

# Can Regional Organizations Reduce Violence?\*

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## Abstract

Many Regional Organizations (ROs) have developed significant institutional capacity for conflict management, but these organizations vary substantially in their capabilities. I argue that ROs with greater conflict management capacity contribute to reduced violence in member states because such capacity enables coordinated deployment of multiple conflict management tools, facilitates rapid response to escalating conflicts, and allows organizations to work effectively alongside international actors. Statistical analyses of 18 regional organizations from 1989-2010 provide robust support for this argument: states in organizations with greater conflict management capacity experience lower levels of violence than comparable states, with this relationship holding across multiple model specifications and alternative measures of violence. These findings suggest that continued investment in organizational capacity—diplomatic mechanisms, military capabilities, and institutional infrastructure—will be essential as Regional Organizations play an increasingly important role in conflict management while UN engagement declines.

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# 1 Introduction

The United Nations, which has played the leading role in international conflict management throughout the post-Cold War period, faces severe and likely lasting challenges. Geopolitical competition among the most powerful states prevents agreement on responses to conflicts such as those in Gaza and Sudan. Funding cuts have dramatically curtailed the organization's ability to engage in peacekeeping and other large-scale efforts. These trends are unlikely to reverse, raising an urgent question: as the UN recedes, which actors can fill the gap?

Regional Organizations (ROs) are the most plausible candidates. Over the last several decades, many ROs have moved well beyond their original mandates of economic cooperation, developing early warning systems and building institutional capacities for responding to violent conflicts. The African Union (AU) has led a peacekeeping mission in Somalia for almost two decades. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the late 1990s, and has since worked to prevent and resolve conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and elsewhere in West Africa. But whether these organizations can systematically reduce violence — and under what conditions — remains poorly understood.

Several academic studies have shown that when ROs engage in specific conflict management strategies, they can contribute to reductions in violence and the implementation of peace agreements. Gartner (2011) shows that regional organizations are frequently called upon to mediate the most difficult conflicts and that RO mediation contributes to longer-lasting agreements. Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman (2024) find that the use of diplomatic and rhetorical actions by ECOWAS lead to reductions in violence in ECOWAS member states.

This article contributes to our understanding of the role of ROs in conflict management by examining the effect of RO conflict management capacity on levels of violence in civil conflicts within member states. I define conflict management broadly, as efforts to limit or reduce violence in civil conflicts—whether by preventing conflicts from emerging, shortening those

that do occur, or reducing their intensity. Unlike existing studies (such as those by Gartner (2011) and Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman (2024)), I do not look at the effect of specific RO actions. Rather, I focus on organizational capacity for conflict management—the institutional infrastructure ROs possess to identify and respond to conflicts. I assume that ROs with such capacity will generally deploy these tools when conflicts arise, given that member states bear the direct costs of regional violence and thus have strong incentives to utilize available capabilities. This approach allows me to move beyond analyzing specific interventions and instead test whether RO institutional preparedness affects overall levels of violence in member states.

I develop a theoretical argument for why RO conflict management capacity should affect levels of violence. ROs have strong incentives to reduce levels of violence within member states, because member states bear the direct costs of regional civil conflict through refugee flows, trade disruption, and potential spillover. ROs are also well positioned to engage in conflict management: close cultural and historical ties help them identify disputes with escalation potential early, and can facilitate diplomatic engagement (Duursma, 2020; Reid, 2017).

ROs can deploy a wide range of conflict management strategies, including diplomacy (mediation, good offices), economic tools (sanctions, embargoes, development assistance), rhetorical strategies (condemnations), and military action (intervention, peacekeeping). Many of these strategies have been shown to reduce violence, and several studies demonstrate that coordinated use of multiple tools produces better outcomes than single strategies alone.

However, ROs vary substantially—both across organizations and over time—in their capacity to deploy these tools. The theoretical argument is therefore that ROs with greater conflict management capacity can respond more quickly and effectively to conflicts, deploy multiple tools in coordination, and work alongside other actors like the UN to enhance overall conflict management effectiveness in their regions.

This argument leads to one main empirical expectation, that states that are members

of ROs with greater conflict management capacity will experience lower levels of violence. Statistical analyses using data on 18 regional organizations from 1989-2010 provide strong support for this expectation. States that are members of ROs with greater conflict management capacity experience lower levels of violence than comparable states in less capable organizations. This relationship is robust across multiple model specifications and alternative measures of violence.

The argument and findings in this article have direct implications for this moment. UN peacekeeping is in rapid decline (Campbell and Cunningham, 2025), international mediation in civil conflicts is falling as well (Lundgren and Svensson, 2020), and U.S. funding cuts, deepening Security Council polarization, and geopolitical competition make a reversal of these trends unlikely. If ROs with greater conflict management capacity systematically reduce violence among their member states — as the analyses here suggest — then sustained investment in that capacity is not merely desirable but urgent. The question is no longer whether ROs matter; it is whether they can maintain and build the institutional infrastructure needed to act effectively as the UN’s role recedes.

## 2 Regional Organizations and Conflict Management

Most regional organizations were formed to coordinate economic activity, such as by lowering trade barriers and encouraging cross-border investment, and/or to address transnational economic issues such as migration, drought, or water rights. Over time, many of these organizations started to take a greater role in political and security issues in the regions where they are based (Haftel and Hofmann, 2017). Scholars have examined the impact of shared RO membership on a variety of political and security outcomes.

ROs have been found to impact democratization and democratic consolidation. Pevehouse (2002, 2005) argues that democratizing states can use regional organizations to consolidate their democratization, and finds that certain ROs contribute to longer periods of

democracy among member states. Debre (2021), in what she refers to as the "dark side of regionalism", argues that autocratic governments can also use regional organizations to coordinate material, informational, and ideational resources to increase the chances of regime survival. Cottiero and Haggard (2023) find that state membership in more authoritarian organizations is associated with increased autocracy. Cottiero (2023) shows that leaders that face higher risks of coup d'états are more likely to deploy military personnel in response to anti-government insecurity in other countries in the same regional organization.

Scholars have also shown that regional organizations can play a significant role in responding to civil conflicts within member states. Gartner (2011) finds that ROs often engage in mediation in the hardest conflicts, meaning those where negotiations are least likely to lead to a sustained ceasefire. Once he deals with this selection effect, he finds that mediation by ROs leads to substantially longer lasting agreements. Duursma (2020) finds that African mediators are generally more effective in mediating civil conflicts in Africa than non-African mediators, and many of these mediators are sent by African ROs. Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman (2024) find that a variety of diplomatic and rhetorical tools used by ECOWAS are associated with reductions in violence in ECOWAS member states.

These studies show that ROs can have substantial impacts on politics and on the occurrence and termination of civil conflict within their member states. The work most closely related to this article is by Karreth and Tir (2013) and Tir and Karreth (2018), who examine the effect of membership in Highly Structured Inter-Governmental Organizations (HSIGOs) on conflict escalation.<sup>1</sup> They find that countries that are members of more HSIGOs are less likely to see low-intensity armed conflicts (between 25 and 1,000 annual battle-deaths) escalate to full civil wars (above 1,000 annual battle-related deaths). A closely related study by Lundgren (2016*b*) likewise finds that IOs with greater levels of institutionalization — distinguishing minimal, structured, and interventionist organizations — have stronger ef-

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<sup>1</sup>HSIGOs can include ROs, but a variety of other organizations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well.

fects on civil war incidence, and that these effects operate through both conflict prevention and termination. These studies show that organizational membership matters for conflict dynamics within countries, but do not focus on the specific conflict management capacity of organizations. In addition, they examine the dynamics of armed conflicts, rather than violence levels overall.

This article builds on this literature by examining how conflict management capacity—rather than general organizational structure—affects levels of violence more broadly. While Karreth and Tir (2013), Tir and Karreth (2018), and Lundgren (2016*b*) demonstrate that more structured and institutionalized organizations matter for conflict dynamics, I test whether organizations with specific institutional capabilities for conflict management reduce violence generally. This approach allows me to identify which organizational characteristics matter most for reducing violence and to assess the overall conflict management effectiveness of regional organizations.

### **3 How Regional Organizations lead to Reductions in Violence**

To motivate the theoretical argument, I begin with a brief overview of how one prominent RO — ECOWAS — has engaged in conflict management in its region. This example illustrates the mechanisms through which capable organizations can reduce violence, and highlights the variation in capacity that the theory seeks to explain.

ECOWAS was founded in 1975 and has fifteen member states.<sup>2</sup> ECOWAS was originally founded to encourage greater regional economic cooperation within West Africa. However, in the 1990s, the organization became much more involved in responding to armed conflict. In

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<sup>2</sup>These member states are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

the late 1990s, ECOWAS' military wing, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), intervened militarily in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This intervention contributed to the end of both of those civil wars. The organization continued to engage in military action, as ECOWAS forces intervened militarily in Guinea-Bissau in 1999, and Cote D'Ivoire and Liberia in 2003.

ECOWAS' military response helped to end conflicts and contributed to longer-lasting agreements. Over time, the organization began to work more proactively in response to coup d'etats and to prevent violent conflict in the region. In 2012, ECOWAS responded to a coup in Mali by condemning the coup, threatening sanctions, and organizing meetings to address both the coup and the response to the Tuareg rebellion in Mali (which was a major factor behind the coup). These actions contributed to the agreement to form a transitional government in April of that year (Aning and Edu-Afful, 2016; Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman, 2024).

