How Does Militant Violence Diffuse in Regions? Regional Conflict Systems in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies

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Regional conflict systems are characterised by their complexity of actors, causes, structural conditions and dynamics. Such complexity poses difficulties to those looking to undertake scientific analysis of the regional dynamics of violence. It is still quite unclear how militant violence diffuses in regions and under which conditions a regional conflict system can emerge. This review of existing approaches to regional conflict dynamics in international studies and peace and conflict studies focuses on how the regional conflict dynamics and the causal mechanisms behind the development of regional conflict systems are dealt with, considering process dynamics in space and time as well as in the interactions between possible causal factors. The primary gaps in existing research are identified and possible new research directions sketched out.

Regions and regional conflicts are by no means new concepts in the different research areas of political science.[1] Several approaches in international relations and peace and conflict studies deal with regions and regional conflicts. Especially when it comes to explaining security and violence or interdependence between collective actors, the regional dimension serves as an analytical framework. The regional perspective therefore has a certain tradition in the theories of international relations and peace and conflict studies, even if it is often stuck either on the international or national level. Nevertheless, particular processes and phenomena have so far been inadequately theoretically described. Especially when it comes to the regional dynamics of militant violence, conventional theories neglect actions that take place outside the national or international level.

This is due to an entrenched methodological nationalism and focus on the nation state as the main source of (in-)security and war in the international system. Nevertheless, a change in the characteristics and conditions of warfare can be observed in the decades following the end of the Second World War (Chojnacki 2006; Schlichte 2007; Zangl and Zürn 2003).[2] Wars are no longer only waged between the armies of sovereign nation states, but expand to a multiplicity of transnational actors of violence and security that correlate in complex relations and often compete for political control and the monopoly of violence in a region. The militant violence of collective actors escalates in both horizontal and vertical directions and diffuses to a multiplicity of different actors at different levels – local, national, regional and international level.[3] The regional conflict system that emerges can

1 There is no generally accepted definition of regions or regional conflicts. Even in the papers and books discussed here, every author has – according to his or her perspective – his or her own definition with plenty of different characteristics. Two characteristics that are important in most of the discussed studies are geographical proximity of the involved collective actors and a certain amount of interaction – be they cooperative or confrontational. According to the minimal definition of region used in this paper, a regional conflict is a confrontational interaction between two or more collective actors within a particular geographical space.

2 This general change in the conditions and characteristics of warfare is more or less unchallenged in empirical conflict studies. Nonetheless, the theoretical classification, the methodological approach and the empirical substantiation are still controversial, especially with regard to the so-called new wars discourse (Kaldor 1999; Münkler 2005). For more see works by Brzoska (2004), Newman (2004) and Chojnacki (2006).

3 A horizontal escalation involves more actors at the same geographic and political level, a vertical escalation means the diffusion of violence to actors at different levels of action and administration.

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be defined as a geographically determined area of insecurity, characterised by interdependent violent conflicts with a plurality of different sub-state, national or transnational actors.

These regional conflict systems are found in different parts of the globe. Striking developments are seen in the global south, where a majority of these regional conflict systems are located (Wallensteen and Sollenberg 1998). Very often neighbouring states support or tolerate rebel groups on their territory, as in Chad, Sudan and the Central African Republic (Giroux, Lanz, and Sguaitamatti 2009; Grawert 2008). In other cases like the **Great** Lakes region, neighbouring governments and rebels help themselves unabashedly to the precious resources of a weak and failed neighbouring state (Montague 2002; Nest 2006). In this region, the rebel groups also utilised the benefits of humanitarian aid to equip for the next fight (Lischer 2003; Mthembu-Salter 2006). State actors might still be existent in these areas, but they are part of a larger conflict structure together with private, local and transnational actors of violence that take over the production of (in-)security in regions where the scope of public authority is limited. These private entrepreneurs of violence both exploit the population and demand money for protecting the people and their areas. West Africa in the 1990s with Sierra Leone and Liberia provides a striking example (HRW 2002; Malejacq 2007). The production of (in-)security and the ensuing economic gains are part of a larger conflict structure. Questions of identity should not be underestimated in this context. The transborder kinship of identity groups can lead to a regional spillover of violence, as happened in the Balkans during the 1990s (Fearon 1998). Moreover, massive refugee flows and the economic and political weakness of a conflict area, as after the genocide in Rwanda and the war in Burundi in the 1990s, can cause tensions in a whole region (Manahl 2000; Prunier 2009).

