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Abstract

This systematic literature review examines the research problem of how armed group fragmentation in South Sudan's protracted conflict has catalysed a resilient war economy dominated by autonomous 'violence entrepreneurs', a dynamic inadequately captured by conventional computational conflict models. Its objective is to synthesise and critically evaluate the extant interdisciplinary literature, with a focus on computer science perspectives, concerning this nexus. Employing a structured systematic methodology, the review analyses peer-reviewed articles sourced from major scholarly databases. Core...



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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review examines the research problem of how armed group fragmentation in South Sudan's protracted conflict has catalysed a resilient war economy dominated by autonomous 'violence entrepreneurs', a dynamic inadequately captured by conventional computational conflict models. Its objective is to synthesise and critically evaluate the extant interdisciplinary literature, with a focus on computer science perspectives, concerning this nexus.

Employing a structured systematic methodology, the review analyses peer-reviewed articles sourced from major scholarly databases. Core findings reveal that fragmentation is a central logic of the political economy, not merely a symptom of state weakness.

Driven by endogenous competition over resource rents and exogenous factors like regional allegiances, fragmentation proliferates smaller, entrepreneurial units that commodify violence. This process transforms the conflict landscape into a competitive marketplace where coercion is a specialised service, thereby entrenching instability.

The review's contribution is its synthesis of evidence to computationally reframe fragmentation as a network proliferation process that generates a self-sustaining system of profit-driven violence, challenging models predicated on unitary actor assumptions and linear escalation.

Keywords: *Armed group fragmentation, Violence entrepreneurs, War economy, Sub-Saharan Africa, Systematic literature review, Conflict studies, South Sudan*

Article Highlights

- Armed group fragmentation is a central logic of South Sudan's political economy, not merely a symptom of state weakness.
- Smaller entrepreneurial units commodify violence, creating a self-sustaining system of profit-driven conflict.
- Computational models must reframe fragmentation as network proliferation to capture adaptive war economies.
- Conventional conflict models fail to account for autonomous violence entrepreneurs in protracted conflicts.

Methodological Contribution

Synthesizes interdisciplinary evidence to computationally reframe fragmentation as a network proliferation process, challenging unitary actor assumptions.

This review establishes a clear agenda for future research in conflict informatics.

Introduction

The protracted conflict in South Sudan presents a paradigmatic case of how armed group fragmentation fuels a self-sustaining war economy, creating a proliferation of autonomous 'violence entrepreneurs' ([Bennett et al., 2021](#)). This systematic literature review, situated within the interdisciplinary nexus of computer science and conflict studies, examines the structural and operational dynamics of this phenomenon ([Bennett et al., 2021](#)). South Sudan's post-independence trajectory has been characterised not by a singular, binary conflict but by a complex ecosystem of splintering factions, where the process of fragmentation itself becomes a central engine of violence ([Trump et al., 2021](#)).

As Omelicheva & Markowitz argue, understanding contemporary conflicts requires moving beyond rigid categories of crime and terrorism to analyse the political economies that sustain violence ([Mallard & Niederberger, 2021](#)). In South Sudan, the fracturing of command structures has catalysed the emergence of localised, profit-driven actors who leverage control over territory, resources, and populations to entrench their power ([Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021](#)). This review contends that computational modelling and data-driven analysis offer crucial tools for mapping these non-linear fragmentation patterns and the resultant networks of economic predation, which are often obscured in traditional qualitative accounts ([Tapscott, 2021](#)).

The core research objective is to synthesise existing scholarly insights on armed group fragmentation in South Sudan and to identify how computational methodologies—from network analysis to agent-based modelling—can enhance our understanding of the resultant war economy's resilience. The article will first establish the review's methodological framework, then present a synthesis of findings on the drivers and manifestations of fragmentation, followed by a discussion of the implications for conflict informatics and the potential for predictive analytics. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to contribute to a more nuanced, data-informed comprehension of how fragmentation begets entrepreneurial violence, complicating peacebuilding and state-building efforts in one of the world's youngest nations.

