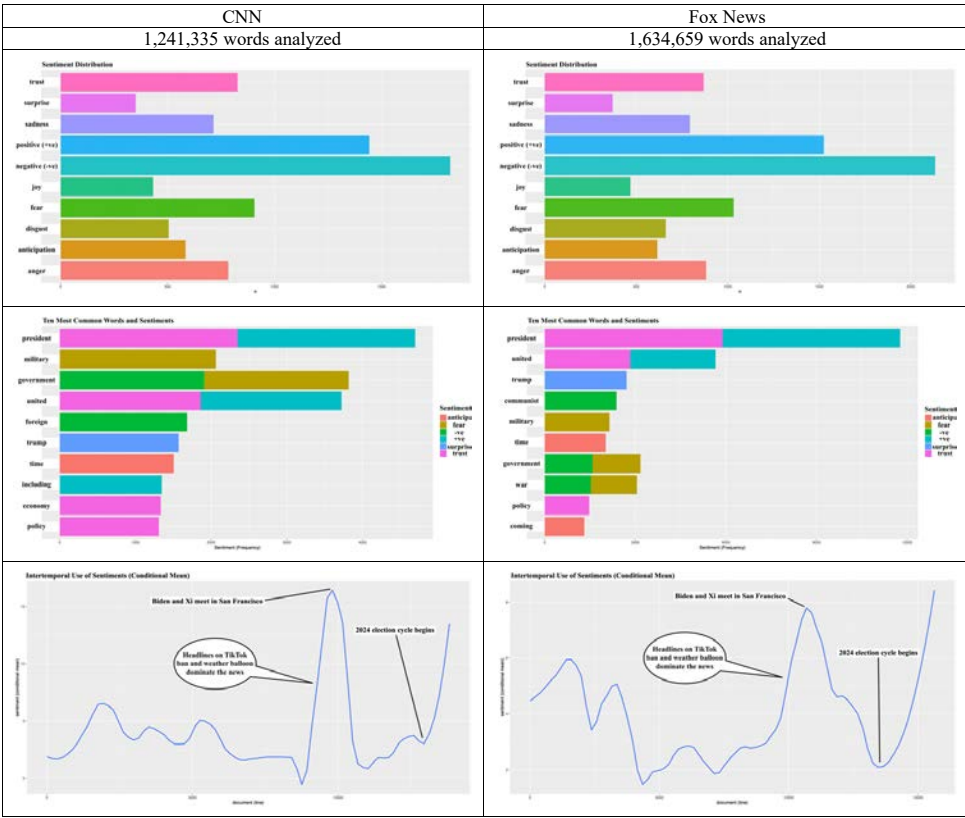
U.S. Department of State on China



Media Outlets on China Under the Trump Administration



Media Outlets on China Under the Biden Administration



## Findings

### *From Trump to Biden: Rhetorical Divergence, Policy Continuity*

The distribution of sentiments toward China in releases from the DOS, CNN, and Fox News, under Trump and Biden, are disproportionately “negative.” There is no doubt “tough on China” has become a bipartisan touchpoint for contemporary U.S. politics and civil society. Yet, in most documents, the sentiments “positive” and “trust” emerge as the second and third highest in proportion, respectively, and are consistently associated with the words “president” and “united.” This could reflect expected confidence from the DOS and unexpected bipartisan hope among media outlets in U.S. capability to manage tensions with China. Furthermore, the sentiment distribution of DOS documents under either administration remained relatively unwavering, only fluctuating within a narrow range of means between 2.5 and 4. This suggests moderation in official DOS stances toward geopolitical precarity. In contrast, the same sentiment distribution of CNN and Fox News spans wider mean ranges under either administration, possibly reflecting a sensationalization of geopolitical developments.