In 2017, ECOWAS responded to a disputed election in The Gambia. Gambian president Yahya Jammeh refused to step down following a surprise electoral defeat. The organization responded quickly, condemning Jammeh's refusal, organizing meetings to discuss the crisis and regional response, threatening military action, engaging in mediation, and intervening militarily. This led Jammeh to accept defeat and leave the country, and is frequently held up as an example of successful conflict prevention (Hartmann, 2017; Breslawski, Cunningham and Fleishman, 2024).

While ECOWAS has been very active in responding to (and working to prevent) armed conflicts in West Africa, it is not the only RO that works in this way. The African Union engages in diplomatic action, including mediation, and played a pivotal role in negotiations leading to the Pretoria Peace Agreement in the 2020-2022 Tigray War in Ethiopia. The AU also uses economic tools, such as sanctions, and deploys peacekeeping missions in a variety of African conflicts, including long running missions in Darfur and Somalia. The Intergovernmental Agency on Drought and Development (IGAD), in the Horn of Africa, and

the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in southern Africa, have personnel and offices devoted to conflict management, and work to reduce violence in their regions as well.

### **3.1 How ROs can be effective at conflict management**

The fact that several ROs, particularly in regions with a history of conflict, engage in conflict management should not be surprising. Regional organizations have strong incentives to work to reduce violence in their region. Civil wars can have profound negative consequences for neighboring states, leading to refugee flows, reductions in trade and investment, arms transfers, etc. In some cases, these conflicts spread, as happened with civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote D'Ivoire in the 1990s. The member states of the RO are most likely to be those that bear these negative consequences of armed conflict in the region, increasing their incentive to respond effectively to violent conflicts (and potential violent conflicts).

ROs often have the ability to respond to these conflicts quickly. When a conflict breaks out (or threatens to), actors like the United Nations have to organize a response from a distance, navigating competing interests among a global membership that may have limited stakes in the outcome. ROs, by contrast, meet regularly to discuss regional issues, and member states — who bear the direct costs of regional instability — have strong incentives to act quickly. ECOWAS was able to respond so rapidly to the coup in Mali in 2012 and to the electoral crisis in The Gambia in 2017 because these crises were discussed through existing regional decision-making structures, among states with immediate interests in their resolution.

In addition, ROs are often (although certainly not always) seen as more legitimate by the member states, which can also facilitate them working earlier in the escalation phase of conflicts, as well as giving them access to a greater range of participants. Mediators from ROs often share cultural (and even personal) ties with the disputants in conflicts that they are mediating, which can make it easier for these disputants to accept their offers

to mediate. This dynamic is partly why Duursma (2020) argues, and finds, that African mediators are more effective in African conflicts.<sup>3</sup> In addition, because ROs generally meet to discuss regional issues, governments may be less hesitant to have their internal affairs discussed in that forum than they would in, for example, the UN Security Council. The perceived legitimacy of these organizations can facilitate their early engagement in conflicts in countries, putting them in a good position to contribute to conflict prevention and resolution before disputes fully escalate.

None of these dynamics mean that ROs will be effective in all cases, or that they can replace the work of the United Nations. While the United Nations can be slow to respond, it has by far the most resources of any international organization engaged in conflict management. In the area of peacekeeping, which is a very expensive form of conflict management, research has shown that RO led peacekeeping missions can enhance, but not replace, the effect of UN peacekeeping (Schumann and Bara, 2023). However, the expectation here is that ROs have both the incentive, and potentially ability, to engage in conflict management if they have the tools to do so.

### **3.2 How RO action can reduce intrastate violence**

If ROs often have both the incentive and ability to work to prevent and resolve violent conflicts within member states, how do they do so? The large literature on conflict management generally points to two ways that international action can lead to lower levels of armed conflict and violence. First, they can help states and dissidents to identify ways to resolve the underlying issues in the dispute. Civil wars happen because dissidents have some underlying motivation for rebellion, and states and dissidents are unable, or unwilling, to settle these

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<sup>3</sup>There is also evidence that the legitimacy advantage of regional mediators is not universal — proximity and shared ties can also generate perceptions of partiality that undermine mediator effectiveness in some cases (Lundgren, 2020).

disputes in a way that avoids violence.<sup>4</sup> Armed conflicts continue until either one side wins (which is relatively rare), or the actors involved can reach some agreement in the dispute.<sup>5</sup>

The literature on conflict management has identified a variety of ways that international actors, including ROs, can help parties resolve disputes. Mediators facilitate bargaining success by setting the agenda for meetings in a way to maximize the chance of reaching agreement, identifying substantive proposals for addressing difficult issues, and sharing information to alleviate information problems (Beardsley, 2011; Bercovitch, 2009). Mediators representing regional organizations are often particularly well suited to do this, because they may have close ties to the combatants, greater personal knowledge of the issues generally present in the region, and experience with similar conflicts.

Peacekeepers can also help states and dissidents overcome barriers to bargaining. One of the challenges with resolving civil wars through negotiation is that both sides have difficulty trusting that the other will follow through on commitments made in the negotiation process. Peacekeepers can help to overcome these commitment problems by observing compliance and by offering security guarantees for each side if the other does not follow through on its commitments (Walter, 2002; Fortna, 2008).

Second, even if the disputants do not reach agreements that resolve the underlying dispute, international actors can reduce violence by encouraging actors to choose means other than violence in the dispute. Outside actors frequently use economic tools, such as sanctions and economic aid, to impact state and dissident calculations of the costs and benefits of fighting or not fighting (Hultman and Peksen, 2017; Cunningham, Fleishman and White, 2025). ROs are positioned to coordinate this effort, and sanctions or arms embargos led by ROs can be particularly impactful since neighboring states are often each others' biggest

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<sup>4</sup>This framework draws on the bargaining approach developed by Fearon (1995). For a discussion of how bargaining theory applies to civil war, see Walter (2009).

<sup>5</sup>Conflicts can also end when the actors choose to stop fighting, even without some agreement to end. This is a form of bargaining success, in that it means that the parties decide to accept the current status quo rather than to use violence to change it.

trading partners.

Peacekeeping can also impact actor decisions whether to engage in violence. Peacekeepers are frequently deployed between warring parties or between armed actors and vulnerable civilians to deter them from engaging in violence (Fortna, 2008; Hultman, Kathman and Shannon, 2013, 2014). Interpositional deployment of peacekeepers can directly prevent these actors from using violence or, at the least, raise the costs of them doing so.

Both of these mechanisms can lead to reductions in armed conflict and violence. An enormous number of studies have been conducted of the effect of international actions on a variety of conflict outcomes, including conflict duration, termination, post-conflict peace, and conflict diffusion, as well as levels of battlefield and civilian violence during and outside of armed conflict. In general, these studies have shown that international action can have a positive effect, leading to reductions in armed conflict and in battlefield violence and civilian killing.

### **3.3 Variation across ROs in conflict management capacity**

While ROs generally have the incentive and ability to respond quickly to crises in some way, the specific tools available to them vary substantially across organizations. ROs such as ECOWAS and the AU, for example, have substantial infrastructure for conflict prevention and management. This infrastructure includes early warning systems designed to identify the potential for escalation, a mediation office ready to respond quickly to the outbreak of crises, personnel on the ground in member states to organize responses, and so on. Other ROs have much less capacity.

The level of capacity matters because responding effectively to armed conflicts and working to prevent violent conflicts from breaking out generally requires identifying escalating disputes quickly, deploying appropriate tools quickly, and sustaining engagement through de-escalation or resolution of conflicts. While the majority of empirical studies of conflict management examine how specific actions—such as mediation, peacekeeping, etc.—affect civil

conflict, several studies examine the effect of coordinated action across different actions. Beardsley, Cunningham and White (2019) find an interaction effect between mediation and peacekeeping on conflict severity, wherein the combination of mediation and peacekeeping leads to greater reductions in battle-related deaths than either strategy independently. Zhang and Dorussen (2025), likewise, find a conditional relationship between peacekeeping and humanitarian aid. Aid on its own, they find, can sometimes exacerbate violent conflict, but when combined with peacekeeping both peacekeeping and aid lead to reductions in violence. While these studies examine the conditional effect of peacekeeping operations on the effectiveness of mediation and aid, Lundgren (2017) finds that mediation is more effective when it is conducted by organizations with the capacity to deploy peacekeepers, whether or not peacekeepers are actually deployed. This suggests that institutional capacity itself — not just its deployment — shapes conflict management effectiveness, which is precisely the mechanism underlying the argument here.

ROs with the ability to identify violent conflicts early (potentially before they break out), respond to them quickly using a variety of tools, and to sustain this engagement should be more effective at conflict management, generally. In addition, ROs with greater conflict management capacity may be able to enhance the effectiveness of other actors—such as the United Nations—also working in the region. In the case of ECOWAS, for example, the organization is often working alongside both the African Union and the United Nations in conflicts in West Africa, such as that in Cote D’Ivoire (Schori, 2014). When international organizations cooperate effectively in conflict management efforts, this can lead to better outcomes than when they operate independently (Fleishman, 2025).

