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# Causal mechanisms in civil war mediation: Evidence from Syria

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## Abstract

Studies of conflict management by international organizations have demonstrated correlations between institutional characteristics and outcomes, but questions remain as to whether these correlations have causal properties. To examine how institutional characteristics condition the nature of international organization interventions, I examine mediation and ceasefire monitoring by the Arab League and the United Nations during the first phase of the Syrian civil war (2011–2012). Using micro-evidence sourced from unique interview material, day-to-day fatality statistics, and international organization documentation, I detail causal pathways from organizational characteristics, via intervention strategies, to intervention outcomes. I find that both international organizations relied on comparable intervention strategies. While mediating, they counseled on the costs of conflict, provided coordination points, and managed the bargaining context so as to sideline spoilers and generate leverage. While monitoring, they verified violent events, engaged in reassurance patrols, and brokered local truces. The execution of these strategies was conditioned on organizational capabilities and member state preferences in ways that help explain both variation in short-term conflict abatement and the long-term failure of both international organizations. In contrast to the Arab League, the United Nations intervention, supported by more expansive resources and expertise, temporarily shifted conflict parties away from a violent equilibrium. Both organizations ultimately failed as disunity among international organization member state principals cut interventions short and reduced the credibility of international organization mediators.

## Keywords

Bargaining, causal mechanisms, ceasefire, civil war, international organizations, mediation, Syria

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## Introduction

Despite increased reliance on international organizations (IOs) in civil war mediation, the conditions of IO intervention effectiveness remain poorly understood. Claims that IO mediation shortens civil wars (Gartner, 2011) confront claims that it lacks discernible effects (Bercovitch and Schneider, 2000; Regan, 2002) or produces fragile settlements prone to disintegration (Beardsley, 2008). One reason for such divergence is the premise — common to much theoretic and large-*N* work — that IOs can be studied as uniform actors with uniform effects. Such "billiard ball" assumptions are mismatched to a reality where IOs display significant institutional diversity (Hawkins et al., 2006; Koremenos et al., 2001), disguising factors that may explain why IOs sometimes promote peace and sometimes not, and why some IOs are more effective than others. Following calls for the disaggregation of IOs, scholars have begun to examine IO mediation in ways more sensitive to institutional heterogeneity (e.g. Boehmer et al., 2004; Haftel 2007; Hansen et al., 2008; Tir and Karreth, 2018). However, while this literature has established correlations between IO characteristics and outcomes, it has failed to provide credible evidence on underlying mechanisms, leaving the causal nature of institutional correlations in doubt.[1] How does variation in institutional characteristics affect the nature and outcome of IO civil war interventions?

In this article, I seek to elucidate the causal mechanisms involved in IO conflict management. In the first part, I theorize the causal mechanisms that link institutional characteristics, via conflict management strategies, to intervention outcomes. Building on the literatures on bargaining and war, conflict management, and international institutional design, I conceptualize peace-brokering IOs as consisting of supranational agents endowed with conflict management capabilities, and member state principals endowed with preferences over intervention policies. I propose that variation in these institutional characteristics determines the nature of IO conflict management interventions, via specific causal mechanisms, with implications for outcomes.

I evaluate the theoretical framework against data on mediation and ceasefire monitoring by the League of Arab States (LAS), more commonly known as the Arab League, and the United Nations (UN) during the first phase of the civil war in Syria (2011–2012). The two interventions took place under comparable conditions, providing a rare opportunity for relatively controlled cross- and within-case inference. While neither intervention resulted in lasting conflict resolution, variation in short-term outcomes makes meaningful analysis of intervention mechanisms possible. The analysis draws on independently sourced interview data, time-series analysis of fatality statistics, and leaked and public IO documentation.

I find that case evidence confirms the general validity of the theoretical framework but, more importantly, points to mechanisms that explain *how* institutional characteristics matter in IO civil war interventions. Case evidence demonstrates that the scope and proficiency of mediation sub-strategies — counseling on the costs of conflict, the provision of coordination points, and the strategic management of the bargaining context — is shaped by the extent of tailored institutional capabilities available in IO secretariats and field locations. Drawing on greater informational capabilities, the UN could maintain a greater scope and proficiency across all three mediation sub-strategies. It consulted more widely, designed a ceasefire that better reflected the nature of the conflict, and sought to

sideline potential spoilers, including Islamist hardliners and the expatriate opposition. With lower institutional capabilities and expertise, LAS mediation was constrained to regional engagements, produced a flawed ceasefire proposal, and did not structure its mediation process to sideline spoilers or reduce rebel fragmentation.

Similarly, case evidence demonstrates that the extent and quality of IO monitoring sub-strategies — the verification of violent events, reassurance patrols, and localized truce brokering — depend on in-house institutional resources. Again, due to its higher capabilities, the scope and proficiency of the UN monitoring intervention superseded that of LAS. UN observers covered a greater number of conflict spots and established mechanisms for public reporting on disputant behavior so that limited tit-for-tat cooperation between combatants could arise. Lacking institutional field mission support, LAS deployed a monitoring force that was undertrained, under-equipped, and characterized by ad hoc solutions, undercutting its credibility as an external enforcement facilitator.

The evidence suggests that the UN's intervention had greater impact on short-term outcomes, especially in terms of conflict abatement, but neither organization managed to bring the combatants — the Syrian government and a loose, Sunni-dominated rebel coalition — to a long-term settlement. The war continued despite their attempts to resolve it. I find that another institutional characteristic — member state preferences — provides an important part of the explanation for why the two interventions ultimately failed. In both cases, preference dissonance among IO member states cut interventions short and reduced the efficacy of the strategies pursued by supranational agents on the ground.