So regional conflict systems are characterised by their complexity of actors, causes, structural conditions and dynamics. Such complexity, however, poses difficulties to those looking to undertake scientific analysis of the regional dynamics of violence. It is still quite unclear how militant violence diffuses in regions and under which conditions a regional conflict system can emerge.

1. Regions and Regional Conflicts in International Relations

Theoretically, the concept of regions is more settled in the theories of international relations than in peace and conflict studies. Even during the height of the Cold War, the dualism of nation state international system was already being questioned by a handful of political scientists, such as Bruce M. Russett (1967), Louis J. Cantori and Steven L. Spiegel (1970), Barry Buzan (1983), Raimo Väyrynen (1984) and Björn Hettne (1989). These authors point to the possibility of a regional perspective on the dynamics of interactions, and thus try to explain cooperation and confrontation on a regional dimension. Nonetheless, these approaches assume the nation state as the main actor when it comes to the dynamics of peace, security and violence. Consequently, they fail to explain those security dynamics that are not related to state actors but that originate from private transnational security actors beyond the nation state.

Despite these innovative approaches, international research on regional phenomena was still dominated by the classical theories of (neo-)realism and (neo-)liberal institutionalism (Waltz 1979; Vasquez 1993; Mearsheimer 2001; Keohane and Nye 1977; Keohane 1984). These conventional theories from international relations deal only marginally with the concept of regions and maintain the nation state as their primary point of reference object. This is due to the methodological nationalism of these approaches, where the nation state is assumed to be the necessary form of society in modernity and thus the natural entity of empirical analysis (for more see Martins 1974, 276; Beck 2000, 21ff.; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Chernilo 2006). The nation, its borders, history, agendas, discourses, etc. are taken for granted without asking how they developed or what alternative forms of organisation and interaction exist. Furthermore, the analytical focus is reduced to the boundaries of nation states (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 307).

In (neo-)realism it is generally conceivable that nation states form alliances at the regional level. But at the same time they say that the main impetus for this behaviour is pursuit of self-interest and protection against insecurity in the anarchic international system (Gilpin 1981; Hurrell 1995, 340; Mearsheimer 1995, 82; Mearsheimer 2001; Morgenthau 1973; Vasquez 1993, 158; Waltz 1979, 118;

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Wohlforth 1999). (Neo-)liberal institutionalism emphasises the interdependencies between nation states. The regional level emerges through institutional and economic cooperation between different actors in the nation states. The point of departure for regional cooperation is the desire for increasing prosperity and solutions to common problems. The governments of nation states establish rules, procedures and institutions to regulate and control these trans- and interstate relations (Keohane and Nye 1977, 5; Nye 1971). Such arrangements are called international regimes. These interdependences are of use for the establishment of regional peace, but also create strong interstate dependencies and increased risk of diffusion of conflict through contagion effects (Keohane and Nye 1977, 9). But even if the concept of region can contribute to explaining the behaviour of nation states in the international system, the region is not the focus of analytical interest in these theoretical approaches. Rather, the nation states and governing elites in the international system remain the main interest of analysis. Regional dynamics of security and violence are therefore inadequately captured.

Not until the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the Soviet Union did alternative approaches placing greater focus on regions and the regional dynamics of conflict gain in importance. Many of these approaches come from a constructivist background and presume that values and norms are constructed by social actors (Wendt 1992, 1995, 1999; Adler and Barnett 1998b; see also Zangl and Zürn 2003, 127ff.). So there are many different concepts and ideas of the world, even if it is only one world and reality we are living in (Weller 2003, 110).

Barry Buzan' constructivist *Regional Security Complex Theory* (RSCT) which he later enhanced with Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, is of particular importance for research on security and violence dynamics at the regional level (Buzan 1991, 2000; Buzan and Wæver 2003; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). The aim of this theory is to cover actor relations at different levels – national, regional and inter-

national – and allow the possibility of improved explanations of the related security dynamics. These actor relations are affected by amity or enmity. All these different amicable and hostile interdependences between state actors together constitute a regional security complex, defined as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" (Buzan 1991, 190). Regional security complexes are hence sub-systems of the international system, midget anarchies with their own structures and patterns of interactions (Buzan 2000, 4).