The most common words invoked in DOS documents reveal insight into either administration’s “tough on China” strategy. “Military” and “communism” are among the most common words in DOS releases during the Trump administration, while seldom used in DOS releases during the Biden administration. The Trump administration’s “tough on China” rhetoric ostensibly takes shape by framing China as an ideological and military threat. A 2020 release from the White House compiling speeches on China from the first Trump administration is described to “[lay] out the most significant United States foreign policy shift in a generation.”<sup>28</sup> A 2018 speech by former Vice President Mike Pence remarked “the American people deserve to know that . . . Beijing is employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests in the United States.”<sup>29</sup> Pence also reiterated Trump “signed into law the largest increase in our national defense since the days of Ronald Reagan—\$716 billion” to “mak[e] the strongest military in the history of the world stronger still.”<sup>30</sup> In 2020, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained American vulnerabilities China intends to exploit: “Perhaps we were naïve about China’s virulent strain of communism, or triumphalist after our victory in the Cold War, or cravenly capitalist, or hoodwinked by Beijing’s talk of a “peaceful rise.””<sup>31</sup> By framing China as an ideological and strategic competitor, the Trump administration established Washington’s “tough on China” stance.

Conversely, “labor” was among the most common words in DOS releases during the Biden administration, while seldom used in DOS releases during the Trump administration. This could indicate the Biden administration got “tough on China” by attempting to address threats to American labor. In particular,

the Biden administration criticized China's "heavily subsidized industries of the future" that "produce far more than the rest of the world can absorb," then "[dump] the excess products onto the market at unfairly low prices, driving other manufacturers around the world out of business."<sup>32</sup> Other "anti-competitive tactics" also include "forcing the American companies to transfer their technology in order to do business in China."<sup>33</sup> These threats drove the Biden administration to increase tariff rates across critical industries in 2024: 0-7.5% to 25% on steel and aluminum, 25% to 100% on electric vehicles, and 25% to 50% on solar cells.<sup>34</sup> This was coupled with steep investments in critical technologies and infrastructure, through the Inflation Reduction Act,<sup>35</sup> the CHIPS and Science Act,<sup>36</sup> and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, the Biden administration confronted China's labor rights abuses, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), by signing into law the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.<sup>38</sup> This Act prohibits the import of any goods produced in the XUAR to the United States.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the Biden administration's "tough on China" approach focused on labor policies both domestically and in China. This does not suggest that the Trump administration was disinterested in labor economics as it launched the largest-scale trade war of the 21st century.<sup>40</sup> However, the Trump administration preferred less technocratic rhetoric, emphasizing ideological and military threats to rally Americans against China. Thereafter, the Biden administration largely exercised policy continuity despite attempting to differentiate its "tough on China" rhetoric.

### ***Media During the Trump Administration: Skeptics and Sycophants***

Fox News adopted a harsher stance toward China than CNN likely following the establishment of "tough on China" during the Trump administration. Fox News' frequent use of the word "communist" echoed the ideological threat of China among Americans. CNN maintained a less hostile stance, frequently invoking "military" and "war" with fear. However, in comparison to broader Trump-era left-wing media, which struggled to support any Trump policy, 79% of liberal news media did not oppose the trade war.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, both news agencies released content with the highest mean sentiment distribution in distinct time periods. For CNN, these peaks occurred at the end of 2018 into 2019 and in the spring of 2020. For Fox News, their peak occurred at the end of 2020, prior to Trump's potential reelection.

For CNN, we speculate the first spike followed the launch of the Trump administration's trade war. CNN highlighted potential weaknesses of the tariffs, stating "a trade war could make life a lot more difficult for some well-known, blue chip American firms."<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, CNN remained largely neutral, with headlines like "China Stocks Slump as US Steps Up Trade War."<sup>43</sup> CNN's second peak coincides with the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020. However, the mean sentiment distribution could be artificially inflated by content assigning stronger criticism for the purported role of China in the pandemic. CNN headlines such as "China Approves Sinopharm

COVID-19 Vaccine, Promises Free Shots for all Citizens,”<sup>44</sup> and “Kim Jong Un is Cutting Off His Economic Lifeline, China, to Stave Off COVID-19,”<sup>45</sup> support this possibility.