By introducing evidence on the linkages between institutional characteristics, intervention strategies, and outcomes, this study makes several contributions to the literature on IO conflict management, as further developed in the conclusion. First, it demonstrates that previously identified correlations between institutional capabilities and outcomes (Boehmer et al., 2004; Hansen et al., 2008; Lundgren, 2017; Tir and Karreth, 2018) have causal properties. It provides detailed evidence on the causal mechanisms of IO mediation and monitoring, hitherto assumed in general terms but not understood in detail, linking them to variation in institutional characteristics. Second, case evidence suggests that mediation strategy, frequently identified as a determinant of mediation outcomes (Greig and Diehl, 2012), is shaped not only by institutional capabilities, but also by IO membership preferences. Third, the evidence suggests that preference shifts among IO principals are a possible explanation for the "time-inconsistency problems" identified by mediation scholars (Beardsley, 2008) as a key reason for mediation failure.

In a wider light, the evidence suggests that scholarship on conflict management needs to move beyond the assumptions of IO uniformity now common in the literature (e.g. Gartner, 2011; Svensson, 2007) and take institutional heterogeneity more seriously into account. The relevant question is not if IOs can settle wars, generally, but which type of IOs, with what intervention strategies, and under what conditions.

## Theory: How institutional characteristics shape IO interventions and bargaining outcomes

The theoretical framework is conceptualized in three layers: a foundation built around the bargaining theory of war; a middle layer drawing on the bargaining approach to

conflict resolution; and a top layer building on the institutional design literature, in which I theorize how IO characteristics condition conflict management interventions. In standard formulations (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2002), bargaining theory conceptualizes war as a costly and inefficient outcome, where violent competition supplants peaceful, regulated exchange as the mechanism for the allocation of property and political authority. Two main conditions make actors' shift from peaceful to violent bargaining strategies more likely.[2] First, a shift to a violent bargaining strategy (war) is more likely in the presence of information asymmetries, that is, actors hold private information about military capabilities or resolve, increasing the risk of miscalculation. Second, a violent bargaining strategy is more likely if actors suffer from commitment problems, that is, they cannot generate solid expectations that agreements will be enforced.

If information asymmetries and commitment problems make war more likely, peace is more likely when these barriers are removed. While this may happen through warfare itself — for example, continued fighting will converge the parties' estimates of their relative capability — it also suggests a role for peace-interested third parties, who may intervene to ameliorate the conditions that prevent efficient bargaining. Two key strategies have been proposed in the literature. First, if bargaining is distorted by information asymmetries, third parties may provide information or facilitate conditions for information exchange (Gilady and Russett, 2002; Kydd, 2003). Second, if commitment problems are the key barrier, third parties may provide reassurance, assisting in the enforcement of agreements that parties are unable to uphold by themselves (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Fortna, 2008; Hartzell, 1999; Walter, 2002).

The two strategies correspond to the two key policy instruments available to IOs. Mediation relies primarily on informational strategies, whereas military monitoring and peacekeeping rely primarily on reassurance strategies. Both strategies incorporate a number of sub-strategies. Mediation sub-strategies include: (1) counseling the disputants on bargaining parameters, such as the cost of war or the resolve of the opponent; (2) the provision of coordination points, especially in the form of draft proposals, to reduce bargaining complexity; and (3) the strategic management of the bargaining context so as to sideline spoilers and generate external leverage. Monitoring sub-strategies include: (4) the verification of violent events, especially breaches of ceasefire agreements; (5) the provision of local reassurance via patrols and observation; and (6) the brokering of local truces and agreements.

I propose that the ability of IOs to execute these strategies is conditioned on institutional characteristics. Following the literatures on institutional design (Haftel and Thompson, 2006; Koremenos et al., 2001) and delegation in IOs (Hawkins et al., 2006), I conceptualize IOs as formal collaborative arrangements consisting of multiple member state principals and one supranational agent, an IO secretariat staffed by international civil servants (Pevehouse et al., 2004). As a subset of the wider population of IOs, peace-brokering IOs have a functional specialization in security and are endowed with mandates and resources to engage in conflict management (Lundgren, 2016; Shannon, 2009). Focusing on such peace-brokering IOs, the argument here highlights two institutional features: the conflict management *capabilities* of the international secretariat; and the *preferences* of the member state principals.

Conflict management *capabilities* are standing bureaucratic structures and resources tailored to support civil war interventions. Capabilities are strategy-specific. For informational strategies, IOs must have diplomatic and analytic capabilities that allow them to consult widely with relevant parties, process intelligence, and craft feasible proposals. A mediation support unit would be the typical example. For reassurance strategies, IOs must have capabilities to plan and administer the sourcing of troops, mission deployment, and in-mission operation control. A body that coordinates the recruitment of military personnel for field missions would be a typical example. Institutional capabilities may be housed centrally or at the main IO secretariat, or may be distributed across local offices and missions.

Member state principals are endowed with *preferences* over intervention policies, most importantly, whether to intervene and, if so, with what strategy combination. To capture the impact of decision-making procedures, preferences are conceptualized as the realized, post-deliberation IO position expressed in adopted policies on each of the two main strategies.

I propose that the interplay between these two features — capabilities and preferences — will have implications for both the characteristics and outcome of interventions. Capabilities and membership preferences condition *intervention characteristics*. Since capabilities help generate the raw material of interventions — information and reassurance — higher capabilities are expected to lead to interventions of higher scope and greater management proficiency, which are expected to be associated with higher effectiveness. The scope of mediation matters because it allows the mediator to consult a wider range of parties across a greater number of levels, increasing its ability to generate accurate estimates of the perspectives of the disputants and their international patrons, to identify possible agreements and compromises, and to cultivate a broader set of actors in support of a deal. Similarly, a greater monitoring scope increases opportunities for the detection of agreement violations, for providing reassurance, and for brokering limited ceasefires. By increasing the likelihood that any violation would be observed and recorded, monitoring increases the costs of violence relative to non-violence.

Preferences are less likely to shape the way in which interventions are carried out, but they may affect their credibility and legitimacy. Scholarship on IO signaling (Thompson, 2006; Thyne, 2009) indicates that variation in member preferences can affect combatant perceptions about whether an intervention will endure into the future. More homogeneous preferences signal greater willingness to commit resources and are hence expected to be associated with higher credibility and effectiveness. Preferences are also likely to shape the legitimacy of an intervention, that is, combatant perceptions that it rests on proper authority. IO interventions that lack broad-based preference alignment, or emerge from unilateral strong-arming on the part of powerful states, may see their legitimacy, and ability to facilitate agreement, undercut (cf. Coleman, 2007).