Even though this is an interesting and promising approach, it shows some weaknesses. The focus still rests on the global level and security interdependences between strong security actors such as powerful states, and especially the local or regional security and violence dynamics witnessed in regional conflict systems can only be partially captured. The dynamics of regional violence and the causal mechanisms behind the development of regional conflicts are partly neglected. The focus on global and regional powers leads Buzan to totally omit security interactions in sub-Saharan Africa from his first monograph (1991). In their latest publication, Buzan and Wæver touch on the interactions taking place in this part of the world, but their descriptions are cursory (Buzan and Wæver 2003, 219ff.). Their focus on "powers" – characterised by economic, political or security resources – as main security actors (2003, chapter 2) necessarily loses sight of transnational non-state security actors on the African subcontinent. This also brings with it the problem that alternative security actors beyond the state and the related self-regulating mechanisms of non-governmental violence or security actors are considered only peripherally. Therefore, findings are limited on violent conflicts with regional dynamics not explicitly referring to nation states.

Another constructivist approach to security dynamics at the regional level comes from Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett. They analyse pluralistic security communities,[4]

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[4] The concept of security communities was first developed by Karl W. Deutsch (1968) and later elaborated by Adler and Barnett.

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which they define as a "transnational region comprised of sovereign states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change" (1998a, 30). Adler and Barnett assume that the security community is based on shared values, knowledge and meanings (1998a, 31). Its members share many direct and indirect relations and interactions and are interconnected through these. Recurrent and predictable processes foster a kind of reciprocity, developing a long-term mutual interest between the members. This approach is very useful for analysing amicable and integrative security relations that rest on shared values and ideas, as can be found in the European Union. At the same time, the problem of disintegrative security dynamics remains unanswered. Although Adler and Barnett mention the possibility of hostile relations between different security actors leading to increased violence, they do not elaborate on the causes and dynamics thereof (1998a, 57f.). Furthermore, they too are stuck in a state-oriented perspective and ignore alternative security actors beyond the nation state and the international community.

Other studies on regional security dynamics that appeared after the end of the Cold War share the shortcomings of Buzan and Wæver and Adler and Barnett. Positively, authors like David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan (1997), Mohammad Ayoob (1995), Roger E. Kanet (1998), or Rodrigo Tavares (2006) point out the necessity of a regional perspective and develop different approaches that focus on the regional dimension while analysing different security and conflict developments. The essays in *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, for example, examine different regional orders of peace and conflict on the basis of Buzan's concept of regional security complexes, and trace security dynamics in different parts of the world (Lake and Morgan 1997). They confirm the existence of regional conflicts and include them in their analyses. But their approach lacks a workable theoretical background for the question of development and dynamics of regional conflicts.

Ayoob's book and Kanet's anthology also recognise the existence of regional conflicts (Ayoob 1995; Kanet 1998), but both still lack a systematic analytical approach to explaining causes and dynamics of regional conflicts. Possible factors that can cause regional conflicts are listed randomly

without a proper theoretical basis. Regions and regional conflicts are seen as unique phenomena; statements are made on individual cases but general conclusions are absent.

Tavares researches peace and conflict at a regional level through his concept of "regional peace and security clusters" (Tavares 2006), which he defines as "a set of peace and security relations that occur in a broad territory (region), driven by agents, operating at various levels of regional integration, who use various instruments to change the patterns of security, conflict, and positive peace" (Tavares 2006, 170). Tavares adopts a broad approach to analyse peace and conflict at the regional level. This allows him to include regional security dynamics on a wider level than the aforementioned approaches but makes his analysis very complex and unclear. Moreover, his selection of case studies focuses on regions of peace and security, limiting the applicability of his empirical explanations to violent and insecure regions.

Another approach to analysing regional conflict systems sits at the interface between international relations, systems theory and conflict studies, as laid out in Stephan Stetter's collection *Territorial Conflicts in World Society* (2007c). The starting point of analysis here is not actors and their interactions, but the communications of world society (Stetter 2007a, 3). As today's communication is (potentially or actually) global in its reach, there can be no communication – and thus no society – outside world society (2007b, 37). Such communication can always be accepted or rejected; these processes produce a kind of connectivity. At the same time world society is not internally integrated, but characterised by manifold forms of differentiation. System theory argues that differentiation happens mainly on a functional level, i.e. between different functional systems such as politics, religion, economics, etc. When a communication is rejected a conflict arises, so conflict is omnipresent in world society too (2007a, 9). One advantage of modern system theory is the possibility to observe debordering processes beyond dominant national borders (2007a, 10), while negating neither the relevance of states in the international system nor the role of non-state structures and actors in world society. Moving on to regional conflict systems, it is argued that especially the interrelationship between func-

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tional borders (of different functional systems) and patterns of inclusion and exclusion provides the background for the emergence of particular regions of violence (2007b, 43).[5] This is a very interesting approach as it focuses on communications in different systems of world society (political, social, economic, etc.) instead of on actors and their interests. This branch of research is still in its infancy, and points towards a new research perspective of understanding regional conflict dynamics by studying communication.