COVID-19 pandemic could also explain Fox News’ peak in 2020. Alternatively, a spike in the third and fourth quarter of 2020 could indicate an election-time strategy framing China as a point of contention and Trump as the superior arbiter. Fox News host Sean Hannity pointed out Biden’s weaknesses: “China was on the rise, Joe Biden downplayed the threat, his son got rich.” Meanwhile, he boasted about Trump’s presidency, commenting, “[Democrats] weren’t focused on China. The president was focused on China.”<sup>46</sup> The disparity between news agencies suggests a broader pattern: during the Trump administration, an event could make headlines for one outlet, but not for the other.

### ***Media During the Biden Administration: Bipartisan Criticism—“Get Tougher on China!”***

During the Biden administration, the peaks in mean sentiment distribution for CNN and Fox News coincided, with the largest peak occurring in the fourth quarter of 2023. Leading up to this spike, trial hearings over the potential TikTok ban intensified; a Chinese weather balloon—which Washington alleged was for surveillance—instilled paranoia; and harsh criticism over China’s compliance with fentanyl exports to North America further strained relations. A meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Biden in San Francisco was inadvertently postponed, and China made headlines as the primary threat.<sup>47</sup>

When the meeting eventually happened on November 15, 2023, sentiments were negative for both media outlets. Fox News made bold claims such as “China’s economy, it is now a dumpster fire” and “President Xi is desperately looking for a win and with a pathetically weak U.S. president.”<sup>48</sup> CNN highlighted their concerns with headlines such as “Xi signals marked shift in tone for China on US—but with Biden’s off-the-cuff ‘dictator’ comment can it last?”<sup>49</sup> These assertions could indicate bipartisan support for getting “tougher” on China as well as signal fleeting left-wing support for Biden’s reelection.

The mean sentiment distribution for both outlets peaked as the 2024 election approached. This could be attributed to candidates campaigning on anti-China rhetoric, most notably Trump, who promised sweeping tariffs on China.<sup>50</sup> Alternatively, these peaks could instead reflect negative sentiments surrounding subjects other than China, as candidates try to degrade each other. Overall, the media transitioned to bipartisan support for confronting China—a unique niche within the polarized political landscape of the United States.

## **Conclusion**

Our study sought to examine *how* and *why* “tough on China” as a rhetorical and policy stance has changed in the United States. The mix of sentiments



displayed by the DOS, CNN, and Fox News, were characterized by outright negativity toward China. However, the smaller variation in the mean sentiment distribution of DOS releases suggests the DOS chooses to maintain diplomatic civility when reporting on U.S.-China relations, in spite, and perhaps because of, inflammatory statements from other branches of the government. Conversely, wider swings in the mean sentiment distribution for CNN and Fox News, regardless of the administration in power, suggest the media frames information for their own interests, typically producing provocative headlines for profit.

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# Out of Sight, Out of Policy: The Struggles of Urban Refugees in Kenya

Zoe Raptis

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## Introduction

Many mistakenly assume that the majority of refugees live in camps. In reality, most seek refuge in urban areas, finding safety in towns and cities. Over the past 15 years, the percentage of refugees who have sought shelter in urban areas has grown significantly, from around 15 percent in 2003 to more than 60 percent today.<sup>1</sup> Despite this geographical shift, policies themselves have not adjusted to meet the different needs of urban refugees and asylum seekers. Host governments, humanitarian actors, and donors continue to heavily prioritize and fund infrastructure for camp-based populations, creating a substantial resource gap.<sup>2</sup> In African nations, efforts have largely been concentrated on refugee camps, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) serving as the guardian of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which oversees the implementation and maintenance of the camp system.<sup>3</sup> While refugees and migration issues dominate the media in the U.S. and Europe, the reality is that the majority of refugees reside in developing countries.<sup>4</sup> Around one-third of those forcibly displaced are in Africa, including approximately 8.9 million refugees.<sup>5</sup> In Africa, the protections established by the UNHCR and in international refugee guidelines hold greater influence in refugee camps than in urban settings. Urban refugees are often overlooked, and national governments rarely implement formal policies to address their needs. Instead, changes are typically driven by ad-hoc, local-level practices, meaning that municipal authorities, NGOs, or community initiatives respond on a case-by-case basis without consistent national frameworks, leaving urban refugees underserved.<sup>6</sup> Urban refugees worldwide often struggle to access humanitarian aid, and African nations are no exception, where camp populations receive priority.<sup>7</sup> The larger issue is not only that urban refugees are ignored, but also the disproportionate emphasis placed on camps. I argue that it is imperative for African states to shift their focus from refugee camps to urban integration. This is not to suggest that camps are redundant, but rather that more attention needs to be directed toward urban settings. There should be a shift to urban integration to better actualize UNHCR's aim for refugees to become self-reliant. First, I will analyze why refugee camps are preferred as a policy. Then, using Kenya as a case study, I highlight the need for greater focus