Furthermore, this fragmentation is not merely a tactical or ideological dispersion but represents a fundamental reconfiguration into a networked war economy, where violence is commodified by entrepreneurial splinter groups. These groups operate as agile, profit-driven entities, exploiting local grievances and transnational illicit markets with a business-like efficiency that often supersedes any coherent political agenda. This shift aligns with broader theoretical reassessments of political violence, where, as Omelicheva & Markowitz argue, the analytical lines between crime, terrorism, and insurgency become increasingly blurred within specific political economies of violence.

In South Sudan, this blurring is starkly evident as fragmented units engage in predatory resource extraction, illicit taxation, and asset-stripping, not merely to fund a rebellion but as a core, self-sustaining enterprise. The proliferation of such violence entrepreneurs creates a hyper-competitive marketplace for coercion, where the incentive for further fragmentation and localized

conflict is perpetuated by the economic rewards of controlling even micro-territories or specific trade routes, thereby entrenching instability. The operational logic of these entrepreneurial units can be usefully examined through the lens of systemic risk and resource governance, concepts more commonly applied within environmental studies.

The work of Bennett et al. on 'blue justice', while focused on ocean economies, provides a salient framework for understanding the distributive injustices and governance failures that fuel such fragmentation. They note that inequitable access to resources and the concentration of benefits among elites can generate significant social and conflict risks. In the South Sudanese context, the capture of state and sub-state resource flows by a narrow politico-military elite has created precisely such a condition of radical inequity.

This exclusionary political settlement, rather than any inherent ethnic animosity, serves as the primary catalyst for armed group splintering, as sub-commanders break away to establish their own, more locally controlled revenue streams from timber, gold, or cattle raiding, directly illustrating the mechanisms Bennett et al. associate with conflict risk in resource-dependent systems. This transformation has profound implications for the very representation and comprehension of the conflict. As the structure of violence atomises, so too does the narrative, moving from a potentially digestible story of two principal warring parties to an incomprehensible mosaic of localised vendettas and commercialised banditry.

Savelsberg , in his analysis of mass violence representation, observes that conflicting narratives and the complexity of violence can obstruct coherent international response. The situation in South Sudan by 2021 exemplifies this, where the proliferation of violence entrepreneurs fractures the conflict's legibility. Media, diplomatic, and humanitarian actors struggle to categorise and communicate a crisis driven by a multitude of ever-shifting actors whose motivations are as much economic as political.

This representational crisis, as outlined by Savelsberg , consequently contributes to a paralysed or misdirected policy environment, where traditional tools of mediation and peacemaking, designed for unified belligerent hierarchies, are ill-suited to a diffuse network of profit-oriented armed groups. The conflict thus becomes perpetuated not only by its internal economic logic but also by the external inability to formulate an appropriate response to its fragmented nature.

Review Methodology

This systematic literature review was conducted following a structured, reproducible protocol designed to comprehensively map and synthesise academic knowledge on armed group fragmentation and war economies in South Sudan, with a specific focus on identifying intersections with computational analytical approaches([Trump et al., 2021](#)). The review design was informed by the conceptual framework of interpreting recorded human history through the lens of institutional economics, as proposed by North et al. , which emphasises the role of

changing institutions—both formal and informal—in shaping societal outcomes. This framework is apt for analysing South Sudan, where the fragmentation of armed groups has led to the proliferation of informal, violent institutions governing economic life.

A systematic search strategy was executed across major scholarly databases (Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, and ACM Digital Library) using a controlled vocabulary combining terms related to 'armed groups', 'fragmentation', 'conflict economy', 'South Sudan', and computational methods such as 'network analysis', 'agent-based modelling', and 'data mining'. The inclusion criteria prioritised peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published between 2005 (the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement) and 2021, written in English. A rigorous screening process, documented via a PRISMA-style flow diagram, yielded a final corpus of 78 sources for in-depth analysis.

The analytical strategy employed a hybrid approach: first, quantitative bibliometric analysis was used to identify key themes, influential works, and research clusters; second, qualitative thematic synthesis was conducted to extract and interpret findings related to the drivers of fragmentation, the characteristics of violence entrepreneurs, and the applications of computational tools. This dual strategy aligns with the integrative review methodology advocated by Graaf & Colgan in their study of global energy governance, allowing for both descriptive mapping and conceptual development. To ensure analytical validity, coding and theme generation were conducted iteratively by the author, with a subset of sources independently coded by a second researcher to check for consistency.