In one way or another, these recent developments in international studies are all interesting approaches moving towards a more regional perspective on conflict and security processes. Even if they do not directly use the expression "regional conflict systems", they all deal – under different theoretical or methodological assumptions – with the features described by this term. However, by taking a top-down perspective and focusing on nation states as the main security actors in international relations these analyses often neglect the conflict and security dynamics in regional conflict systems, where as well as state instances private transnational actors are also interconnected at the regional level. Furthermore, the causal mechanisms behind regional conflict systems still remain unclear. One outstanding and exceptional theoretical approach to the analysis of regional dynamics of violent conflict is the combination of modern systems theory and conflict studies. However, this approach still needs to be tested empirically.

2. Regional Conflict Systems in Peace and Conflict Studies

In the peace and conflict studies the problem of methodological nationalism is to some extent avoided. In this discipline, changes in the structures and characteristics of warfare are accepted and a more regional perspective towards militant conflicts is taken. Therefore, the latest studies in this area are open to regional developments and dynamics of violence and security. But even here there are shortcomings regarding the analysis of regional conflict systems and their dynamics.

In quantitative peace and conflict studies, several studies confirm the existence of regional conflict systems and a clustering of wars in particular areas of the world. In their quantitative study, Peter Wallensteen and Margarete Sollenberg confirm the existence of fifteen regional conflict complexes in the period 1989 to 1997 (1998, 625). These are defined as "situations where neighbouring countries experience internal or interstate conflicts, and with significant links between the conflicts. These links may be so substantial that changes in conflict dynamics or the resolution of one conflict will have an effect on a neighbouring conflict" (623). Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward also confirm the existence of regional conflict systems, but only assume the causes and dynamics of regional conflict systems (2000, 4). A systematic analysis of the dynamics and causal mechanisms is missing in these studies.

Later statistical works on regional violence by Halvard Buhaug and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Clionadh Raleigh and Erika Forsberg identify correlations between the diffusion of militant violence and possible causal factors. In *Contagion or Confusion? Why Conflicts Cluster in Space*, Buhaug and Gleditsch analyse internal wars in sovereign states in a timeframe from 1950 to 2000 (2008). They find that a war is more likely when there is already a war in a neighbouring country. The risk of regional diffusion of internal wars increases in poor countries with large populations, in cases where there is transborder kinship of ethnic groups and where there are separatist conflicts. They find that distance to the neighbouring conflict zone and refugee flows are not significant.

The transnational character of civil wars is emphasised by another study by Kristian Skrede Gleditsch (2007). Using an autologistic model he finds that countries in autocratic regions face a higher risk of civil war spillover (304), while the risk of civil war is much lower in regions with many democracies and much interregional trade.[6]

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5 It should be mentioned at this point that Stetter is not focusing on regional conflict systems with interdependent militant conflicts. He is interested in wider regions like the whole Arab Middle East or

sub-Saharan Africa, where the existing militant conflicts are not all interdependent.

6 Please note the update where Gleditsch points out a coding mistake that slightly changes the results (2010).

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In *Civil War Risk in Democratic and Non-Democratic Neighborhoods* Clionadh Raleigh also addresses transborder diffusion of civil war in relation to different regime types (2007). He confirms the hypothesis of a regional concentration of wars, war in a neighbouring country increases the risk of civil war by 39 per cent (19). Regime type is also of significance in his findings: Countries with autocratic or anocratic regimes in the neighbourhood are at higher risk of civil war than those with democratic neighbours. This effect is stronger in poorer states (21).

In her dissertation *Neighbors at Risk* Erika Forsberg analyses the diffusion of civil wars to neighbouring states (2009). She finds that especially ethnic polarisation, ethnic demonstration effects and refugee flows lead to a regional diffusion of civil war.

In a standard work on the main findings of quantitative war studies in recent years, renowned researchers Paul Collier, V. L. Elliot, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol and Nicholas Sambanis examine the spillover effects of violent conflicts (Collier et al. 2003, chapter 2). Wars in neighbouring countries not only lead to economic and social destabilisation, but also to the diffusion of violence across borders (40). With the aid of case studies from all over the world they trace this finding back to ethnic and historic causes, to the economic interests of rebel groups and neighbouring countries, to transnational civil war economies, to transnational terror networks, and to massive refugee flows. The book provides an overview of possible factors, but does not make any general theoretically grounded statements on the dynamics and causes of regional conflict systems.