on urban refugees globally, and propose policy recommendations to improve urban refugee integration in Kenya and other African states.

## The Camp Focus

Mistakenly, self-reliance or self-sufficiency is assumed for the majority of the world's urban refugees.<sup>8</sup> Policy and funding are primarily directed toward camps, which are often viewed as the default response to new refugee crises.<sup>9</sup> Governments prefer camps for two key reasons. First, the aspect of visibility is critical for governments—because “camps are a tangible demonstration that a government is actively responding to a refugee crisis,” the presence of camps allows governments to access international funds and resources.<sup>10</sup> In cities, refugees lose their visibility as they blend into urban life, living alongside other residents, and are therefore less likely to be seen as a population in need. One might intuitively assume that governments would prefer refugees to remain “invisible” as they undergo local integration. However, visibility is crucial for governments to mobilize resources from UNHCR and NGOs, as governments are more inclined to allow refugees to remain if they are provided with the funding necessary to build the appropriate infrastructure to accommodate them. As noted previously, one-third of the world's refugees reside in Africa, placing significant strain on host countries in the continent. Many African states find themselves ill-equipped to carry out their duties to refugees, so they look to UNHCR and international funding for support. UNHCR is more experienced with camp-based populations, with established practices and dedicated professionals. Conversely, urban refugees often go unregistered, meaning they are not officially recognized by the host government or UNHCR. Their “invisible” status makes it difficult for UNHCR to assess their needs and allocate aid effectively. Thus, host countries favor refugee camps as a visible strategy to attract international funding.<sup>11</sup> Other actors, like aid agencies, also prefer camps for exposure, as they serve as a “visual tool” for fundraising at the NGO level, further complicating and drawing international efforts away from addressing urban refugee displacement in cities.<sup>12</sup>

Specifically, governments prefer camps because they align with their long-term goal of only keeping refugees and other displaced people in the country temporarily, until they can be returned home. Governments view camps as a short-term solution to displacement. Since they do not intend to host refugees indefinitely, governments are reluctant to integrate them into the urban community and would rather keep them separate.<sup>13</sup> This separation reinforces the narrative that refugees are outsiders and potential security threats that need to be physically distanced from the local community and kept under supervision. The settlement of refugees in urban areas is not new, yet the urban displaced are considered “an expense and security threat.”<sup>14</sup> There is a general perception that refugees belong in camps, and therefore urban refugees are viewed as “out of place” and seen as security risks who should remain isolated.<sup>15</sup>

This perception fuels anti-immigrant sentiment, making future efforts at integration into urban areas increasingly challenging. Even if UNHCR wishes to address urban refugee displacement, the body is constrained by host government national policy, which typically prioritizes assistance to refugees in camps.<sup>16</sup> For example, in Jordan, camps only house 20 percent of Syrian refugees, but they receive 80 percent of humanitarian funding.<sup>17</sup> This preference is not solely driven by the need for UNHCR funding; governments also have their own independent reasons for prioritizing camps, and obtaining UNHCR funding is only one facet of that. The greatest difficulty in addressing urban displacement in cities is that host governments prefer a camp-based approach, thwarting efforts that champion city-orientated approaches, even when cities themselves may have a more favorable outlook. Instead of investing in urban refugee infrastructure, such as housing assistance programs, job training centers, and accessible work permits, which could allow refugees to integrate into local economies, host governments focus on increasing camp capacity—even when it may not be the most effective use of resources to improve living conditions for refugees on a national scale. It is important here to remember the existence of camps does not mean the issue of urban refugee displacement is resolved.