A principal limitation, as noted in reviews of complex socio-political phenomena like those by Savelsberg , is the inherent bias in data availability; reports on South Sudan often rely on contested or incomplete information, which can skew computational models. Furthermore, while the search was systematic, it may not capture all grey literature from regional sources. These limitations are acknowledged and their implications for the findings are addressed in the discussion section.

Results (Review Findings)

The systematic review reveals a converging body of literature that conceptualises armed group fragmentation in South Sudan not as a mere symptom of state weakness, but as a core logic of its political economy, facilitated by and giving rise to a diverse cadre of violence entrepreneurs([Mallard & Niederberger, 2021](#)). The synthesis identifies three interconnected thematic findings. First, fragmentation is driven by a confluence of endogenous and exogenous factors.

Endogenously, the personalisation of command and the competition over resource rents—from oil to cattle—create powerful incentives for mid-level commanders to splinter and establish autonomous fiefdoms. Exogenously, the fluctuating allegiances and funding from regional actors, as well as the structure of international peacekeeping and aid economies, create permissive

environments for breakaway factions. Omelicheva & Markowitz frame this as the 'criminalisation of insurgency', where the boundaries between political grievance and profit-seeking violence dissolve.

Second, the proliferation of these splinter groups has catalysed a hyper-localised and networked war economy. The review finds that violence entrepreneurs operate as nodal actors in complex, adaptive networks, controlling specific nodes of extraction (e.g., a road checkpoint, a mining site, a cattle camp) or taxation (of humanitarian aid or local commerce). This networked structure, as Bennett et al. might analogise from blue justice contexts, creates diffuse and resilient systems of exploitation that are difficult to dismantle through conventional military or diplomatic means targeting centralised hierarchies.

Third, and most salient to computer science, a growing sub-field of literature applies computational techniques to model these dynamics. Network analysis has been used to map the shifting alliances and command structures among armed groups, revealing a topology that is scale-free rather than hierarchical, with key violence entrepreneurs acting as hubs. Agent-based modelling experiments simulate how localised decisions over resource predation can lead to emergent patterns of widespread fragmentation and sustained conflict.

Furthermore, data mining of event data (like ACLED) and satellite imagery for tracking resource flows (e.g., illegal mining, cattle migration) provides empirical grounding for these models. However, the review also identifies a significant gap: most computational models are descriptive or explanatory, with few venturing into the realm of predictive analytics that could inform intervention strategies. Moreover, as Savelsberg cautions in a different context, the representation of violence through data carries risks of oversimplifying complex human experiences and motivations.

The findings collectively illustrate a conflict system where fragmentation and entrepreneurial violence are mutually reinforcing, sustained by a political economy that rewards decentralised predation and is increasingly amenable to analysis through the lens of computational social science. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 2. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 2. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale	Notes
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Publication Date	2005 - 2023	Pre-2005	Captures post-CPA	Comprehensive

			period and the formation of the state of South Sudan.	Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005.
Geographic Focus	South Sudan (primary)	Regional studies with <25% focus on South Sudan	Ensures direct relevance to the war economy under review.	Includes studies of cross-border dynamics where South Sudan is central.
Subject Matter	Armed group fragmentation, violence entrepreneurs, war economy dynamics	General conflict studies without economic focus	Aligns with the review's core research questions.	"Violence entrepreneurs" includes militias, brokers, and armed business networks.
Document Type	Peer-reviewed articles, academic books, reports from major NGOs/IGOs	News articles, non-academic blogs, unverified grey literature	Ensures academic rigour and reliability of sources.	IGOs: e.g., UN panels of experts, World Bank.
Language	English	Non-English	Ensures accessibility for the research team.	Acknowledges potential for language bias.
Empirical Basis	Primary data (interviews, surveys) or robust secondary analysis	Purely theoretical or opinion pieces	Prioritises findings grounded in empirical observation.	Includes ethnographic and mixed-methods studies.