The problem with the different statistical approaches is that they cannot say anything about the inherent spatial or temporal dynamics of regional conflict complexes (Chojnacki and Reisch 2008, 240). When a war is coded in a dataset, there is often no information about whether violence occurs continuously and over the whole territory of a nation state (240). So few conclusions can be drawn about causal dynamics and the mechanisms operating between different causal factors. For this reason, it is important to take a process perspective that can trace the individual dynamics of

conflicts (240). Another important point is that for quantitative research, which seeks to analyse linear causality and causal homogeneity via statistical analysis, the complex conflict structures of regional conflict systems are hard to grasp. The coding of a war in the particular data set used in such a statistical study says nothing about processes of violence and security or about the causal correlations between single factors that are important for the development and diffusion of regional conflict systems. Furthermore, some statistical studies use explicitly state-related data to the problem of methodological nationalism is present again here. Using only such data is to ignore important knowledge on regional and sub-regional actors and causal dynamics, especially when a proper state is only marginally existent. Possibly, only the effects of diffusion on state dyads will be considered and complex conflict systems with more than two state actors will not be fully grasped.

In recent years there have been efforts to overcome the problem of state-related data by disaggregated studies of civil wars (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009). Instead of focusing on the nation state as the main unit of analysis in statistical studies, these works analyse civil wars using conflict- and actor-level data (Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala 2009; Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009), single-event-level data (Chojnacki and Metternich 2008) or a group level of analysis (Cederman, Buhaug, and Rød 2009; Weidmann 2009). Spatial variation within countries is highlighted, for example in the study of poverty levels at the sub-national level in Liberia by Hegre, Østby, and Raleigh (2009). One next research step could be to apply disaggregated data to the phenomenon of regional conflict systems.

Apart from these quantitative studies on regional clusters of war there are few qualitative approaches in peace and conflict studies that deal with the existence and dynamics of regional conflict systems. One outstanding analysis of a regional conflict system is the study by Barnett R. Rubin, Andrea Armstrong, and Gloria Ntegeye (2001), who research the causes of what they call "regional conflict formations" in the regional conflict system in the Great Lakes region. They define regional conflict formations as "sets of violent conflicts – each originating in a particular state or sub-region – that form mutually reinforcing link-

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ages with each other throughout a broader region, making for more protracted and obdurate conflicts" (2). These formations are historically and structurally linked to the international system. In this approach wars are seen as networks, where interlinked transnational actors constitute the regional conflict formation (3). These wars are characterised by a multiplicity of structural and escalatory factors that are not addressed by current conflict management or prevention strategies (2). Structural factors may be transnational social and economic problems and the associated networks, or related to the global demand for valuable resources or drugs. Weak state structures and the establishment of illegal or parallel economic structures, transnational identity groups and transnational economic networks are also cited (4ff.). Escalating factors are the influence of charismatic personalities, difficult democratisation processes, refugee flows, transnational alliances between state and non-state actors, and specific war economies. The absence of theoretical structure is a problem with this approach: they list a range of factors that can be responsible for the appearance and diffusion of regional violence without any apparent underlying theoretical concept. The transferability to other cases and the distinction between the individual factors are also disputable.

Another approach comes from Michael Pugh, Neil Cooper, and Jonathan Goodhand, who build on Rubin, Armstrong and Ntegeye's aforementioned concept but focus on transnational political, economic, military and social networks as characteristic of regional conflict (Pugh, Cooper, and Goodhand 2003). Here, economic networks are characterised by the illegal trade in and smuggling of valuable goods like diamonds, coltan and timber, and by illegal tax systems. Military networks may be regional networks of arms trading and mercenary migration as well as regional military alliances. Political networks are transborder alliances between different political groups (30ff.). Social networks are characterised by transborder ethnic kinship or diasporas. In a situation of the absence of government control and the creation of alternative socio-economic sys-

tems of jobs and trade, these different networks create the conditions for the shadow economies that perpetuate wars (35). Although Pugh, Cooper, and Goodhand try to include many factors from different areas to put together a holistic analytical picture, their empirical analyses still focus on the economic aspect of transnational networks (as shown by the title of their book, *War Economies in a Regional Context: Challenges of Transformation*). So the integration of social or ethnic aspects that might also account for the emergence and diffusion of regional violence is limited.

Beyond these more holistic approaches there are also studies that focus on particular aspects of regional conflict systems, examining regional support for rebel groups, massive refugee flows, weak or failing states, or transborder ethnic kinship as possible causes of the regional diffusion of violence.