The ability of ROs with greater conflict management capacity both to respond quickly and effectively to violent conflicts in member states and to coordinate with other international organizations should mean that conflict management efforts are more successful in their member states. Effective conflict management means that some disputes that otherwise would have escalated to armed conflicts do not, those armed conflicts that do occur would

be shorter and less violent, and wars that are resolved are less likely to recur. Overall, this results in lower levels of violence. This is the empirical expectation that I will test in this article:

*Hypothesis: Countries that are members of ROs that have greater conflict management capacity will experience lower levels of violence than those that are not members of ROs or members of ROs with less conflict management capacity.*

This hypothesis focuses on organizational *capacity* to engage in conflict management rather than in specific interventions. This approach assumes that ROs with greater capacity will generally employ these tools when conflicts arise or threaten to emerge in member states. This assumption is justified by the incentive structure for ROs outlined above: member states bear the direct costs of regional violence through refugee flows, trade disruption, and potential conflict spillover. These incentives mean that ROs with institutional capacity for conflict management are likely to deploy these tools when there is the potential for conflicts to escalate.

Moreover, looking at capacity rather than specific interventions avoids endogeneity concerns inherent in measuring actual conflict management activities—organizations are more likely to intervene in severe conflicts, which would confound estimates of intervention effectiveness. Organizational capacity, in contrast, reflects institutional infrastructure that exists independent of any particular conflict episode, making it a more appropriate measure for identifying the effect of organizational preparedness on violence levels. In the next section, I conduct a series of statistical analyses that examine how the conflict management capacities of regional organizations in which states are members affect levels of violence in those member states.

## 4 Empirical Analyses

### 4.1 Measuring Conflict Management Capabilities of ROs

There are several datasets that contain information about the capabilities of IOs. The dataset that has the most information on RO conflict management capabilities is the International Organization Conflict Management Dataset (IOCM) (Lundgren, 2016*a*), and I use it for the analyses in this article. The IOCM contains information on the conflict management capabilities of 21 “peace-brokering” international organizations, almost all of which are regional organizations, from 1945 to 2010. I exclude three of these organizations—the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The United Nations is not an RO, and indeed virtually every state in the world is a member. The Commonwealth of Nations is also not an RO. While it has somewhat more limited membership than the UN, its members stretch across multiple continents. NATO, meanwhile, is a collective security organization that was established to counter external threats and functions quite differently from the ROs described here. The remaining 18 IOs which are used in the analysis are included in a list in the Appendix.

The IOCM contains yearly information on the “diplomatic interventions capability,” “economic sanctions capability,” and “field mission capability” (which primarily relates to the ability to authorize and deploy peacekeepers) of each RO. For each of these categories, there are two ordinal variables. One variable indicates the degree of institutionalization of the capability, ranging on a scale from zero to four, with “0” meaning “has no institutional structure in place to support a particular capability” and “4” meaning “has established institutional bodies to provide specialized administrative and operative support for a given capability, together with long-ranging experience of using it” (Lundgren, 2016*a*, p. 204). The second variable, “authorization,” measures the institutional level at which the specific capability can be authorized. It also ranges from zero to four, with “0” indicating “an IO is not mandated to employ the relevant capability” and “4” indicating “authority has been

fully delegated, implying that supranational officials can independently authorize its usage” (Lundgren, 2016*a*, p. 205).

In addition, the IOCM data contains dichotomous variables indicating whether the IO has three other “security mechanisms”. These mechanisms are a collective security mechanism, confidence building measures, and early warning systems.

The IOCM data reveals clear variation in conflict management capacity across ROs. In 2000, for example, ECOWAS has high values on most of the variables. The organization has a “3” and “4” on diplomatic capacity institutionalization and authorization, respectively, and a “2” and “3” on the field mission capacity variables.<sup>6</sup> ECOWAS is coded as having collective security measures, confidence building measures, and an early warning system. By contrast, the Economic Community of Central African States receives no score higher than 1 (and two zeroes) on the six ordinal variables and is coded only as having an early warning system in 2000.

The example of the Organization of African Unity (OAU)/African Union (AU) shows how these capabilities can change over time within one organization. Figure 1 shows the diplomatic, economic, and field mission capacity for the OAU/AU from 1989 to 2010. To measure capacity in each area, I have just added the “institutionalization” and “authorization” variables for each area together, giving a range of 0 to 8 for each.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the OAU/AU has developed substantially in all three areas over time. In the early 1990s, the organization had little (if any) ability to impose economic sanctions, quite limited field mission capacity, and some diplomatic capability. By 2010, the AU was near the highest possible levels on each of these variables. The three dichotomous variables are similar. In 1989, the OAU is not coded as having either collective security or early warning mechanisms. It has had an early warning system since 2003, and is coded as

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<sup>6</sup>In that year, the organization only receives a “1” on both variables measuring economic sanctions capability.

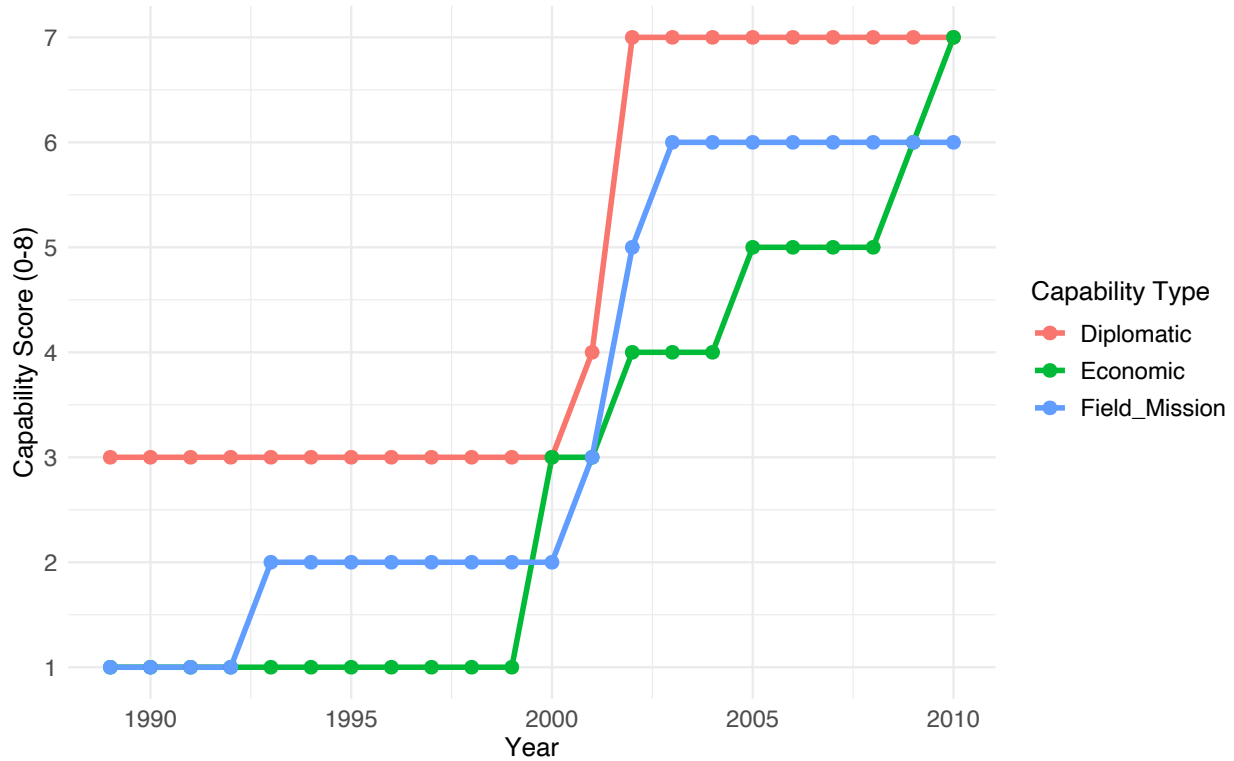


Figure 1: Development of OAU/AU Diplomatic, Economic, and Field Mission Capacity (1989-2010)

having collective security in 2009 and 2010.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2 shows how the diplomatic, economic, and military capabilities of all 18 organizations included in the data have changed in the 1989-2010 period. It shows that organizations such as ECOWAS, the African Union, and the European Union greatly increased their conflict management capacity in this period, while organizations like SADC and IGAD have seen relatively small increases. Other organizations, including the Andean Community and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have no conflict management capacity (measured by these three variables) across the entire period.

I use the IOCM data to generate country-year measures of the conflict management capabilities of the ROs in which each country is a member. I identify the set of ROs to

<sup>7</sup>The confidence building measure variable is missing for all years for the OAU/AU.