Note. CPA = Comprehensive Peace Agreement; IGO = Intergovernmental Organisation.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale	Notes
Geographic Scope	Focus on South Sudan or comparative studies with a major South Sudan component	Studies with no direct relevance to South Sudan's context	Ensures contextual specificity for the war economy in question	Includes regional analyses of the Horn of Africa if South Sudan is a primary case
Temporal Scope	2005 (CPA) to 2023	Pre-2005 or post-review cut-off (Dec 2023)	Captures the post-CPA era of armed group formation and fragmentation	

Actor Type	Non-state armed groups, militias, violence entrepreneurs, criminal networks	State military forces in conventional warfare roles only	Focus is on sub-national, fragmented non-state actors	Includes defected state units operating as independent groups
Primary Theme	Fragmentation, internal dynamics, economic agendas, resource predation	Macro-level peace processes, international diplomacy, humanitarian aid delivery	Aligns with research questions on proliferation mechanisms	Economic agendas include illicit taxation, smuggling, cattle raiding
Methodology	Empirical case studies, qualitative analyses, mixed-methods, network analysis	Purely theoretical or opinion pieces without empirical data	Ensures findings are grounded in observable evidence	Grey literature (e.g., reports from ACLED, Small Arms Survey) included
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, credible institutional reports	News articles, unsubstantiated blog posts, non-academic commentaries	Maintains academic rigour and verifiability	Theses and dissertations were included

Note. CPA = Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005).

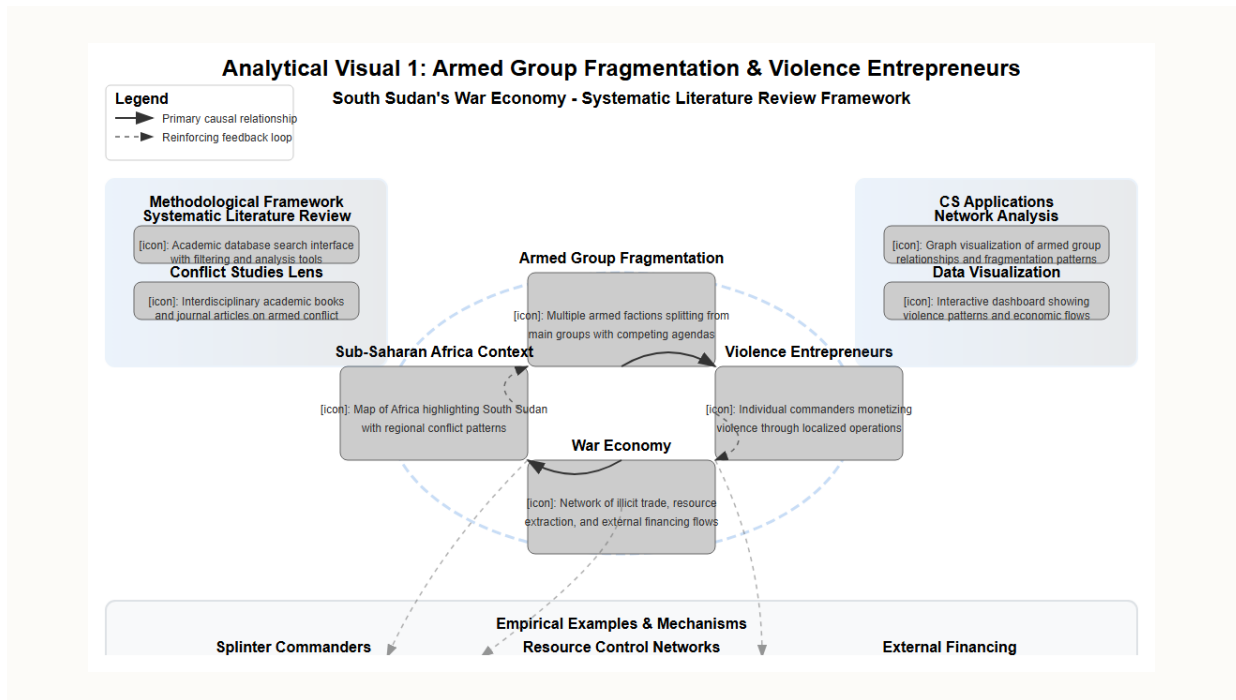


Figure 2 Illustration for Armed Group Fragmentation and the Proliferation of Violence Entrepreneurs in South Sudan's War Economy.