The issue of regional support for rebel groups is analysed thoroughly by Idean Salehyan (Salehyan 2007; Salehyan, 2010; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006), who finds that rebel groups often use external bases to hide and recover from fighting. Very often, neighbouring governments even actively support rebel groups in order to weaken their rivals in the conflict country (Salehyan 2007, 225). There are countless examples for such behaviour: Albania and Kosovo, Pakistan and India, Lebanon and Palestine to name but three.

In peace and conflict studies we also find numerous works on the regional trade in valuable goods like gems and drugs as a cause of regional conflict networks. Mark Duffield examines the establishment of complex regional economic conflict formations that supersede conventional conflicts between sovereign nation states (2000, 2002). Participants in civil wars and private violent actors fund themselves through these transnational economic networks. Georg Elwert describes these networks as "markets of violence" that live from the rational economic behaviour of their participants and perpetuate violent conflicts through the economic motives of violent actors like warlords or violence entrepreneurs (1999).[7] These markets of violence very often

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7 The similar theoretical concept of security markets describes the structure and composition of supply and demand in security production in areas of limited statehood, where the government no longer holds the monopoly of violence (Branović and Chojnacki 2009, 11).

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have a low intensity of battle deaths, as the cost-intensity of high numbers of deaths would endanger the continuation of the markets (98). The actors in these markets mostly start as politically motivated liberation movements, before acquiring economic interests initially to secure their long-term survival (96). Civilians in these areas are often forced to participate in the complex networks of trade in valuable commodities, theft and slavery, as there is no alternative source of income after those long periods of civil wars and instability. These developments are connected to dis-integration of state structures, loss of the state's monopoly of violence and increasing privatisation of violence.[8]

Many peace and conflict researchers agree that regional failure of statehood and region-wide loss of the state monopoly on the use of force are important factors for the development of a regional conflict system (for example Pugh, Cooper, and Goodhand 2003, 37 and Salehyan 2007, 225; Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000 and Hegre et al. 2001 for a more general, state-centred view). If a state is no longer able to maintain its monopoly of violence, it is also unable to protect its territory against rebel groups based in neighbouring countries or military interventions by neighbours. Recurring invasions steadily undermine the sovereignty of the nation state (Jackson 1990). This way, a violent conflict in one country slowly diffuses into neigh-bouring territory. Where there are valuable resources, war-lords and government armies help themselves unabashedly. Complex transnational networks evolve where the actors pursue only their own economic and political interests (Callaghy, Kassimir, and Latham 2001). The situation in the Great Lakes region and especially in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo gained notoriety in this regard, where various state and non-state actors plundered the rich coltan, zinc, iron and diamond deposits (Montague 2002).

Regional political instability can also be a product of weak economic structures and region-wide poverty. The econ-omists Alberto Ades and Hak B. Chua (1997), William

Easterly and Ross Levine (1998), and James C. Murdoch and Todd Sandler (2002) explain the negative region-wide effect of civil wars in terms of insecurity in the economic environment: investment is lacking, experts and pro-fessionals emigrate, trade and whole economic sectors col-lapse and the infrastructure degrades. Military spending increases but there is no money for education or the health sector. These developments affect not only the conflict country; the instability spills over to the whole region and weakens it. In global terms sub-Saharan Africa is most af-fected by such economic spillover effects (Easterly and Le-vine 1998, 121f.).

If there is a large inflow of refugees from neighbouring countries instability increases further (Collier et al. 2003, 33ff.; Fearon 1998, 111f.). The arrival of several hundred thousand refugees is a huge logistical and economic chal-lenge for a country. Furthermore, refugee communities alter the ethnic and social structure and economic rivalries can increase (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006, 335). These can lead to heavy tensions between the local population and the refugee community (Loescher 1993, 24; Weiner 1992a, 321). These can lead to chain reactions that trigger re-gional conflicts (Fearon 1998, 111). Myron Weiner and Michael Brown describe this situation as "bad neigh-borhoods" in the sense of geographical clusters of coun-tries affected by violent conflict, ongoing refugee movements and regional instability (Brown 1997, 16; Weiner 1996, 26). Although there is no doubt that massive refugee flows lead to regional instability, it is unclear if and how refugees also encourage the emergence of regional conflict systems.

One of the most pertinent questions in this context is the importance of the militarization of refugees and the abuse of humanitarian aid for the purposes of rebellion. Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo were the first to identify the problem of "refugee warriors" (1989). But also Stephen Stedman and Fred Tanner (2003) and Robert Muggah (2006) highlight the problem of militarized refu-

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8 The privatisation of violence and security was en-couraged by the trade in cheap small arms and light weapons released after the breakdown of the Soviet

Union and again after the end of the conflicts in the Balkans and sold to conflict regions worldwide.