With regard to *intervention outcomes*, the expectation is that they will depend on how intervention characteristics shape combatant bargaining strategies. Since higher capabilities allow for higher scope and proficiency, along both main strategies, high-capability IOs will be more likely to successfully address bargaining problems. Likewise, IOs that can offer credible and legitimate interventions, based on united preferences among member state principals, are more likely to alter bargaining behavior.
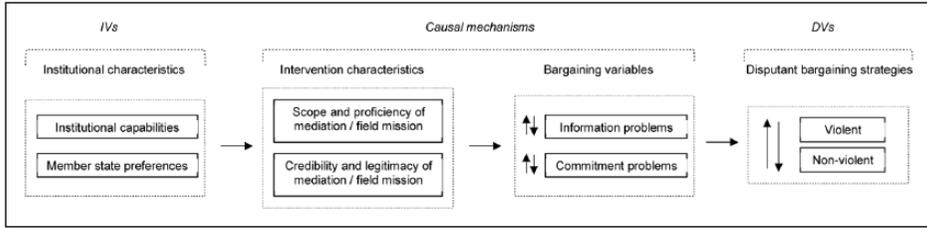
**Figure 1.** Hypothesized causal process.

Taken together, the assumed causal chain is illustrated in Figure 1. The nature of institutional capabilities and member state preferences determine the characteristics of IO interventions, which, in turn, influence the bargaining between disputants, shaping their expected returns from violent or non-violent strategies. Extensive and proficient IO interventions supported by united IO principals are more likely to reduce information and commitment problems, lowering the disputants' expected gains from violent strategies relative to non-violent strategies. The observable implication is a behavioral shift to non-violent modes of engagement, defined here as reduced military attacks or increased participation in negotiations.

## Research design: A structured comparison

The primary purpose of the empirical analysis is to trace causal mechanisms within cases; its secondary purpose is to assess variation in causal effect across cases. It is executed as a variable-guided, structured comparison (Bates, 1998; George and Bennett, 2005) between two cases of attempted IO civil war resolution: the interventions by LAS (from June 2011 to January 2012) and the UN (from January to August 2012) in Syria during the first phase (2011–2012) of its civil war. The symmetry of the organizations, their interventions, and the conflict context provides good grounds for a most-similar cases design. To begin with, both IOs belong to the small sub-population of "peace-brokering" IOs, endowed with mandates and resources for conflict management.[3] Next, their interventions in Syria, as will be detailed later, exhibit many structural similarities, sequencing mediation and military monitoring. Finally, since both interventions took place during a narrow time frame, much of the political and social context is held constant. Confounders, including civil war determinants such as income, ethnic composition, and geography (Collier et al., 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Hegre and Sambanis, 2006), and factors affecting conflict duration, including the nature of the dispute (Fearon, 2004) and combatants (Bercovitch and Langley, 1993), are largely controlled. This means that, with a few exceptions that will be discussed later, variation is found in the "right places": in the dependent and independent variables of interest.

The dependent variable is intervention effectiveness. It is viewed as proportional to the degree to which interventions increase disputants' reliance on non-violent bargaining strategies. Two indicators are used: *conflict abatement*, measured in daily battle-related fatalities at the national level; and *contractual progress*, estimated based on the solidity

and breadth of disputants' commitment to formal negotiation frameworks. While these indicators have limited usefulness as measures of durable peace, they combine three attractive properties: first, they are fine-grained enough to allow us to identify subtle differences between interventions; second, they constitute a good approximation of expected behavior under conditions of improved bargaining efficiency[4]; and, third, they are temporally proximate to interventions, increasing the reliability of causal attribution.

To measure the first independent variable, *intervention capabilities*, only supranational, bureaucratic structures are weighed in, emphasizing expertise and resources that can support mediation and monitoring. Both general capabilities, housed in the general secretariat, and Syria-specific capabilities are taken into consideration. To estimate *membership preferences*, I evaluate, at key junctures, the degree of unity in the two IO bodies mandated to authorize interventions, the LAS Ministerial Council the UN Security Council. Preferences are viewed as revealed via votes on principal policy proposals regarding IO interventions in Syria. The LAS Ministerial Council adopts resolutions via consensus, whereas the UN Security Council adopts resolutions based on affirmative votes by at least nine members, with no permanent member (P5) voting against (veto).

The predefined indicators for the independent and dependent variables provide a holding structure for the cross-case analysis. The within-case examination of causal processes proceeds in a more exploratory fashion (cf. George and Bennett, 2005). The ambition is to trace the general mechanisms suggested by theory, via intervention characteristics, to disputant bargaining strategies, examining whether these provide plausible pathways for observed effects. A significant portion of this involves delineating the sub-strategies of mediation and monitoring, and detailing how they depend on institutional capabilities.

Data have been sourced from newswires, IO documentation, and 21 interviews with IO officials, diplomats, and regional experts.[5] For quantitative analysis of conflict abatement, I use fatality statistics compiled by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[6] The pro-opposition bias of these NGOs introduces a risk of sampling bias. However, unless sampling biases are correlated with time, which is unlikely, we can use these data to study temporal variation in country-level conflict intensity.

The UN has attempted several rounds of mediation in Syria since 2012. To maintain comparability between the two cases, I include the first UN intervention, under Kofi Annan, excluding its second and third phases, led by envoys Brahimi and De Mistura, respectively. That leaves two interventions of similar length and overall approach, ensuring the relatively controlled environment crucial for comparative case analysis.