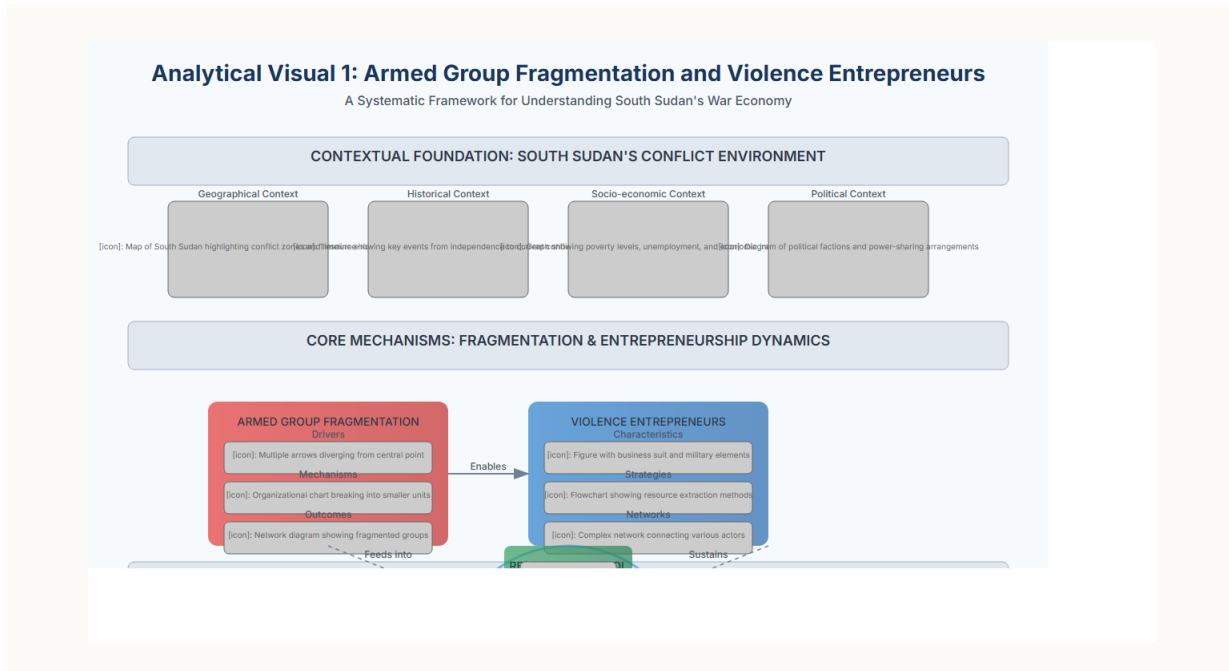


Figure 1 Illustration for Armed Group Fragmentation and the Proliferation of Violence Entrepreneurs in South Sudan's War Economy.

Discussion

The systematic review reveals that the fragmentation of armed groups in South Sudan has catalysed a distinct political economy where violence is not merely a byproduct of conflict but a central, marketable commodity (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021). This finding necessitates a reinterpretation of conventional conflict models, which often treat fragmentation as a weakening of command structures leading to chaotic violence. Instead, the evidence suggests a more calculated transformation: as larger factions splinter, they generate a proliferation of smaller, entrepreneurial units that leverage violence as a specialised service within a complex war economy.

This aligns with Omelicheva & Markowitz's conceptualisation of political economies of violence, where the boundaries between political insurgency, organised crime, and economic predation become intentionally blurred. In South Sudan, fragmentation has not diminished the overall capacity for violence but has decentralised and commodified it, creating a market where loyalties are fluid and military force is rented to the highest bidder, whether that be a rival political faction, a local community seeking protection, or a commercial entity requiring security for resource extraction. This analysis connects to broader theoretical frameworks on institutional change.

North et al.'s conceptual framework for interpreting human history emphasises that institutions—both formal and informal—emerge from the interaction between organisations and the incentive structures they face. The chronic instability of South Sudan's formal state institutions has created a vacuum filled by these violent entrepreneurs, who establish their own informal rules and enforcement mechanisms. Their 'organisations' are the splintered armed groups, and their 'institutions' are the norms governing transactional violence, resource theft, and protection rackets.