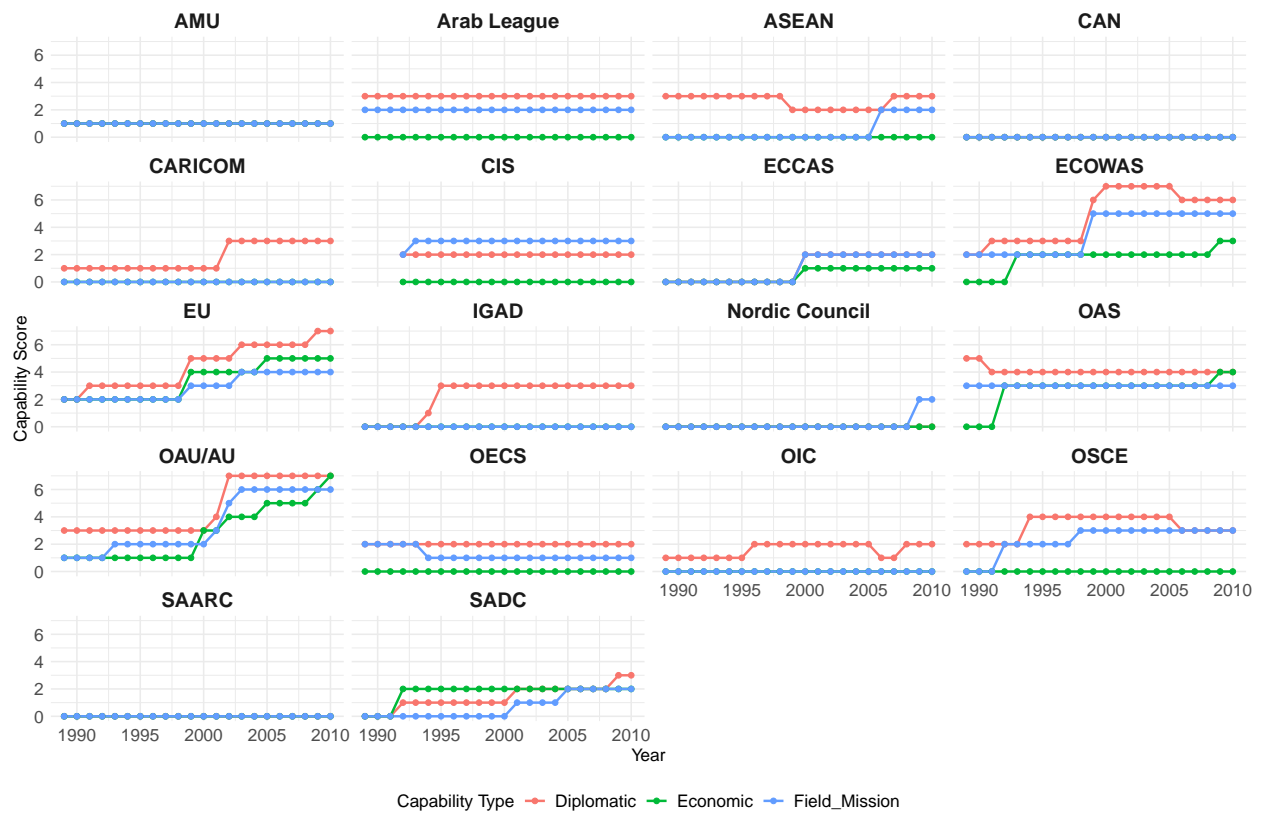


Figure 2: Diplomatic, Economic, and Military Capacity for 18 Regional Organizations (1989-2010)

which each state belongs using the Correlates of War IGO Data (Pevehouse et al., 2020), which provides a country-year dataset listing all IOs each country is a member of in the year. I then matched these data to the IOCM data to generate a country year dataset that included the conflict management capacity variables for every RO that was included in both datasets and that a country belonged to.

I use two measurements of conflict management capacity. The first is a count of the number of areas—diplomatic, economic, field mission, early warning, confidence building, and collective security—within which an organization has capacity. To create this variable, I have turned the measure of diplomatic, economic, and field mission capacity into dichotomous variables indicating whether the organization has any capacity in that area (i.e. either the authorization or institutionalization variables are coded as greater than 0). This variable ranges from 0-6. This count measure captures the breadth of tools available to the organization and thus its ability to deploy coordinated responses using multiple instruments—a key mechanism identified in the theoretical argument above. Organizations with capacity across more areas can combine diplomatic engagement with economic pressure, or deploy field missions alongside mediation efforts, which existing research suggests produces better outcomes than single strategies alone.

The second measurement aggregates the total conflict management capacity across all six areas. When I code the variable this way, I am weighting diplomatic, economic, and field mission capacity higher than early warning systems, collective security measures, and confidence building measures, since the diplomatic, economic, and field mission capabilities variables vary from 0 to 8 and the other three are dichotomous. This weighting reflects the more detailed information captured by the ordinal scales for these three core capabilities, allowing the measure to capture not just whether organizations possess tools, but the degree of institutional infrastructure and sophistication within each capability area. However, any weighting is by nature somewhat arbitrary, which is why I use two measures of conflict management capacity.

For each of these measures, I then take the value for the most capable organization to which a country belongs in the year, and that is the measure for that country for that year. I use the highest capability organization because some countries are members of more than one organization, while others are members of only one or none. The logic is that it is the most capable RO that will typically lead the conflict management effort, and therefore its capacity is most important.<sup>8</sup>

To see how these variables are measured in actual cases, we can compare Togo, Chad, Laos, and Nepal in 2000. Togo is a member of ECOWAS, the organization with the highest conflict management capacity score in 2000. That year, ECOWAS has a score of “7” on the diplomatic capacity variable, “3” on economic capacity, “5” on the field mission capacity, and “1”s on each of the three dichotomous variables, This means it has a score of “6” on the conflict management capacity count measure and “18” on the aggregate measure. Chad, like virtually every country in Africa (including Togo), is a member of the OAU/AU, and in 2000 that was the most capable organization to which it belonged. In 2000, the OAU had a score of “3” on diplomatic capacity, “3” on economic capacity, “2” on field mission capacity and is coded as having an early warning system. These result in a score for Chad of “4” on the count measure and “9” on the aggregate measure. Laos is a member of ASEAN, which in 2000 is coded as “2” on diplomatic capacity and as having confidence building measures, but “0”s on everything else, giving Laos scores of “2” on the count variable and “3” on the aggregate measure that year. Nepal, meanwhile, is a member of SAARC, which has scores of zero on all the capacity variables in 2000, giving Nepal a score of zero on both measures of conflict management capacity for that year.

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<sup>8</sup>In a robustness check, described below, with tables presented in the Appendix, I take the sum of the conflict management capabilities of the two most capable organizations to which a state belongs.

## 4.2 Measuring levels of violence

The statistical analyses examine how these measures of conflict management capacity affect levels of violence within countries. To measure levels of violence, I use data from the UCDP Georeferenced Event Data (GED) (Sundberg and Melander, 2013), aggregated to the country year. This provides a measure of the number of deaths due to state-based internal armed conflict in every calendar year. Importantly, this includes some years that do not reach 25 battle-related deaths, so it allows me to compare countries that are not currently in armed conflict in terms of their level of violence.<sup>9</sup>

Figures 3 and 4 present histograms of the number of battledeaths, by year, for the period 1989-2010 (the period in which the IOCM and UCDP GED data overlap). In both figures, I have removed zeroes and log-transformed the number of battle-deaths, due to a large number of zeroes and a heavy skew for the data. In the global sample, there are 3,352 out of 4,192 country-years with zero battle-deaths, while there are 187 country-years with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths. There are 8 country-years with 10,000 or more battle-deaths and 3 with more than 20,000. The two country-years with the most battle-deaths are both in Ethiopia—49,698 in 1990 and 24,358 in 1989.

## 4.3 Modeling Approach

To properly test the hypothesis that countries that are members of ROs with greater conflict management capacity will experience lower levels of violence than others, all else equal, I need to deal with the fact that the baseline risk of violence varies substantially across countries and across time within countries. I am interested in cross-sectional variation—I anticipate that two countries with similar baseline risks of violence will have different levels of violence

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<sup>9</sup>The GED codes battle-related deaths linked to armed conflicts, non-state conflicts, and instances of one-sided violence as defined by UCDP. This includes events that take place outside of active conflict years but which are linked to these conflicts. This means that events are not coded in countries that have not had one of these armed conflicts.

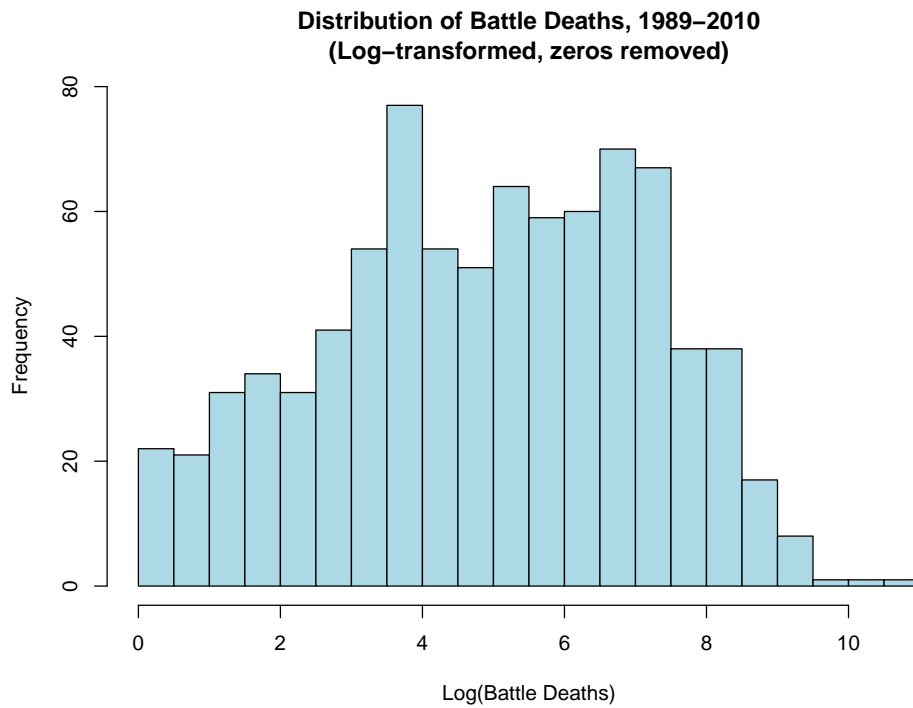


Figure 3: Histogram of Battledeaths 1989-2010, log-transformed, with zeroes removed