A few methodological issues relating to the cross-case comparison of outcomes warrant further discussion. One is the possibility of inter-case dependency, which would lead the first intervention to influence the second. This possibility will be examined at the end of the analysis. A second is possible variation in conflict dynamics. While much of the context is comparable across cases, they may vary in the degree of international pressure. This is considered in the discussion of the quantitative results. A third concerns the study of a "moving target." Some may object that the war in Syria has not yet ended. This objection is understandable from a large-*N* perspective, where right-censored observations pose methodological difficulties. However, the objection does not withstand scrutiny. The units of observation here are interventions, which can be studied in their entirety even if the war continued. Furthermore, conceptualizing wars in a binary fashion (as
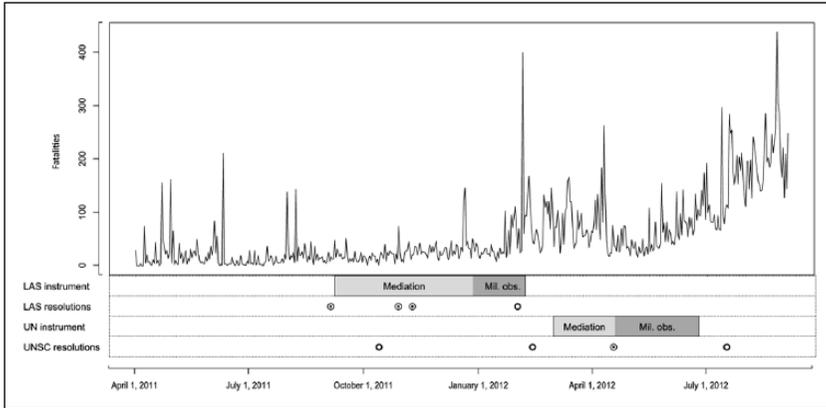
**Figure 2.** Timeline of interventions, key resolutions, and fatalities, April 2011–September 2012. ⊙ Consensual resolutions; ○ non-consensual or vetoed resolutions. LAS: League of Arab States.

either "on" or "off") may be a necessary operationalization in large-*N* studies but an unnecessary limitation in case studies. The bargaining perspective certainly does not necessitate a particular delimitation since any equilibrium, violent or not, may be understood as a temporary resting point in a continuous process of bids and counter-bids by political actors. Restricting the data to wars that have ended would also introduce selection bias (for a discussion, see Fortna and Howard, 2008).

## Empirical analysis

The analysis is organized around the causal chain in Figure 1. Accordingly, after a brief overview of the two interventions, a second subsection considers variation in institutional characteristics across organizations. A third subsection deals with variation across interventions, detailing the range of intervention sub-strategies employed, and a fourth presents evidence on outcomes.

### Overview of the two interventions

Figure 2 displays the duration of mediation and monitoring interventions, voting on key resolutions, and battle-related fatalities in Syria from the start of the conflict in the spring of 2011 through September 2012.

As the Syrian crisis erupted in the spring of 2011, LAS followed its customary noninterventionist approach at first, but in response to the escalating violence during the summer, it became increasingly activist. In August, LAS Secretary-General al-Arabi called for an "immediate halt" to violence and initiated a mediation intervention that extended through January 2012. The intervention centered on an "Arab Action Plan" that called for a cessation of violence, military withdrawal, and a "national dialogue."[7] The Syrian government tentatively agreed to this plan on October 30 but raised conditions, the disentangling of which would require two months of diplomatic shuffling. The rebels

either rejected the plan out of hand or set up conditions for participating in the envisioned political process.

Amid escalating international frustration, Damascus announced its agreement to the LAS initiative on December 19. While a key expatriate opposition group, the Syrian National Council (SNC), denounced the agreement, LAS sent a monitoring mission to Syria around Christmas 2011. Consisting of 166 personnel, the mission dispatched 20 field teams around the country in the first weeks of operation; however, it was soon surrounded by controversy. On January 22, 2012, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, advocates of regime change in Syria, withdrew their funding and personnel, pushing LAS to adopt an explicit anti-regime position. This initiative, formalized in Resolution 7444, called for the departure of Syrian President al-Assad and the establishment of a government of national unity. With member states in deep disagreement over Syria, LAS suspended its monitoring activities on January 28 as the organization passed the ball to the UN.

At the UN, action was initially focused in the Security Council, where negotiations in January and February 2012 cemented fault lines that were to remain fixed for the rest of the year. Whereas the US, the UK, and France wished to endorse the plan proposed by LAS on January 22, Russia and China opposed any support, implicit or explicit, for regime change. Responding to the worsening Syrian situation, the UN appointed former Secretary General Kofi Annan as its mediator. He soon engaged in consultations with international and regional stakeholders, as well as regime and opposition representatives, drafting a six-point plan that called for a ceasefire and a "Syrian-led political process." After several rounds of frantic shuttle diplomacy, the regime and several opposition groups agreed to the plan. A ceasefire was established, shakily, on April 12.

To help enforce the ceasefire, the Security Council established the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), comprising 300 observers mandated to "monitor a cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties."[8] Operating out of Damascus and six local sites, the mission engaged in patrols across the country, reporting that "regular violence" continued in Syria but that there had been "some reduction in the intensity of fighting" and that "[t]he engagement of observers at the local level appears to be having a calming effect."[9] Despite further mediation engagement by Annan, violence resurged in the summer, and by the end of June, key parts of the opposition had revoked their commitment to the ceasefire. UNSMIS suspended monitoring activities on June 15, citing "intensifying" violence. With the ceasefire un-monitored, an international "contact group" met in Geneva on June 30, agreeing to a communiqué that called for a "transitional governing body" in Syria. The Geneva communiqué appeared to unite the world powers behind a common approach, but unity swiftly eroded as interpretations of the adopted text diverged, especially with regard to al-Assad's future. Further efforts by Annan proved futile and he resigned in August, effectively ending the first phase of the UN's engagement with the Syrian crisis.

## The organizations: Variation in institutional characteristics

I now turn to the first step in the causal chain illustrated in Figure 1, considering variation in institutional capabilities and membership preferences.