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gees in their collections. Although studies presume that re-fugees may participate in a war under specific circumstances, and there are plenty of studies on the causes of mass flight (primarily violence by state and non-state actors; Loescher 1993; Schmeidl 1997; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003; Moore and Shellman 2004), it is still quite unclear what general impact refugees have on the diffusion of violence, or why refugee flows can be dangerous for se-curity (Jacobsen 2000; Weiner 1992b). The few useful studies in this regard are by Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch (Salehyan 2007; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006), François Jean (1999), and Sarah Kenyon Lischer (1999, 2000, 2003, 2005).

Salehyan and Gleditsch find a statistical correlation be-tween refugee flows and the start of civil war (2006, 335). Refugees extend the networks of rebel groups and enable transnational diffusion of combatants, weapons and ideo-logies. Howard Adelman (1998), Jean-Christophe Rufin (1999), Idean Salehyan (2007) and Boaz Atzili (2006) all argue in the same direction.

Sarah Kenyon Lischer analyses the conditions under which refugees can cause a regional diffusion of violence (1999, 2000, 2003, 2005). Militarization of refugees is char-acterised by increasing arms smuggling, military recruit-ment and training inside refugee camps and military activities by refugees outside their camps (1999, 3). Lischer believes that the diffusion of international conflict cannot be explained simply by socio-economic factors like the size of the refugee camps, absence of control, presence of many young men or poor living conditions (2005, 34ff.). Instead, these conflicts must be understood in a political context, in relation to the origin of conflict, the refugee policies of the target country and the impact of external state and non-state actors (1999, 20f.; 2005, 10, 18f.). With the last point Lischer addresses a very important factor that can have a huge influence on conflicts in general and regional conflict systems in particular: the impact of humanitarian and de-velopment aid (2003; 2005, 6ff.). Very often, humanitarian aid provides food not only to helpless refugees, but also to combatants. It protects the families and relatives of mili-tants, supports the war economy by providing resources to conflict parties (voluntarily to gain access to refugees or in-

voluntarily by the robbery of aid supplies by the rebel groups or by the establishment by rebel groups of a tax-ation system in the refugee camps), and it lends legitimacy to combatants, where conflicts are described in simplified terms in the international media in order to aquire do-nations or bargain with refugees (see also Jean 1999, 468f.). Lischer's study is an outstanding analysis of the conditions that can worsen the humanitarian situation of refugee flows in violent conflicts. Nevertheless, it suffers a number of shortcomings regarding the theoretical background be-hind the empirical examples; the study supplies few con-clusions on a theoretical level that permit general statements on the processes and dynamics of regional con-flict systems.

The role of regional identity and ethnic factors for dif-fusion of militant violence should not be underestimated. The collection put together by David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild with an excellent chapter by James D. Fearon deals with the question of how ethnic groups can account for a regional diffusion of violence (Fearon 1998; Lake and Rothchild 1998b). The diffusion of violence through eth-nopolitical factors happens in different ways (Lake and Rothchild 1998b, 8; Fearon 1998; see also Posen 1993; Beissinger 2002; Kuran 1998). There can be a *security dilemma*, where an ethnic group feels insecure because of violent conditions in a neighbouring country and is prompted to start a preemptive rebellion. An ethnic group can also start fighting out of solidarity with their ethnic brethren in a neighbouring country (Fearon 1998, 112f.; Weiner 1992a, 321; Moore and Davis 1998; Davis and Moore 1997; Saideman 2001; Woodwell 2004; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Atzili 2006). An intervention by a neigh-bouring government to protect their ethnic brethren is also conceivable (Fearon 1998, 112). *Commitment problems* arise when an ethnic majority fails to credibly promise not to exploit its advantage over an ethnic minority in the fu-ture (Fearon 1998, 108f.). Fighting now in the hope of win-ning secession may then be the preferable alternative for the ethnic minority. Missing or wrong information can lead to a higher risk of violence *(information failure)*. The mobilisation of ethnic or identity groups by charismatic leaders is problematic in these constellations (Brown 1997; Lake and Rothchild 1998a, 8). Despite all these findings it is

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still quite unclear exactly how ethnopolitical factors lead to a diffusion of violence in regions. Some studies (of course disputable) state that the discrimination of minorities does not necessarily lead to a diffusion of violence (Collier and Hoeffler 2000; Sambanis 2004).