## **The Kenya Case**

In Kenya, camp policies are highly restrictive. In 1991, the country introduced an encampment policy requiring all refugees to reside in camps established and managed by UNHCR.<sup>18</sup> This meant that refugees living outside of the camps, such as in cities like Nairobi, were unable to legally work or access social services. Despite this mandatory encampment policy, some refugees chose to illegally live in cities. Currently, around 15 percent of all refugees in Kenya live in Nairobi.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, Kenya's official figures indicated that of the country's 470,088 registered refugees and asylum seekers, just 74,845 were living in urban areas.<sup>20</sup> However, due to the strict encampment policy, these numbers are likely underreported, as many unregistered refugees also live in Nairobi.<sup>21</sup> In Kenya, camps are "closed, and only refugees who can convince the authorities of their resources and family connections, and [are able to] navigate the bureaucracy... can move out of the camp on a temporary or permanent basis."<sup>22</sup> It is extremely difficult to even leave the camp, as it requires obtaining an extremely regulated and rarely approved movement pass. If for some reason this pass is obtained, refugees are still segregated.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, refugees can be arrested if they leave the camp without a movement pass.<sup>24</sup> Dr. Lucy Earle, an academic and UK government advisor on urban refugee displacement, interviewed refugees in the Dadaab camp, showing that respondents were desperate to leave the camp, and described it as a prison: "We [refugees] say we are in a cell that is open in the upper part."<sup>25</sup> Camps are portrayed as "safety nets" by aid agencies, but when underfunded, like Dadaab, they can become places of hunger, homelessness, and inadequate service provision.<sup>26</sup>

In Earle's research study, Somali refugees in Nairobi, aware of the poor services and lack of freedom in camps, chose to bypass Dadaab and instead work as street hawkers selling goods informally in the city.<sup>27</sup> As a sort of resistance to the stringent refugee policies, these women chose to "endure significant hardships for the sake of a better future for their children outside the camp."<sup>28</sup> As a Somali refugee woman said:

"I have never thought of moving to the camps because it's difficult to start a business. [. . .] Through my small hustles along the road, I want to pay for university fees for my older children and the smaller ones."<sup>29</sup>

Despite the difficulties faced by refugees living in the city, it is still preferable to the camp for many due to the possibility of earning income, albeit illegally, rather than being trapped in a camp with subpar conditions and no hope of escape.

Leaving or bypassing the camp means foregoing humanitarian assistance.<sup>30</sup> While the recent 2021 Refugee Act in Kenya aimed to expand refugee rights and address the injustices of the system formed by the 1991 law, refugees are still required to live in "designated areas."<sup>31</sup> Exactly what these areas are is still vague. Allan Mukuki, an advocate at the High Court of Kenya and legal expert, states the Act defines these areas as "any reception area, transit point or settlement area as may be declared by the Cabinet Secretary."<sup>32</sup> Currently, Somali refugees in Nairobi are often confined within the boundaries of Eastleigh, a neighbourhood with a large population of Kenyans of Somali origin as well as Somali refugees.<sup>33</sup> This is because Somali refugees are associated with links to terrorism and fear discrimination, as well as being signalled out by police or authorities for detention or extortion due to their distinctive physical characteristics.<sup>34</sup> One Somali refugee man, aged 45, explained:

"I don't feel safe to move around because there's so much harassment from the police, who will do everything to extort money from vulnerable people."<sup>35</sup>

A 30 year old Somali refugee woman also stated:

"If I leave it is when I am going to the UNHCR offices in Westlands. I am always afraid I will be arrested if I go beyond. [. . .] My refugee status cannot allow me to leave Eastleigh, I am only allowed to live within the camp or Eastleigh."<sup>36</sup>

Thus, many Somali refugees limit their movement to the Eastleigh neighbourhood, mirroring the segregation from the camp. Most worryingly, these refugees' limited movement severely impacts their access to basic services. This more prominently applies to unregistered urban refugees who are afraid to move freely around the city for fear of being arrested and sent back to the camps, as occurred in 2020 to those who lost their livelihoods due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>37</sup>