*Institutional capabilities.* Although the UN and LAS were both set up for security governance and share several institutional features, they differ with regard to institutional capabilities. These differences reflect divergent institutional trajectories since their establishment in 1945. Although LAS has remained a primary regional organization in the Middle East, undertaking several regional mediation and peacekeeping interventions, it has endured primarily as a vehicle for intergovernmental coordination, without the significant accumulation of supranational conflict management capabilities (Barnett and Solingen, 2007; Pinfari, 2009). In contrast, the UN, reflecting its experience from more than 60 civil war mediation interventions and nearly 70 peacekeeping operations since 1945, has developed highly specialized bureaucratic and operational capabilities in support of conflict management.

With regard to informational capabilities, the UN is more developed. At the secretariat level, the UN has a sizeable body, the Department of Political Affairs (DPA),[10] focused on political analysis in civil war situations, including a Mediation Support Unit (MSU) tasked to "plan and support mediation efforts in the field." In comparison, the LAS secretariat has sub-bodies for political affairs and Arab security, but these lack functions for mission support and, following the interstate orientation of LAS, are generally not geared toward the analysis of intrastate conflicts. Overall, LAS is judged to have a "very low capacity for political analysis" (Pinfari, 2009: 9; cf. Barnett and Solingen, 2007).[11]

These differences are particularly marked for IO-wide capabilities, but given that LAS has a minimal field presence, they are also observed for Syria-specific capabilities. In 2011, there was a significant UN infrastructure in Syria, including offices for many of its specialized agencies and programs, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). While these are not primarily concerned with political analysis, they (in particular, the Resident Coordinator system) provide a source of intelligence and access points to local networks, which are important resources for assessing a bargaining situation (cf. Savun, 2008). In contrast, while LAS maintains a network of local offices, the majority of these are located outside of the Middle East, with none in Syria. The interview data suggest that given its role as a long-standing IO in the Middle East, LAS had access to a wide network of political actors.

A comparison of field mission capabilities suggests a similar divergence. At the secretariat level, the UN has two departments dedicated to peacekeeping (the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and the Department of Field Support (DFS)), rosters for troop contributors, and a standing capacity to equip and train monitors.[12] At the local level, it could draw on three neighborhood missions, UNDOF (Golan Heights), UNTSO (Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria), and UNIFIL (Lebanon), giving it a standby capacity to bolster the Syrian intervention before logistical arrangements were completely worked out. In comparison, LAS has no administrative body specialized in peacekeeping, no routines for the sourcing of troops for field missions, and no ongoing missions prior to the Syrian civil war. While LAS has a natural proximity to the conflict and its effort was dominated by officials with deep regional expertise, interview evidence suggests that the UN's local infrastructure in the region (e.g. UNTSO) allowed it to incorporate similar skills, including Arabic expertise.[13] Overall, the UN is endowed with more

expansive and more specialized institutional capabilities to support civil war interventions, both for informational and reassurance strategies.

The UN's advantages are compounded by the fact that they can be exercised with greater independence, at least with regard to mediation. The UN Secretariat can act with a large degree of autonomy and frequently engages in mediation without predefined mandates from the Security Council (cf. Skjelsbaek, 1991). Hassouna (1979) points out that the LAS Secretariat has sporadically engaged in autonomous mediation, for example, during the 1958 Sudan–Egypt border dispute, but in contrast to the UN, Pinfari (2009: 6) argues, LAS member states have displayed "great reluctance to assign substantial powers to a supranational institution" for such purposes.

*Member state preferences.* Figure 2 summarizes variation in the unity of member state preferences as expressed in voting on key resolutions. We observe longitudinal variation in the preferences of both IOs. LAS member states were united, at least formally, over the approach to Syria from the start of the conflict until the deployment of LAS monitors in December 2011. There were underlying tensions, especially regarding the Assad regime, but this did not prevent the member states from uniting around a string of policy decisions in the fall of 2011. The big split came in January 2012, when diverging priorities, already existing for some time, made consensual decision-making impossible, paving the way for the termination of the LAS intervention. The key driver was that Qatar and Saudi Arabia withdrew their support as they shifted to a strategy that prioritized rebel support over IO-led negotiations.

At the UN, the Security Council remained divided over Syria policy for most of the studied period, with the exception of the temporary unity in support of Annan's six-point plan and UNSMIS. The divide followed the typical split, with the three Western countries (the US, the UK, and France) arguing for a more robust intervention, and Russia and China for no intervention or less robust forms of intervention. The latter two countries exercised the veto on several occasions. This disunity implied that several of the initiatives for UN mediation came from the UN Secretariat, acting independently, and that UNSMIS was withdrawn as soon as member preferences diverged.

## *The interventions: Variation in mediation and monitoring strategies*

Having established variation in institutional characteristics, I next assess how this variation exerted influence along the two proposed mechanisms. For each of the two main strategies — starting with mediation and dealing with monitoring next — I present case evidence on sub-strategies and examine how they were conditioned on IO capabilities and preferences.

*Causal mechanism 1: The alleviation of information problems.* Case evidence shows that both IOs incorporated three mediation sub-strategies: (1) counseling on the costs of war; (2) the provision of coordination points; and (3) the strategic management of the bargaining context. Through consultations with combatants and their international patrons, both IOs channeled information to change disputants' beliefs about key bargaining parameters (1). Leaked reports and interviews indicate that such counseling focused on modifying

expectations as to the likely outcome and cost of war. For example, building on a narrative that "the winds of change have come to the Middle East," the UN sought to convince Damascus that "there was no chance that they could win."[14] In consultations with al-Assad, Annan underlined that continued conflict would invite international punishment: "I warned the President that if this continued, calls for further international measures would inevitably grow."[15] Similarly, LAS counseled the regime on "catastrophic consequences," seeking to focus attention on the costs of violence.[16] In essence, both IOs sought to persuade the regime that given the Arab upheavals, the "price" of repression, its standard response to challengers, had dramatically increased, and that accommodation was in its interest. In bargaining terminology, we may view these as attempts to correct the regime's estimation of its disagreement value, that is, its expected gains from a violent strategy.[17] By reducing this value, the mediators sought to incentivize the disputants in favor of a negotiated agreement.