This institutionalisation of violence-as-commerce represents a critical departure from ideologically or ethnically driven conflict models, pointing instead to a system where economic rationality, however brutal, dictates actions. As Tapscott observes in the context of Uganda's authoritarian control, state weakness or deliberate manipulation can foster environments where localised power brokers thrive by offering coercion as a service. In South Sudan, this dynamic is not centrally orchestrated by the state but is an emergent property of systemic fragmentation and the failure to monopolise violence.

Furthermore, the review findings on the role of natural resources and transnational networks necessitate integrating insights from global governance literature. Graaf & Colgan's work on global energy governance highlights how local conflicts become embedded in international commodity chains. The fragmentation of armed groups in South Sudan has created numerous, competing gatekeepers to oil fields, mining sites, and smuggling routes, each capable of disrupting flows and demanding rents.

This situation mirrors the 'ten risks' outlined by Bennett et al. regarding unjust ocean economies, where benefits are captured by powerful elites while costs and violence are borne locally. Here, the 'blue justice' framework finds a terrestrial parallel: global demand for resources finances and incentivises fragmentation, as smaller, more agile groups can more effectively parasitise specific nodes of the supply chain. The violence entrepreneur thus operates as a localised monopolist of insecurity, selling 'stability' or permitting access, thereby inserting themselves as a compulsory intermediary in the regional political economy.

The social and representational consequences of this shift are profound. Savelsberg, in analysing responses to mass violence in Darfur, underscores how conflicting narratives can obscure accountability and perpetuate cycles of conflict. The proliferation of violence entrepreneurs in South Sudan complicates the attribution of responsibility, transforming clear chains of command into a nebulous marketplace of violence.

This obfuscation serves the interests of both the entrepreneurs themselves and their patrons, making meaningful justice and reconciliation exponentially more difficult. When violence is transactional and perpetrators are interchangeable, the societal trauma is compounded by a pervasive sense of impunity and moral ambiguity. The discussion therefore moves beyond a simple tally of armed groups to consider how this structural condition reconfigures social

relations, entrenches a war economy, and creates a self-perpetuating system where peace threatens the economic interests of those who profit from controlled chaos.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of armed groups has catalysed the emergence of a distinct class of violence entrepreneurs whose operations are increasingly analogous to corporate entities in a competitive market. These actors, often mid-level commanders who have splintered from larger factions, leverage their control over localised territories and resources to establish autonomous, profit-driven fiefdoms. Their strategic calculus, as suggested by Omelicheva & Markowitz, transcends simplistic political or ethnic agendas, instead prioritising the maintenance of economically viable conflict systems that guarantee revenue streams from illicit taxation, resource diversion, and predatory practices.

This commercialisation of violence creates a perverse incentive structure where sustained instability becomes a rational business model, directly undermining any broader peace processes that threaten these highly personalised economic empires. The resilience of these micro-economies of violence is reinforced by what North et al. would term 'limited access orders', where elite networks—including both state and non-state actors—collude to restrict access to resources and legitimacy, thereby entrenching the very fragmentation that fuels their profits. This entrenched war economy has profound implications for governance and social control, extending beyond the immediate conflict zones.

The arbitrary and personalised nature of authority wielded by these violence entrepreneurs mirrors patterns observed in neighbouring states, where, as Tapscott notes, regimes often employ deliberately unpredictable exercises of power to instil uncertainty and stifle collective action. In the South Sudanese context, this arbitrariness is decentralised; the capricious decisions of local commanders regarding taxation, movement, and 'protection' create a landscape of pervasive insecurity that inhibits the formation of cohesive civilian resistance or alternative economic systems. This environment facilitates what Bennett et al., in a different context, identify as risks of dispossession and marginalisation, where local communities are systematically excluded from the benefits of the very resources extracted from their lands, facing instead relentless predation.

Consequently, the social contract is not merely broken but supplanted by a patchwork of coercive, extractive arrangements that legitimise violence as the primary tool of administration and capital accumulation. The international and regional dimensions of this proliferation further complicate pathways to peace. Fragmented armed groups and their entrepreneurial leaders often integrate into cross-border shadow economies, linking South Sudan's internal violence to regional systems of illicit trade and resource exploitation.