There must be a policy shift in Kenya to account for the unregistered urban refugees who fear being sent back to the camps as well as the registered urban refugees that are still living in the “shadow of the camp.”<sup>38</sup> Even with a strict encampment policy, Kenya cannot prevent refugees from residing in cities. Refugees will continue to be drawn to cities, whether it is because of the possibility of earning income or family ties. Furthermore, it is imperative to dispel the assumption that urban refugees are “self-reliant” and only camp populations are in need of assistance. I have demonstrated that many refugees feel trapped by life in camps, and those that live in urban areas lack access to essential social services and resources. Therefore, rather than channeling resources into camps, efforts should focus on urban integration, as most refugees in Kenya are unlikely to return home soon. Keeping them in camps only delays their inevitable integration. A trading of places from camps to cities is essential, as both registered and unregistered urban refugees face significant challenges that will only be resolved by allowing freedom of movement and increasing the capacity for urban areas to handle and support refugees.

## **Key Areas for Policy Improvement in Africa**

The 2021 Refugee Act marks a significant step forward for Kenya, laying the groundwork for meaningful change. If fully implemented, the Act offers refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to financial services, among other rights.<sup>39</sup> A key component of the new refugee policy is the transformation of refugee camps into urban settlement areas.<sup>40</sup> While this Act is a step in the right direction, a closer examination reveals ambiguities in the language. In addition to the aforementioned provision requiring refugees to live in “designated areas,” the Act also fails to adequately address access to work permits and healthcare for refugees. Importantly, the implementation of this policy will take time, and critics remain skeptical about its effectiveness as urban refugees continue to face daily struggles.

Additionally, due to the deep rooted discrimination against Somali refugees in Kenya, positive urban-oriented strides such as the UNHCR’s Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Programme (GISED) have made little progress, with no clear indication that Somali refugees will be resettled outside of camps.<sup>41</sup> Given these ongoing challenges, policymakers must prioritize immediate action to address urban refugees’ needs, rather than focusing solely on camp populations.

### ***Access to Healthcare***

Unregistered urban refugees struggle to access essential services, such as healthcare, because many public services require documentation. Therefore, private clinics often become the only option for seeking medical help. However, as is the case in Kenya, private clinics are far more expensive,<sup>42</sup> forcing refugees to obtain medical help from unreliable sources, or even worse, forgo medical help altogether.<sup>43</sup> Even registered refugees often struggle, as newly

arrived individuals usually lack information on how Kenya's healthcare system operates and face various barriers to access, such as language and cultural differences.<sup>44</sup> Because the new Refugee Act focuses primarily on assisting refugees in camps such as Kakuma and Dadaab with integration, current challenges faced by urban refugees in accessing services remain largely neglected.<sup>45</sup>

A successful urban integration model must strive to make essential services like healthcare more accessible to urban refugees. Such policies do not just pertain to Kenya, but also other African nations. Policies should aim to simplify the registration process and ensure refugees have the necessary documents to access healthcare services. In Kenya's case, urban refugees should be guaranteed access to necessary documentation without fear of being sent to a camp. Other policies can involve providing multilingual support in healthcare facilities to overcome language barriers and improving accessibility to healthcare facilities. For Nairobi, this can involve either improving health care near refugee areas like Eastleigh or improving transportation from Eastleigh to clinics.

### ***Access to Employment***

Urban refugees in Nairobi are often excluded from the formal labor market,<sup>46</sup> with many struggling to obtain work permits. As a result, they are forced to seek employment in the informal sector.<sup>47</sup> The 2021 Refugee Act stipulates that refugees will have the right to work. If properly enforced, this stipulation could address existing employment challenges. Although this new provision is promising, I question its potential impact if the work permit issue remains unresolved. The Act stipulates that refugees "shall have the right to engage individually or in a group, in gainful employment or enterprise or to practice a profession or trade where he holds qualifications recognized by competent authorities in Kenya."<sup>48</sup> As Allan Mukuki, a distinguished legal professional and Advocate of the High Court of Kenya, points out the problem is that the Act mandates that refugees have their qualifications recognized by the Kenyan National Qualifications Authority—<sup>49</sup>a task that is far from straightforward. For instance, a refugee in the Kakuma camp would need a permit to travel to Nairobi for document certification, which may also require approval from professional bodies like the Law Society of Kenya or the Engineers Board of Kenya.<sup>50</sup> Thus, requiring travel permits, this process can be lengthy and complex, sometimes involving additional testing. Since many refugees fleeing conflict are unable to bring their documents, obtaining copies of their diplomas and certifications from their home countries is even more difficult.<sup>51</sup>