Both IOs provided coordination points, predominantly in the form of draft agreements (2). Both the Arab Action Plan and Annan's six-point plan can be thought of as attempts to inject procedural "stickiness" and narrow down the issues at stake.[18] In a complex conflict context with a range of disputed issues, such coordination reduced uncertainty about what issues might be subject to negotiations and what a future process may look like.[19] The draft agreements also connected stakeholder across levels. For example, the LAS plan was labeled an "Arab solution," underscoring its potential as an instrument for regional coordination.

Both IOs, but predominantly the UN, sought to alleviate information problems indirectly by shaping the overall structure of the bargaining context (3). One part of this was fomenting unity among the opposition, encouraging them, as Annan said, to "build unity among their ranks under one umbrella."[20] This strategy also involved making choices as to whom to consult and in what order. The UN seemingly avoided bestowing recognition on rebel actors with hard-line preferences, including radicals inside Syria and, to some extent, the external opposition. For example, Annan never met directly with expatriate representatives, such as the SNC, which maintained a bellicose position and enjoyed limited legitimacy inside Syria. This strategy of facilitating rebel cohesiveness and sidelining potential spoilers diminished information problems arising from the splintered nature of the opposition; however, as we will see later, it may have created other problems.

Hence, the behavior of both IOs conforms with the informational causal mechanism, with the evidence suggesting a disaggregation into three sub-strategies. Closer analysis, however, reveals variation in the scope and proficiency of these strategies, influenced by their institutional differences.

The *scope of consultations* provides a "hoop test" for informational efficacy: in order to influence an actor, communication with that actor is a prerequisite. Table 1 provides a summary of the data on the scope of consultations, across levels and sub-strategies. The data clearly indicate the UN's wider scope. Inside Syria, the UN met more frequently with the government and devoted a separate mediation team led by Annan's deputy, former Palestinian Prime Minister Nassar al-Qidwa, to consultations with opposition groups.[21] In particular, while the UN maintained extensive connections with the Syrian government, it consulted widely with opposition representatives. This allowed the UN to

**Table 1.** Comparison of mediation intervention characteristics (sub-strategies).

| Level | LAS | | | UN | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1. Info on bargaining parameters | 2. Coordination | 3. Strategic management of bargaining | 1. Info on bargaining parameters | 2. Coordination | 3. Strategic management of bargaining |
| *Intra-disputant* | | ▪ | ▪ | | ▪ | ▪ |
| *Disputant* | ▪ | ■ | | ■ | ■ | |
| *Regional* | | ▪ | | ▪ | ▪ | ▪ |
| *International* | | | | ■ | ■ | |

■ frequent; ▪ occasional; LAS: League of Arab States.

maintain contacts with the "whole spectrum of the opposition," including not only the SNC, but also the Free Syrian Army, the so-called local coordination committees, and "other groups."[22]

In comparison, LAS focused on consultations with the government and did not initiate contacts with the opposition.[23] Further, whereas LAS privileged bilateral or fixed multilateral settings for its mediation, the UN engaged in several international "tour-de-tables," seeking to leverage important stakeholders in support of its efforts. Annan went several times to Russia and China, the regime's key international backers, as well as to Iran and Iraq, its closest friends in the region. This contrasts with the more limited LAS initiative. Framing the conflict as a domestic issue, LAS primarily consulted with stakeholders in "receiver mode" in Cairo and engaged in only one brief regional tour.

In terms of the *proficiency* of mediation, evidence suggests that LAS operated mainly in reaction to external stimuli. For example, it first met the opposition *after* its Arab Action Plan was formulated, a sequencing blunder that undercut its ability to incorporate opposition interests. The Arab Action Plan itself misdiagnosed the conflict, suggesting an agreement between LAS and the government, rather than between the combatants that dominated the battlefield. It did not adequately include, nor seek, commitments from the opposition.[24] Further, it did not include provisions for actors at the international level, missing an opportunity to leverage countries in the region, especially the disputants' regional patrons, in its support.

Operating more proactively, the UN sought to mobilize leverage progress across levels. UN mediators described how they viewed the conflict as consisting of "three concentric circles," containing the disputants, the regional players, and the great powers, respectively.[25] Annan "understood that in order to get anywhere, he needed instruments for corralling unity at the international level. He focused on getting a piece of paper that could be used to generate international unity. This became the Six-point Plan."[26] Only after progress had been made at that level did he focus his energies on the domestic level.

The observed variation in intervention characteristics has much to do with institutional capabilities. While neither IO had a perfect understanding of the bargaining situation across all levels, the UN's greater capabilities, especially the DPA and MSU, provided an intelligence advantage, in particular, for developing a "map of the table" identifying stakeholder interests, positions, and resources.[27] These analytical capabilities

were instrumental in all three mediation sub-strategies identified earlier. For example, UN mediators reported that in counseling the disputants, they often "related to prior experience," drawing on the UN's expertise to increase the credibility of advice, for example, when informing the Syrian regime that its strategy of the heavy bombardment of cities had failed to bring about desired ends in comparable civil wars.[28] As for coordination, the UN's expertise on how to design transition mechanisms fed into the design of the April 12 ceasefire. Strategic management was similarly boosted by the UN's ability to divide its staff into several mediation teams, allowing it to entertain multiple mediation tracks in parallel.[29]

LAS failed to capitalize on its capability advantages, including its regional networks and the fluidity that its ad hoc approach provided. The capacity constraints of LAS had implications across all three mediation sub-strategies. In a reflection of its more limited capacity for political analysis, as well as of member state preferences, LAS mediation originated from a sovereignty-focused understanding of the conflict, seeing it as a regime problem rather than as a multidimensional war with a network of regional and international actors on either side. Neglecting key actors meant that LAS information provision and coordination were confined. To some extent, these constraints were a function of the time of intervention: the precise nature of the conflict was less clear at that time. However, more importantly, they were an effect of lower capability in political analysis and mediation support for intrastate operations.