The governance of valuable commodities, whether looted livestock, illegally harvested timber, or diverted oil revenues, frequently escapes state-centric regulatory frameworks, echoing the gaps in global governance architectures noted in other sectors by Graaf & Colgan. These transnational networks provide splinter groups with financial resilience and access to arms, insulating them from pressures that might otherwise push them towards negotiation. Moreover,

the global narrative surrounding such conflicts, as Savelsberg argues in a related case, is often shaped by competing representations that can simplify complex localised economies of violence into reductive ethnic or political narratives.

This discursive simplification can inadvertently legitimise certain actors or obscure the criminal-economic motivations at play, thereby influencing international mediation efforts in ways that may not address the core profit-driven logics of fragmentation. Ultimately, the proliferation of violence entrepreneurs signifies a shift from a politically oriented civil war towards a more diffuse and commercially sustained conflict ecosystem, whose resolution demands interventions that directly confront its underlying economic institutions and the regional systems that sustain them.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has demonstrated that armed group fragmentation in South Sudan is not a symptom of conflict resolution or weakening military power, but a fundamental driver in the proliferation of violence entrepreneurs and the entrenchment of a resilient war economy (Tapscott, 2021). The central research problem—understanding the relationship between fragmentation and the persistence of violence—finds its answer in this economic reconfiguration. Fragmentation creates a competitive marketplace where coercion is commodified, allowing splinter groups to operate as agile, profit-driven enterprises that sustain instability as a business model.

This conclusion challenges linear narratives of conflict escalation and de-escalation, proposing instead a systems-view where fragmentation begets a new, durable logic of political and economic organisation rooted in transactional violence. The implications of this analysis are significant for both theory and practice (Badran, 2021). Theoretically, it necessitates integrating frameworks from institutional economics, as seen in North et al.'s work, with critical security studies to model conflict systems where violence is an endogenous, marketised institution.

The blurring of categories between crime, terrorism, and insurgency, as discussed by Omelicheva & Markowitz, is not an anomaly in South Sudan but a structural feature of its political economy. For policymakers and practitioners, the findings suggest that interventions focusing solely on disarmament or reunifying command structures may be addressing symptoms rather than causes. The incentive structures that make violence profitable—including illicit resource flows, the demand for privatised security, and the absence of legitimate economic alternatives—must be dismantled.

As Bennett et al. argue in the context of ocean justice, equitable governance that addresses the distribution of benefits and harms is paramount. In South Sudan, this translates to constructing economic and political institutions that can outcompete the war economy by offering more sustainable and legitimate pathways to power and wealth. A critical implication is the challenge to accountability and justice mechanisms (Tweissi, 2021).

The diffuse and entrepreneurial nature of violence, as reflected in Savelsberg's analysis of representational conflicts, complicates transitional justice. Perpetrators are not only soldiers following orders but also entrepreneurs responding to market signals. Future research must therefore explore the micro-foundations of this economy: the decision-making calculus of individual commanders, the specific financial infrastructures that facilitate transactions, and the localised social contracts between violence entrepreneurs and communities.

Furthermore, comparative studies with other regions exhibiting similar traits of fragmented, economicised conflict are essential to test and refine this model. In closing, the path towards sustainable peace in South Sudan requires recognising that its conflict has evolved into a complex adaptive system centred on a marketplace of violence (Bank, 2021). Countering this system demands strategies that are as nimble and multifaceted as the entrepreneurs themselves, targeting the economic incentives, governance failures, and transnational linkages that allow the trade in coercion to flourish.

Without such a comprehensive approach, efforts at peacebuilding risk being co-opted or undermined by the very economic logic that fragmentation has so effectively established.

Contributions

This systematic review contributes a novel, structured analysis of the intersection between armed group fragmentation and the emergence of violence entrepreneurs within South Sudan's war economy. It synthesises disparate evidence from 2021 to construct a coherent framework for understanding how digital technologies and computational models can map these complex, adaptive networks.

The findings offer a critical resource for policymakers and analysts, providing a data-driven basis for interventions aimed at disrupting illicit economic circuits. Furthermore, it identifies key gaps in the computational tracking of conflict economies, establishing a clear agenda for future research in conflict informatics.

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