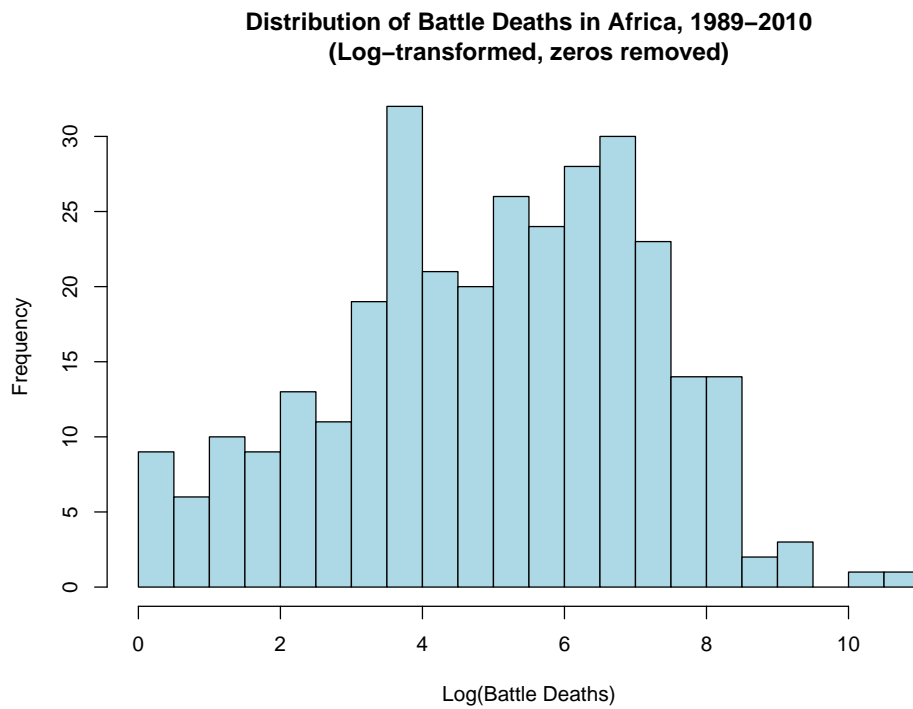


Figure 4: Histogram of Battledeaths 1989-2010, in Africa, log-transformed, with zeroes removed

based on the conflict management capacity of the ROs to which they belong. I am also interested in variation over time, since RO conflict management capacity can change over time, and as ROs gain capacity I would expect violence levels within countries to decline.

To examine both of these, I conduct analyses with, and without, country-level fixed effects. The models with country-level fixed effects examine how changes in conflict management capacity affect violence in the country over time, while the models without fixed effects allow for cross-sectional comparison. I conduct these analyses in two samples. The first includes all countries in the world and the second is limited to Africa. In both samples, the time period is 1989-2010 period (when both the UCDP-GED and IOCM data are available). I include analyses limited to Africa because Africa has both relatively high levels of violence (as seen from Figure 4) and organizations with high conflict management capacity. Focusing the analysis on Africa removes many countries that are not recorded as having violence in the UCDP-GED data, and so eliminates a large number of zeroes.

I include a set of control variables that should affect the baseline levels of violence in each country-year, as well as a lagged dependent variable and a time trend in all models. These controls serve two purposes: adjusting for confounding factors that affect both RO capacity and violence levels, and improving precision by accounting for known predictors of civil conflict. This allows me to compare how RO conflict management capabilities affect countries with similar risks of internal violence. Four of the control variables do not vary much within country over time, so I exclude them from the fixed effects models. The first variable is the country's infant mortality rate from the World Bank World Development Indicators data. It is generally well established that countries at lower levels of economic development are more prone to civil violence, and the infant mortality rate is a common proxy for economic development. The second variable is a measure of country population (log-transformed), also from the World Development Indicators. Country population is one of the variables with the most consistent (positive) effects on levels of armed conflict.

The third control variable is the level of democracy in the country, as measured by the

V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index. The V-Dem variable measures the level of democracy in the country on a 0 to 1 scale (Coppedge et al., 2025; Pemstein et al., 2025). The final variable is from the Ethnic Power Relations data project and measures the percentage of the country's population that is made up of ethnic groups that are excluded from political power.<sup>10</sup> Ethnic groups that are excluded from political power are more likely to rebel (Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010), and countries that have a higher percentage of their population excluded from power are more likely to experience armed conflict (Buhaug, Cederman and Gleditsch, 2014).

I also include several controls in both the country fixed-effects and non fixed-effects models that do vary over time. First, I include dichotomous variables measuring whether there is a UN peacekeeping operation (PKO) or Special Political Mission (SPM) present in the country in the year.<sup>11</sup> PKOs and SPMs are both UN peace operations, and they are present in many conflict-affected countries. Adding these variables allows me to examine whether ROs with higher conflict management capacity impact levels of violence, controlling for the role of the UN in these countries in each year as well.

Second, I add a variable, from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) data (Hyde and Marinov, 2012), measuring whether there was any national-level (presidential, legislative, or both) election in the year. Elections can be very contentious times in countries, and there is frequently electoral violence.

Finally, I include a one-year lagged measure of deaths due to state-based intrastate violence (a lagged DV) in each model, as well as a variable measuring the year. Adding the lagged DV is important because ROs often develop conflict management capacity in regions with a history of armed conflict. By including the lagged dependent variable, I can measure whether ROs with greater conflict management capacity contribute to reductions in violence. The

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<sup>10</sup>These data were obtained from the GROW-UP platform (Girardin and Vogt, 2015).

<sup>11</sup>These variables are taken from the United Nations Peace Mission Mandate dataset version 2.2 (Hellmüller, Tan and Bara, 2024).

year variable controls for global trends in battle-related deaths over time (such as the decline in armed conflict in the 2000s) that may be correlated with changes in conflict management capacity.

I examine the level of violence in each country year using negative binomial regressions of the number of people killed due to state-based intrastate violence. I choose negative binomial models because the data show high levels of overdispersion (as can be seen from Figures 3 and 4). I cluster standard errors at the country-level. All IVs and control variables (except for the year measure) are lagged by one year to deal with the potential for reverse causality.

A more fundamental endogeneity concern is that ROs may develop conflict management capacity in anticipation of, or in response to, violence among their members — meaning capacity is shaped by the outcome it is meant to explain. Three features of the research design help address this. First, the capacity measures reflect long-term institutional infrastructure rather than conflict-specific responses, making them less susceptible to short-term anticipation effects. Second, all independent variables are lagged by one year. Third, the lagged dependent variable accounts for prior violence that may have prompted capacity development. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional results should be interpreted as associations that are consistent with the theoretical argument rather than clean causal estimates. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analyses in the global sample.

## 4.4 Results

Table 2 reports the results of four models using the count of conflict management capacities described above (which ranges from 0 to 6). The first two models are in the global sample, and the third and fourth in the Africa sample. The first and third models do not include any fixed effects, and the second and fourth have country fixed effects.

The models in Table 2 generally support the hypothesis. Conflict management capacity (which here measures the capacity of the highest capacity RO to which the member state belongs in that year), is negative in all four models, and statistically significant in all but

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Battle Deaths	167.09	1093.51	0.00	49,698.00	3994
CM Capacity (t-1)	7.88	5.96	0.00	21.00	3994
CM Capacity Count (t-1)	3.23	1.97	0.00	6.00	3994
UN PKO Present (t-1)	0.11	0.31	0.00	1.00	3994
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.06	0.23	0.00	1.00	3994
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	40.94	35.76	2.10	274.00	3446
Log Population (t-1)	8.97	1.67	5.19	14.10	3446
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	0.50	0.28	0.02	0.92	3424
Excluded Population % (t-1)	0.14	0.20	0.00	0.91	3534
Election (t-1)	0.25	0.43	0.00	1.00	3994

*Note:* Statistics calculated for the full analysis sample with non-missing values on key variables.

the model with country level fixed effects. This shows that member states of ROs with higher conflict management capacity have lower average numbers of deaths due to state-based intrastate conflict in a year, holding constant the other variables in the models, and this effect is seen both in the global sample and in Africa. The global fixed effects models show that, within countries, the number of deaths is lower in periods in which countries are members of ROs with greater conflict management capacity, although this relationship is not significant in the Africa sample with fixed effects.

The control variables generally perform as expected. Infant mortality rate and log population are both positive and significant, while V-Dem Polyarchy is negative and significant—all consistent with existing literature on civil conflict. The excluded population variable is positive in both samples but only reaches significance globally.

The presence of a UN PKO is positive in the global sample, and UN PKO and SPM presence are both positive and statistically significant in the global sample without fixed effects. This counterintuitive result reflects selection: UN peace operations deploy to active, severe conflicts, so their presence is a marker of conflict severity rather than necessarily indicating ineffectiveness. The presence of an election is negative in all four models, and statistically significant in the models without fixed effects. This likely reflects that countries

Table 2: Conflict Management Capacity (count measure) and Intrastate Violence

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity Count (t-1)	−0.319*** (0.049)	−0.659** (0.312)	−0.404*** (0.142)	−0.217 (0.352)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.329*** (0.246)	0.157 (0.594)	−0.228 (0.438)	−0.562 (0.595)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.781** (0.311)	−0.636 (0.770)	0.521 (0.486)	−0.972 (1.333)
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.023*** (0.003)		0.011** (0.005)	
Log Population (t-1)	0.880*** (0.051)		0.538*** (0.103)	
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	−5.109*** (0.346)		−3.597*** (0.795)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.667*** (0.412)		0.399 (0.609)	
Election (t-1)	−0.295* (0.173)	0.059 (0.240)	−0.880*** (0.313)	−0.187 (0.460)
Year	−0.047*** (0.014)	−0.050 (0.034)	−0.003 (0.030)	−0.008 (0.072)
Constant	90.068*** (27.119)		8.124 (59.393)	
Num.Obs.	3543	1887	1112	721

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is intrastate battle deaths. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

that hold elections more frequently generally have lower levels of violence, both globally and in Africa.