Several intervention characteristics can also be explained with reference to preferences. We have already noted that the LAS mediation mission was terminated when IO preferences diverged. While the continuation of the UN's mediation, on account of the greater independence of its Secretariat, was less sensitive to shifts in preferences, its general viability was premised on united support by the UN Security Council.[30] This is most clearly shown by how the mission was dented, and ultimately completely undercut (as epitomized by Annan's resignation), when disagreement within the P5 led to the failure of the Geneva plan. Preference alignment also provided additional, and likely crucial, weight behind some of the sub-strategies. This is most clearly seen for sub-strategy 2. Annan's six-point plan emerged from the leverage unlocked by the temporal alignment of P5 preferences in April and May 2012, leading Russia to lean on the regime and Western powers to pull strings with opposition actors.

**Table 2.** Comparison of monitoring intervention characteristics (sub-strategies).

| Level | LAS | | | UN | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 4. Verification | 5. Patrols | 6. Local mediation | 4. Verification | 5. Patrols | 6. Local mediation |
| Intra-disputant | | | | | | |
| Disputant | ▪ | ▪ | ▪ | ■ | ■ | ▪ |
| Regional | | | | | | |
| International | | | | | | |

■ frequent; ▪ occasional; LAS: League of Arab States.

*Causal mechanism 2: The alleviation of commitment problems.* Commitment problems were abundant in Syria. "There is an overall atmosphere of tension, mistrust and fear," reported the UN, leading the combatants to condition any moderation in military posture on disarmament of the adversary.[31] To ameliorate distrust and promote ceasefire compliance, both IOs deployed observation forces. At the superficial level, the two missions operated similarly, following monitoring routines that can be summarized into three sub-strategies of reassurance.

First, they engaged in the verification of ceasefire violations (4). Monitors visited sites around Syria, recording information from observation, forensic investigation, and witness accounts. Second, by being visible in and around conflict hotspots, via patrols, they sought to provide local reassurance (5). Third, they engaged in localized conflict resolution, mediating minor armistices, negotiating prisoner exchanges, and ensuring humanitarian access (6). For example, LAS observers negotiated a withdrawal of troops at one location in January 2012, and UNSMIS brokered a ceasefire in Deir ez-Zor in May 2012.

While both IOs followed similar monitoring routines, they again display variation in scope and proficiency (see Table 2). Most importantly, evidence on deployment locations suggests that UN monitors covered more conflict spots: LAS made infrequent patrols from one site whereas the UN made frequent patrols from seven sites around the country.[32] The UN engaged more extensively in "local stability projects," that is, the brokering of local truces.[33] In addition to such mediation, UNSMIS established a verification mechanism that provided weekly reports on ceasefire breaches and convened a local liaison forum for each of its team sites where "military observers, local government representatives, [and] local opposition leaders" could "clarify issues of concern."[34] Similarly, LAS established an "operations room" in Damascus and communicated publicly on some of its verification activities.[35]

With regard to operational management, both missions displayed shortcomings. The UN suffered from operational restrictions, including shortages of personnel and, as its chief General Mood complained, "passive rules of engagement." Compared with LAS, however, these limitations were minor. As evidenced in a leaked report, the LAS mission was ad hoc, unsystematic, and rife with rivalries.[36] Officials complained about "inadequate administrative and technical preparations" as observers were "not capable" and "did not have prior experience in this field."[37] Several were civilians, which hampered relationships with the Syrian army and to ex-militaries on the rebel side, with negative implications for the quality of verification and monitoring.[38] Further, a large portion of the mission was under-equipped, lacking communication technology, transportation, and personal safety gear, such as protective vests. One observer described how the mission was not so much an IO mission as an aggregate of disparate delegations: "while the Qataris had all the equipment and none of the experience, the Tunisians had all the experience, but none of the equipment."[39]

Field mission capabilities help explain variation in how LAS and the UN operated on the ground. As for LAS, its institutional weakness translated into a makeshift monitoring approach, constraining its execution of the three monitoring sub-strategies. For example, due to its lack of equipment, LAS monitors relied on Syrian forces to provide logistics and support, an arrangement that naturally confined the scope of its monitoring

activities.[40] A paradoxical benefit that flowed from this makeshift approach, however, was speed. Despite having no standing mechanisms to support field missions, LAS could generate and deploy a monitoring contingent within a very short time. In contrast, while it may have deployed somewhat slower, the UN's institutional advantages translated into comparatively better mission coordination and greater freedom of movement inside Syria, which allowed for more encompassing verification and patrolling activities.[41] It also heightened its ability to provide local mediation. For example, in one instance, there was an opportunity to deploy observers to Homs, an opposition stronghold. Interview accounts underline that the skill of UN staff was critical in reacting swiftly to developments in a changing political landscape, and thereby have a positive local effect.

As with mediation, IO preferences influenced the characteristics of monitoring in Syria. Given that both interventions lived and died with unity among IO principals, the durability of all sub-strategies were directly shaped by how preferences evolved in these forums. For LAS, this dependence was exacerbated by how the mission was originally composed. Lacking capabilities to undertake central vetting, all monitors were appointed by individual countries, apparently beholden to their particular concerns and interests in Syria, making the mission particularly sensitive to shifts in IO preferences. As noted earlier, the mission fell apart soon after countries initiated the unilateral withdrawal of their contingents.

## The outcomes: Ultimate failures but variation in short-term conflict abatement

In the final section of the analysis, I consider variation in outcomes, using both qualitative and quantitative evidence, and discuss whether it can be plausibly attributed to the causal chain examined earlier.

*Contractual progress and conflict abatement.* Neither intervention produced a durable solution. This apparent invariance, however, masks differences revealed by micro-evidence on procedural and substantive outcomes.

As for contractual progress, LAS managed to secure a verbal agreement by the regime to its ceasefire plan. However, the regime stalled, using pretexts to effectuate a military strategy. The opposition never agreed, even tacitly. With such spotty commitments, a bilateral ceasefire never materialized, leading to the conclusion that LAS attained very limited contractual progress.