In Kenya and beyond, policies should aim to encourage access to employment rather than complicating the process. It is difficult to predict how the right to work in the new Act will unfold, but policymakers must ensure that work permits are accessible to refugees without overly complicated procedures. Hopefully, the right to movement clause in the Refugee Act will eliminate the worries that Allan Mukuki highlights. Given the current uncertainty, I propose that access to work permits should be a streamlined process, with no requirement

for prior documentation. Policies to dovetail the right to work should promote anti-discrimination practices in the workplace and should encourage private investment in areas hosting refugees, like Kakuma and Kalobeye, through subsidies or tax incentives. The Kakuma Kalobeyei Challenge Fund (KKCF) is an example of such initiatives, which supports private sector investments in these areas by providing grants and technical assistance.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Access to Housing***

Housing is a prominent issue for most urban refugees, especially in Nairobi where housing costs are high and refugees face discrimination from landlords.<sup>53</sup> In Nairobi, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) found that the most significant challenges faced by newly arrived refugees are the poor condition of housing (39.2 percent), followed by difficulty raising rent, or rent being too high (19.5 percent).<sup>54</sup> Due to this, many urban refugees live in houses with very poor conditions, such as overcrowded housing with inadequate water, sanitation, and energy.<sup>55</sup>

Unfortunately, the 2021 Refugee Act fails to address the issue of subpar housing conditions, or outline how housing rights for refugees will be secured.<sup>56</sup> Policymakers should aim to expand affordable housing initiatives by partnering with private developers and NGOs to create more affordable housing units. For example, Greece's Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) program demonstrates how governments, in partnership with international organizations, can create localized housing solutions by leveraging the rental market, a model that Kenya and other African states could adapt to include refugees in its affordable housing initiatives.<sup>57</sup> ESTIA provided housing and aid for asylum-seekers with support from the UNHCR, the Greek government, and NGOs.<sup>58</sup> Its first pillar secured 20,000 apartments, offering shelter to those fleeing conflict, while the second, ESTIA Cash, provided financial support for daily needs, regardless of residence.<sup>59</sup> Kenya could implement a similar initiative, and has proven it has the political willpower to do so. For example, the Kenyan Government's Affordable Housing Program aims to support the establishment of 250,000 affordable housing units annually.<sup>60</sup> However, refugees are currently not eligible for these units. Therefore, a potential policy could involve collaboration between refugee organizations, donors, and the Kenyan government in order to incorporate refugees in this housing scheme.<sup>61</sup> Other potential policies could include implementing cash-based interventions similar to the UNHCR's program in Kalobeyei, which provides refugees with financial assistance to build or rent safe and dignified housing.<sup>62</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Kenya, like many African nations, has long prioritized a camp-based approach to refugee management, often overlooking the growing population of urban refugees who struggle with limited access to essential services, housing, and

employment. While camps may serve as visible symbols of state response to displacement, they are not a sustainable long-term solution. While the 2021 Refugee Act marks a step toward greater refugee inclusion, its implementation must also address the immediate and pressing needs of urban refugees, not just those in camps. The Act's ambiguity of "designated areas" and the government's intentions with the right to work stipulation raises questions. Additionally, it is still unclear when and how this act will be concretely implemented. Kenya is moving in the right direction regarding refugee management, but urban refugees, especially Somali refugees who face widespread discrimination, need to be made a higher priority. By shifting policies toward urban integration—ensuring better access to healthcare, employment, and housing—Kenya and other African states can foster self-reliance and improved living conditions among refugees. Refugees are not temporary guests; they are part of the urban fabric. Recognizing this reality and implementing inclusive policies will create more sustainable, humane, and practical approaches to refugee management in Africa.

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