The lagged measure of intrastate deaths is positive in all models and statistically significant in all but the Africa sample with fixed effects. This shows that countries with violence in one year are more likely to have it in the next. The year variable is negative in every model, and significant in the global sample without fixed effects. This reflects the general trend that levels of armed conflict and violence broadly decreased for the first twenty-five years or so after the Cold War ended. This is an important control variable, because, as Figure 2 shows, the conflict management capacity of organizations on average increased over this period as well.

To see whether the results here are driven by the measurement of conflict management capacity included, Table 3 re-runs the models in Table 2 with the additive measure of conflict management capacity (which has a theoretical range from 0 to 21).

The results in Table 3 are similar to those in Table 2. the measure of conflict management capacity remains negative in all four models, although it is now only statistically significant in the models without fixed effects. This similarity suggests that not only the presence (or absence) of economic, diplomatic, and field mission capacity matters, but also how much capacity organizations have in each of these areas.

To examine the substantive effects of conflict management capacity, Figure 5 uses the negative binomial model (without fixed effects) in the global sample from Table 2 to generate predicted numbers of battle-deaths at different levels of conflict management capacity, holding the control variables at their mean, the lagged measure of intrastate battle-deaths at zero, and the year variable at 2000. The blue line represents point estimates of predicted battle deaths, while the shaded ribbon indicates 95% confidence intervals. The gray histogram shows the distribution of conflict management capacity observations in the data, with frequency counts displayed on the right y-axis. Figure 6 does the same thing for the Africa sample without fixed effects.

Table 3: Conflict Management Capacity (additive measure) and Intrastate Violence

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity (t-1)	-0.083*** (0.016)	-0.061 (0.057)	-0.170*** (0.047)	-0.097 (0.120)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.119*** (0.247)	0.279 (0.571)	-0.164 (0.439)	-0.460 (0.689)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	1.009*** (0.312)	-0.444 (0.784)	0.689 (0.486)	-1.029 (1.339)
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.019*** (0.003)		0.009* (0.005)	
Log Population (t-1)	0.860*** (0.051)		0.637*** (0.103)	
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	-5.732*** (0.349)		-4.538*** (0.770)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.793*** (0.412)		0.205 (0.609)	
Election (t-1)	-0.223 (0.174)	0.046 (0.245)	-0.899*** (0.312)	-0.228 (0.450)
Year	-0.037** (0.015)	-0.069* (0.038)	0.106** (0.048)	0.056 (0.129)
Constant	71.401** (30.201)		-211.087** (96.442)	
Num.Obs.	3543	1887	1112	721

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is intrastate battle deaths. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

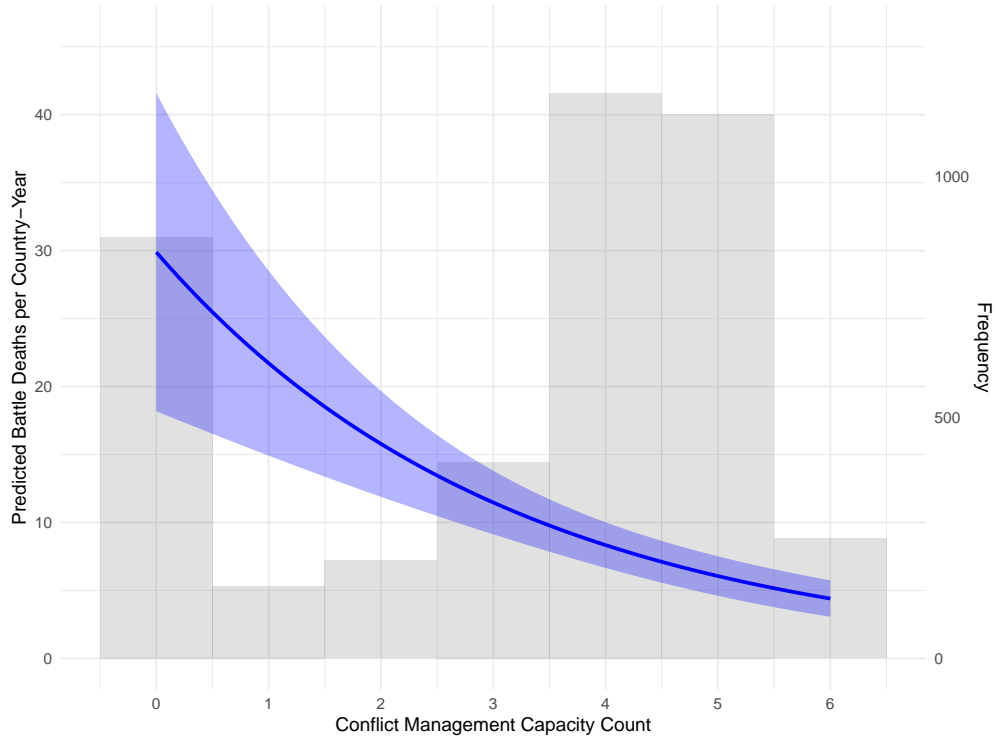


Figure 5: Predicted Intrastate Battle-deaths by Conflict Management Capacity (count measure), global sample without fixed effects

Figures 5 and 6 reveal a strong negative effect of increased conflict management capacity on battle deaths. In the global sample, holding other variables at their means, when conflict management capacity is measured as "0", the model predicts approximately 30 battle deaths per country-year. As conflict management capacity increases to its maximum observed value (6), predicted deaths decline to approximately 5 per country-year, representing an 83% reduction. While there are relatively few country-years with a "6" on conflict management capacity in the global sample, there are many with "4" or "5", and Figure 5 shows that an approximately 67% reduction in predicted battle-deaths occurs between 0 and 4.

In the Africa sample, few African countries belong to ROs with conflict management capacity below 3, because the OAU/AU had a capacity of at least "3" throughout the 1989-2010 period and virtually every country in Africa is a member. At a conflict management capacity count of "3", the model predicts about 75 battle-deaths per year. At a conflict management capacity of 6, it is about 25, a reduction about 67%. These are large substantive

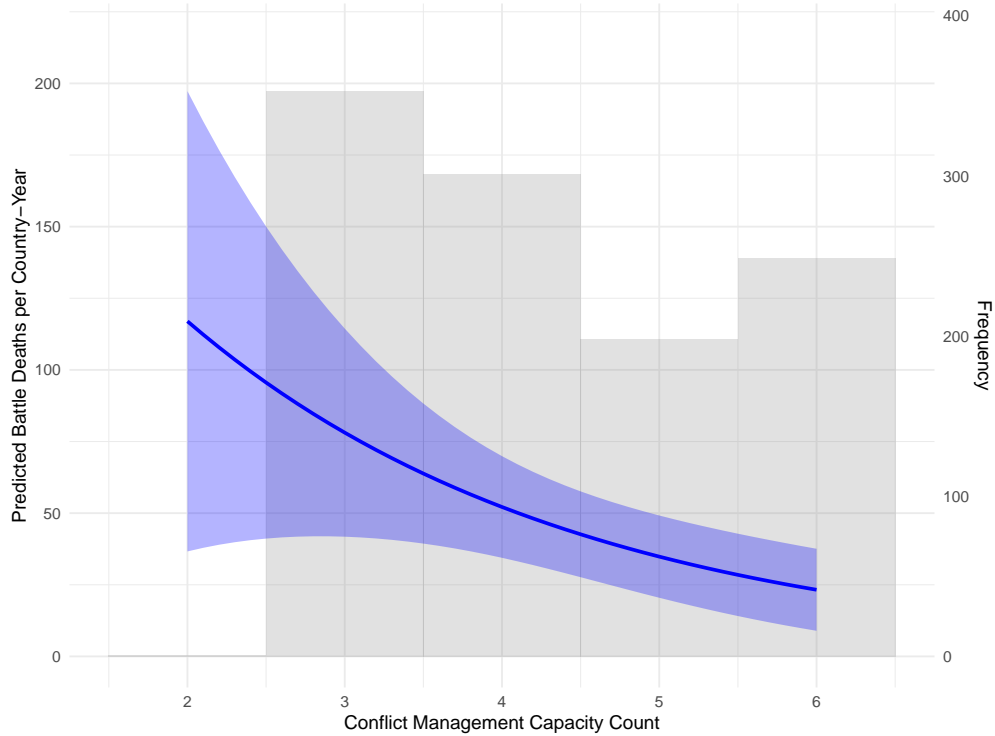


Figure 6: Predicted Intrastate Battle-deaths by Conflict Management Capacity (count measure), Africa sample without fixed effects

effects. The higher baseline predictions in the Africa sample reflect the continent’s elevated conflict levels during this period, even accounting for control variables.

The models presented in Tables 2 and 3 and the substantive effects in Figures 5 and 6 show big cross-sectional differences in levels of battle-related deaths based on the conflict management capacity of the most capable RO to which a country belongs. The models with country fixed effects, however, are generally not significant. This suggests that there is less of a within country effect as conflict management capacity develops over time.