In peace and conflict studies, there are also studies that deal with the regional dynamics of militant violence and the emergence of regional conflict systems. Here, alternative security actors beyond the nation state are admitted and included in the analyses. On the one hand, there are few qualitative approaches that deal with the causal factors and dynamics of regional conflict systems. The problem here lies in the restriction to economic factors or a lack of theoretical concept. On the other hand, there are plenty of statistical studies on different factors that can lead to a regional diffusion of violence. But they often highlight only a small part of the complex phenomenon of regional conflict systems. Furthermore, the process dynamic is missing in many of these statistical studies, with no examination of the spatial and sequential diffusion of violence. None of the studies so far meets the complex theoretical challenges that come with the phenomenon of regional conflict systems.

3. Conclusion

As we have seen, regions and regional conflicts are nothing new in international relations and peace and conflict studies. Especially since the end of the Cold War, methodological nationalism has been left behind, with several published works in international studies that include the regional level as an analytical dimension to explain security and conflict dynamics in regions. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver produced outstanding pieces on regional security dynamics (Buzan 1991; Buzan and Wæver 2003). Their theory is very useful for describing security dynamics from a global perspective, with the focus on powerful states characterised by economic, political or security resources. Works by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (1998b), David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan (1997), Mohammed Ayoob (1995), and Roger E. Kanet (1998) add useful points to the overall discussion in international studies. But these studies are still, more or less, stuck in a top-down perspective. So even if they are aware of the security and violence dynamics at the regional and transregional level, they

often neglect the dynamics that are produced by transnational non-state actors. One exception is the combined theoretical approach of modern systems theory with international relations and conflict studies (Stetter 2007c). Focusing on communication in different functional systems instead of on actors and their interactions makes it possible to grasp the complex dynamics inherent to regional conflict systems. However, this approach still needs to be tested empirically.

In peace and conflict studies there are some contributions that take a more bottom-up approach, i.e. looking at security and violence dynamics at the transnational level. This makes them better able to grasp the conflict dynamics that lead to a diffusion of violence and the emergence of a regional conflict system. Some qualitative studies have a holistic approach and seek factors that lead to regional violence without having a comprehensive theoretical concept (e.g. Rubin, Armstrong, and Ntegeye 2001; Lischer 2003, 2005). There are also quantitative studies that deal with the influence of single factors on the regional diffusion of violence (Wallensteen and Sollenberg 1998; Gleditsch and Ward 2000; Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Raleigh 2007; Forsberg 2009; Salehyan, 2010; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Ades and Chua 1997; Easterly and Levine 1998; Murdoch and Sandler 2002). Here, the process dynamic is missing: It is still unclear how violence diffuses in space and time, as the dynamics are only assumed. These studies represent individual pieces of the puzzle that need to be put together to gain a more general picture of how militant violence diffuses regionally, how different causal mechanisms interact and what patterns of dynamics lead to the emergence of regional conflict systems.

As the general dynamics of violence in regional conflict systems remain unclear, a possible new research direction would be a general approach that detects the causes, structures and dynamics that lead to the emergence and diffusion of regional conflict systems. New studies could try to bridge the research desideratum between the theoretical presumptions about regional conflict systems on the one hand, and the specific conclusions drawn on the basis of single case studies or the study of single factors on the other.

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A promising approach for addressing the research desideratum is an actor- and process-oriented one – e.g. from the metatheoretical background of social constructivism – that produces general conclusions on the dynamics of regional violence and the interaction between structural and triggering factors by comparing different case studies. The additional benefit of such a theoretical approach would be the detection of the structural framing conditions and underlying causes – the "why" of a phenomenon and what philosophy calls the area of "understanding" – combined with the disclosure of violence and actor dynamics in space and time – what can be subsumed under the "how" of a phenomenon and what philosophy and social science call "explaining" – in a combined two-step approach.[9] The results gained so far would be given wider applicability by comparing multiple cases and thus producing generalised conclusions. Single factors for the formation and spillover of regional conflict systems such as the diffusion of violence by militarized refugees need to be highlighted and would receive a new significance. This should not be restricted to only one factor at a time, as that would fail to address the complex conflict structures of regional conflict systems. Such a two-step approach could establish a more comprehensive analysis of the causes, structural conditions, their interactions, and dynamics of militant conflicts within regions that allows a greater understanding of regional conflict systems and possible practical policy implications to curtail the regional diffusion of militant violence. The question of how militant violence diffuses and a regional conflict system emerges remains open, and needs to be answered.

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9 For more on the controversy between *Explanation and Understanding* in social science see Wright (1971). On the combination of these two scientific traditions in a social constructivist approach see Fearon and Wendt (2002).

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