While fixed effects models have many advantages, for many of the countries in the data here there is relatively little, if any, within country variation in conflict management capacity. Membership in ROs is very stable, so very few countries change their organizational membership in this period. Conflict management capacity of ROs does change over time, as we see from Figure 2, but for a number of organizations—including the Arab Magreb Union (AMU), Andean Community (CAN), South Asian Association for Regional Coordination (SAARC),

and Nordic Council—there is little if any change in capacity across this time period.

Additionally, the cross-sectional variation is important. The analyses here suggest that countries that have similar profiles in terms of population, regime type, economic development, access to power of large ethnic groups, and histories of violence can have very different levels of violence based on the RO to which they belong. That is consistent with the theoretical argument here, which emphasizes that organizational capacity—not within-country changes over time—is the key mechanism through which ROs affect violence levels.

## 4.5 The effect of individual ROs

The analyses in Tables 2 and 3 show that conflict management capacity is associated with lower violence levels across organizations. However, these models do not reveal which specific organizations are driving these results, nor whether the capacity measures accurately capture organizational effectiveness. To address these questions, I examine the effect of membership in individual ROs on violence levels.

I focus on four African ROs that the existing literature identifies as actively engaged in conflict management: the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, and SADC. Based on the theoretical argument and the capacity measures, we would expect ECOWAS and the AU—which have the highest conflict management capacity scores—to show the strongest negative associations with violence. These analyses also serve as a robustness check: if membership in high-capacity organizations reduces violence, we should observe this effect even when measuring organizational presence dichotomously rather than through continuous capacity scores.

I replace the conflict management capacity variables with dichotomous indicators of membership in each RO. This specification tests whether countries in, for example, ECOWAS have lower levels of violence than countries not in any of these four organizations, holding other factors constant. I do not include country fixed effects because organizational membership is essentially time-invariant within countries during this period. I also exclude the AU variable from the Africa subsample because every African country is a member.

Table 4: Regional Organization Membership and Violence (Log Deaths) (1989-2014)

	Global	Africa
OAU/AU Member (t-1)	0.120 (0.090)	
ECOWAS Member (t-1)	-0.240*** (0.079)	-0.248** (0.118)
SADC Member (t-1)	-0.317*** (0.070)	-0.350*** (0.110)
IGAD Member (t-1)		0.153 (0.197)
Log Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.823*** (0.020)	0.761*** (0.034)
Infant Mortality Rate (t-1)	0.003** (0.001)	0.003 (0.002)
Log Population (t-1)	0.088*** (0.016)	0.120*** (0.033)
V-Dem Polyarchy (t-1)	-0.077 (0.080)	0.020 (0.213)
Excluded Population % (t-1)	0.278** (0.135)	0.243 (0.236)
Election (t-1)	-0.019 (0.033)	-0.073 (0.068)
Year	0.004 (0.003)	0.005 (0.008)
Constant	-7.919 (5.652)	-10.633 (15.102)
Num.Obs.	4207	1320
R2	0.763	0.678
R2 Adj.	0.762	0.676

Note: Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. DV is  $\log(\text{intrastate deaths} + 1)$ . Models estimated via OLS. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 4 reports results from two models, one for the global sample and one for Africa. Because the negative binomial regressions would not converge with these specifications, I use OLS models with the natural log of battle deaths as the dependent variable (adding 1 to avoid undefined values for zero deaths). These models extend through 2014 rather than 2010 because they rely only on COW IGO membership data (which goes to 2014), not the IOCM dataset.

The results in Table 4 strongly support the capacity-based theoretical argument. Membership in ECOWAS and SADC—the two organizations with the highest conflict management capacity scores alongside the AU—is associated with significantly lower violence levels.

The ECOWAS coefficient is negative and statistically significant in both the global and Africa samples, as is the SADC coefficient. This indicates that countries in these organizations experienced lower levels of violence than otherwise similar countries during this period.

The OAU/AU coefficient is positive but insignificant in the global sample. This likely reflects that AU membership essentially serves as an Africa indicator, and African countries experienced higher average conflict levels during 1989-2014 than the rest of the world. The fact that ECOWAS and SADC show negative effects even within Africa—where all countries are AU members—suggests these subregional organizations provide violence reduction benefits beyond AU membership alone.

The IGAD coefficient is positive and insignificant in the Africa sample. This aligns with the capacity-based expectations: as Figure 2 shows, IGAD’s conflict management capacity is considerably lower than that of ECOWAS, the AU, and SADC. The absence of a violence-reducing effect for IGAD membership is consistent with the findings in Tables 2 and 3 that organizational capacity—not simply membership in any regional organization—drives conflict reduction.

## 5 Additional Analyses

I conduct some additional analyses to further examine the relationship between RO conflict management capacity and levels of violence. The first analyses examine whether specific characteristics of regional organizations might confound or drive the relationship between RO capacity and violence. Some ROs have powerful member states that drive much organizational action—Nigeria in ECOWAS and South Africa in SADC, for example. It could be that regional hegemony, rather than RO capacity per se, explains the patterns observed. ROs also often comprise states with similar regime types, and democratic ROs may be more effective at conflict management. Both ECOWAS and SADC were made up primarily of democracies

during this time period. Finally, some ROs face more simultaneous conflicts among their members than others, potentially creating capacity strain that reduces effectiveness.

To explore whether the results in Table 2 are driven by these alternative mechanisms, I add three controls to the main models. Power Concentration is measured as the CINC (Composite Index of National Capability) share of the most powerful member state in the organization.<sup>12</sup> Democracy Proportion is measured as the share of member states with a V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index score greater than 0.5. Conflict Proportion is measured as the share of member states experiencing any battle-related deaths. For each country-year, these measures are calculated for the organization with the highest conflict management capacity score.

The results are presented in Appendix Table A2. The CM capacity count variable remains negative in all four models and statistically significant in the models without fixed effects, consistent with the main findings in Table 2. The three RO characteristics are also significant only in models without fixed effects, which is unsurprising given that these characteristics change little within organizations over time.

The pattern of results for these controls is noteworthy, though I leave detailed investigation to future research. Power concentration is positively associated with violence, suggesting that hegemonic organizations are not more effective—indeed, the opposite may be true. Democracy proportion is negatively associated with violence in the global sample, indicating that more democratic ROs may be more effective. Conflict proportion is positively associated with violence globally (though not in Africa), consistent with capacity strain reducing effectiveness. Most importantly for present purposes, conflict management capacity remains negatively associated with violence even controlling for these organizational characteristics, confirming that institutional capacity matters beyond the power distribution, regime composition, or conflict burden within regional organizations.

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<sup>12</sup>CINC data are from Correlates of War Project (2017); the original discussion of CINC scores is in Singer, Bremer and Stuckey (1972).

The second set of additional analyses examine the effect of conflict management capacity on different measures of violence. In Table A3, I replace the measure of deaths from intrastate state-based violence with a measure of total deaths from state-based violence. This measure also includes deaths resulting from interstate wars, such as the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In Table A4 I use a cumulative measure of deaths, which includes all deaths from organized violence (whether state-based, non-state, or one-sided violence) in the year. Both of these measures are from the UCDP-GED (Sundberg and Melander, 2013). For the analyses in Table A4 I exclude country-year observations where cumulative deaths exceed 500,000, because the extreme values from the Rwandan genocide (and their lagged values) were preventing the models from converging.

In the analyses in Tables A3 and A4, the conflict management capacity variable shows the same pattern as in Table 2. The variable is negative in all four models, and significant in all but the model in the Africa sample with country-level fixed effects. This shows that the results in Table 2 are not driven by the measure of violence used.

The third set of analyses examines an alternative operationalization of the independent variable. The analyses in Tables 2 and 3 use the conflict management capacities of the most capable RO to which a country belongs. However, some countries are members of two capable organizations, while others belong to only one. In Africa, for example, countries in ECOWAS are also AU members and thus have two capable organizations that can intervene, whereas countries in a less capable subregional organization are more reliant on the AU alone. To examine whether the combined capabilities of two organizations matter, Appendix Tables A5 and A6 replicate the main analyses from Tables 2 and 3 using the sum of the two highest-capacity ROs to which a country belongs, rather than the single most capable organization. The results are substantively identical to those in the main tables, suggesting that the findings are not sensitive to this measurement choice.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

Regional Organizations are often well positioned to engage in conflict management. Because their member states will bear most of the spillover costs of conflict in the region, these organizations generally have the incentive to work to prevent, contain, and de-escalate violent conflicts. ROs can also often organize quick responses to escalating disputes because they discuss regional issues as part of their regular working business, and often have personnel on the ground in these countries already. When they do engage in conflict management, ROs are often seen as more legitimate actors by disputants within member states, enhancing their effectiveness. Some of the successes of these organizations have been recognized, such as ECOWAS' response to the disputed election in The Gambia in 2017 and the AU's cooperation with the UN in the peacekeeping mission in Darfur.

While these successes are important, studies of individual cases cannot determine whether they represent a general pattern or simply the most visible instances where ROs happened to succeed. The analyses in this article address this limitation by systematically examining the relationship between organizational capacity and violence across regional organizations from 1989-2010. The results show that ROs with greater conflict management capacity are systematically associated with lower levels of battle-related deaths among member states. This relationship holds across multiple model specifications and alternative measures of violence, demonstrating that these organizations lead to reductions in violence more generally. This pattern is particularly robust for ECOWAS, where the organization's high conflict management capacity is consistently associated with reduced violence even when accounting for country-specific factors and other organizational characteristics.

These findings are important, because they suggest that there would have been more violence in countries that are members of organizations like ECOWAS, SADC, and the AU if these organizations had not developed their conflict management capacity. This increase in violence could have manifested in additional armed conflicts, longer lasting conflicts, more destructive wars, and/or more frequent conflict recurrences.

The impact of ROs on violence identified here supports the focus of the United Nations in recent years on “local ownership” and “regionalization” in conflict management/peacebuilding efforts. This focus is likely to be increasingly important in the future, as the UN role in conflict management is almost certain to diminish. The UN has been the leading actor in conflict management efforts for most of the post-Cold War period. However, UN peacekeeping, which has been the main way the organization has led responses to armed conflicts throughout this period, is in rapid and profound decline (Campbell and Cunningham, 2025), and international mediation in civil conflicts is declining as well (Lundgren and Svensson, 2020). These trends have been continuing for at least a decade, and are likely to accelerate as a result of U.S. funding cuts to the UN, continued polarization in the UN Security Council, and increased competition among UN member states.

Regional Organizations could be well positioned to fill in some of the gap left by the UN’s diminished role if they continue to invest in and engage in conflict management. However, this optimistic scenario faces two significant challenges. First, there remains a gap in our understanding of whether RO conflict management success is dependent on UN support, or whether these organizations can really engage successfully on their own. Existing analyses of the effect of ROs (including the analyses in this article) largely examine a period where the UN was involved to some degree in most, if not all, of these conflicts. Further research focused on isolating the effect of RO action from that of the UN would help to understand how effectively ROs could fill in this gap.

Second, the continued ability of some of these ROs to engage in conflict management is in serious doubt. ECOWAS has been one of the most active organizations in this space, but is currently paralyzed following several coups in the region and the withdrawal of three member states—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—from the organization. In 2023, SADC deployed a military mission to the DRC, which was designed to replace MONUSCO, the longest-lasting and largest multidimensional UN peacekeeping force in the post-Cold War era. The SADC mission was a failure, however, its mandate has ended, and the withdrawal of MONUSCO

has paused. The African Union, meanwhile, has shown little ability to respond to the civil war currently causing a humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan.

Despite these challenges, successful conflict management is almost certainly going to require ROs working to prevent and resolve armed conflicts and reduce violence in their member states. Civil wars in Sudan and Syria show how destructive wars can be when international actors support opposing sides as opposed to coordinating to try to de-escalate conflicts and promote resolution. ROs can play a pivotal role in reducing violence and armed conflict, but only when they possess and maintain the conflict management capacity to engage effectively. The findings in this article suggest that continued investment in organizational capacity—diplomatic mechanisms, military capabilities, and institutional infrastructure—will be essential if regional organizations are to fill the gap left by declining UN engagement.

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# Appendix

Table A1: Regional Organizations Included in Analysis

Acronym	Organization Name
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Arab League	League of Arab States
CAN	Andean Community
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
Nordic Council	Nordic Council
OAS	Organization of American States
OAU/AU	Organization of African Unity / African Union (OAU/AU)
OECS	Organization of Eastern Caribbean States
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SADC	Southern African Development Community

Table A2: Controlling for RO Characteristics

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity Count (t-1)	-0.445*** (0.073)	-0.369 (0.268)	-0.273* (0.161)	-0.236 (0.339)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.562*** (0.259)	0.243 (0.592)	1.940*** (0.412)	-0.586 (0.631)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.718** (0.335)	-0.488 (0.824)	0.268 (0.466)	-0.831 (1.464)
Battle Deaths (t-1)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Election Year (t-1)	-0.100 (0.186)	-0.081 (0.246)	-0.479 (0.303)	-0.195 (0.459)
Year	-0.029** (0.014)	-0.061 (0.042)	0.006 (0.027)	-0.002 (0.084)
Power Concentration (t-1)	5.043*** (0.470)	-3.219 (2.229)	10.164*** (0.936)	-2.516 (5.853)
Democracy Proportion (t-1)	-1.938*** (0.324)	-0.871 (1.832)	-4.523*** (0.915)	-0.966 (2.923)
Conflict Proportion (t-1)	3.529*** (0.679)	2.658 (1.739)	1.134 (0.941)	1.388 (2.054)
Num.Obs.	3428	1730	1112	721

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is intrastate battle deaths.  
\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table A3: Total State-Based Deaths as DV

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity Count (t-1)	−0.317*** (0.048)	−0.668** (0.322)	−0.494*** (0.143)	−0.278 (0.439)
Infant Mortality (t-1)	0.021*** (0.003)		0.012** (0.005)	
Population (logged, t-1)	0.872*** (0.051)		0.635*** (0.103)	
Electoral Democracy (t-1)	−5.818*** (0.346)		−4.960*** (0.801)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.552*** (0.411)		−0.010 (0.610)	
Battle Deaths (t-1)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.285*** (0.246)	−0.296 (0.713)	−0.332 (0.440)	−1.014 (0.727)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.850*** (0.311)	−1.138 (0.858)	0.556 (0.489)	−0.969 (1.459)
Election Year (t-1)	−0.335* (0.173)	−0.014 (0.234)	−0.882*** (0.314)	−0.285 (0.490)
Year	−0.057*** (0.014)	−0.066** (0.033)	−0.007 (0.030)	−0.017 (0.071)
Num.Obs.	3543	1931	1112	743

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is state-based total deaths (includes interstate, intrastate, and extrasystemic conflict). \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table A4: Cumulative Total Deaths as DV

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity Count (t-1)	−0.199*** (0.040)	−0.576*** (0.220)	−0.413*** (0.106)	−0.414 (0.268)
Infant Mortality (t-1)	0.019*** (0.002)		0.014*** (0.004)	
Population (logged, t-1)	0.990*** (0.041)		0.887*** (0.077)	
Electoral Democracy (t-1)	−5.044*** (0.281)		−5.328*** (0.598)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.242*** (0.336)		−0.443 (0.455)	
Total Deaths (t-1)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	0.985*** (0.201)	−0.005 (0.446)	−0.010 (0.328)	0.059 (0.512)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	1.045*** (0.254)	−0.697 (0.607)	1.035*** (0.363)	−0.561 (0.927)
Election Year (t-1)	−0.258* (0.140)	−0.001 (0.179)	−0.835*** (0.234)	−0.257 (0.306)
Year	−0.061*** (0.011)	−0.034 (0.024)	−0.036 (0.022)	−0.033 (0.038)
Num.Obs.	3541	2347	1110	939

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is cumulative total deaths from organized violence. Observations with extreme outliers (>500,000 deaths) excluded to ensure model convergence. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table A5: Additive Top-2 Capacity Sum as IV

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity Top-2 Sum (t-1)	-0.058*** (0.010)	-0.050 (0.039)	-0.125*** (0.025)	-0.104 (0.094)
Infant Mortality (t-1)	0.022*** (0.003)		0.015*** (0.005)	
Population (logged, t-1)	0.896*** (0.050)		0.728*** (0.102)	
Electoral Democracy (t-1)	-5.552*** (0.346)		-3.956*** (0.780)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.442*** (0.411)		0.092 (0.603)	
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.222*** (0.247)	0.297 (0.569)	-0.470 (0.435)	-0.503 (0.656)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	1.092*** (0.312)	-0.371 (0.780)	1.078** (0.487)	-0.838 (1.200)
Election (t-1)	-0.157 (0.174)	0.034 (0.241)	-0.716** (0.310)	-0.217 (0.439)
Year	-0.031** (0.015)	-0.064 (0.039)	0.124*** (0.041)	0.097 (0.137)
Num.Obs.	3543	1887	1112	721

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is intrastate battle deaths. CM Capacity Top-2 Sum is the sum of the two highest-capacity ROs to which a country belongs. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table A6: Count Top-2 Capacity Sum as IV

	Global NB	Global NB-FE	Africa NB	Africa NB-FE
CM Capacity Count Top-2 Sum (t-1)	-0.175*** (0.028)	-0.330** (0.144)	-0.329*** (0.075)	-0.349 (0.343)
Infant Mortality (t-1)	0.022*** (0.003)		0.012** (0.005)	
Population (logged, t-1)	0.910*** (0.050)		0.682*** (0.102)	
Electoral Democracy (t-1)	-5.329*** (0.340)		-4.183*** (0.769)	
Excluded Population % (t-1)	1.478*** (0.411)		0.003 (0.603)	
Intrastate Deaths (t-1)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
UN PKO Present (t-1)	1.441*** (0.246)	0.320 (0.585)	-0.314 (0.433)	-0.573 (0.624)
UN SPM Present (t-1)	0.789** (0.311)	-0.519 (0.775)	0.571 (0.481)	-1.031 (1.285)
Election (t-1)	-0.208 (0.173)	0.024 (0.240)	-0.696** (0.310)	-0.166 (0.448)
Year	-0.039*** (0.014)	-0.048 (0.036)	0.031 (0.031)	0.042 (0.093)
Num.Obs.	3543	1887	1112	721

*Note:* Clustered standard errors (by country) in parentheses. NB-FE models use negative binomial with country fixed effects. Low-variation variables (infant mortality, population, democracy, excluded population) removed from FE models. DV is intrastate battle deaths. CM Capacity Count Top-2 Sum is the sum of capability counts for the two highest-scoring ROs to which a country belongs. \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$