Did LAS reduce fatalities? In a self-assessment report, LAS claimed that its monitors had reduced "acts of violence" and al-Arabi declared that LAS had "undoubtedly" reduced the intensity of fighting. Data show 1118 casualties in December 2011, compared to 972 in the month-long period during which LAS observers were deployed. This represents a slight reduction, from 36.1 to 34.7 per day.

To test whether this reduction was systematic or random, I modeled the intervention effect using ordinary least squares (OLS) and autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) time-series analysis based on de-seasonalized data.[42] OLS models follow the specification $Y_t = \alpha + \beta_1 t + \beta_2 t^2 + \beta_3 t^3 + \beta_4 d_t + \epsilon$, where $Y_t$ is the number of reported fatalities at $t$, the time in days since the start of the time series, and $d_t$ is a dummy variable with the value of 1 if there was an IO deployment at time $t$. To account for autocorrelation

and heteroskedasticity, I employ a Newey West estimator. For the ARIMA models, the parameters (p,d,q) were identified based on fit statistics (Hyndman and Khandakar, 2008) for each IO-specific fatalities series, using the 90 days before each respective ceasefire.[43] Models with minimal specifications are motivated by the twofold assumption that: (1) within the short (120–180 days) time span used in each analysis, the political context is largely held constant; and (2) the impact of non-observed factors, such as gradual shifts in external support, on escalatory or de-escalatory dynamics is captured indirectly via the trend covariates (linear, quadratic, and cubic trend variables in OLS; trend terms in ARIMA).

Table 3 reports the deployment coefficients ($\beta_4$ in the OLS case) for each of the organizations, with indicated time spans.[44] The comparison is before and during deployment within each IO's fatality time series. I find no support for a substantive LAS intervention effect. The relevant coefficient is statistically indistinguishable from zero, regardless of modeling approach, suggesting that the fatality-generating process continued unabated despite the efforts of LAS.

Turning to the UN, I first consider its ability to generate contractual progress between the parties. It did manage to extract commitments from both sides to the April 12 ceasefire, but commitments to the envisioned UN-sponsored process remained vague, tentative, and conditioned on mutually incompatible positions. Until very late in the game, the regime refused to participate in any dialogue until the opposition disarmed. The opposition conditioned dialogue on regime change, which implied, at a minimum, Assad's departure. Since the UN did not fully manage to relax these conditions, it failed to achieve broad contractual progress, leaving the April 12 truce as its major achievement.

As for conflict abatement, the UN's self-assessment was that it had a "dampening effect" and produced a "general reduction in violence." Data support this assessment. The month preceding the April ceasefire had 2576 deaths, for a daily average of 83.1, compared with 1136 (or 36.6 per day) in the 31 days following the ceasefire, a reduction by some 56%. This reduction holds for a second month, that is, the period from early May to early June, but in the third month, casualties again mount, reaching a monthly total of 3141 (or 101.3 per day), indicating that the ceasefire had fallen apart. These results are confirmed by time-series analysis (see Table 3 and Figure 4), which indicate that the UN had a "dampening effect" on conflict intensity.[45] Deployment coefficients for both the one- and two-month durations are negative and significant at conventional

**Table 3.** Effect of IO interventions on daily fatalities in Syria.

| Period of intervention | OLS | | ARIMA | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LAS | UN | LAS | UN |
| One month | −7.8 (8.4) | −85.6*** (14.3) | −15.4 (13.8) | −72.9*** (28.0) |
| Two months | Not deployed | −86.0*** (14.0) | Not deployed | −71.8*** (26.0) |
| Three months | Not deployed | −81.1*** (13.3) | Not deployed | −74.8*** (25.7) |

*Note*: Intervention coefficients from eight separate models (reported in full in the online appendix). Coefficients represent intervention effects relative to the counterfactual of no intervention. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. De-seasonalized and stationarized ($d = 1$) data. *** $p < .01$; * $p < .1$.
LAS: League of Arab States; OLS: ordinary least squares; ARIMA: autoregressive integrated moving average.

levels in both types of models. UN coefficients are also negative for a third month, but the comparison here is against a trend line that may overestimate the expected number of casualties, so this result should be interpreted with caution.

Comparing Figures 3 and 4, which present predicted fatalities based on pre-deployment trends, the difference in effect is easily discernible.[46] For LAS, few observations fall outside the predicted 95% confidence interval, and when they do, they are above the prediction. Contrast this with the UN, where nearly all observations are below the 95% confidence interval, suggesting that a systemic shift in the fatality-generating process is likely to have taken place.

*Assessing the links between interventions and outcomes.* The impact of interventions on the disputants' calculus is difficult to assess with certainty. However, insider observations, combatant references to IO mediation, and the clear co-temporality of the UN intervention and changes in observable behavior indicate that it had a consequence. Interviews
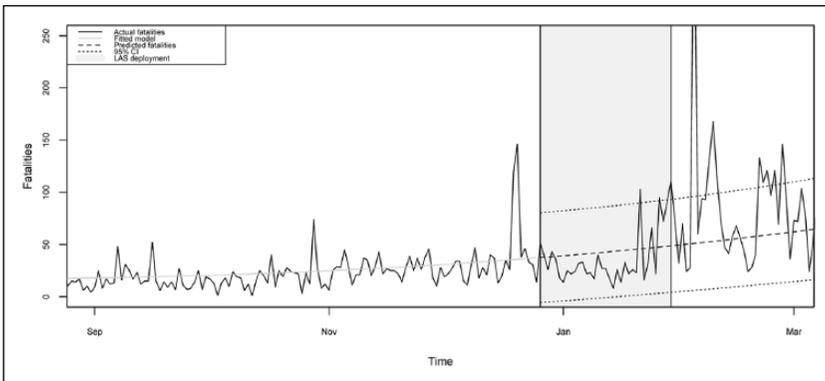


**Figure 3.** Fatalities in Syria from September 2011 to March 2012.
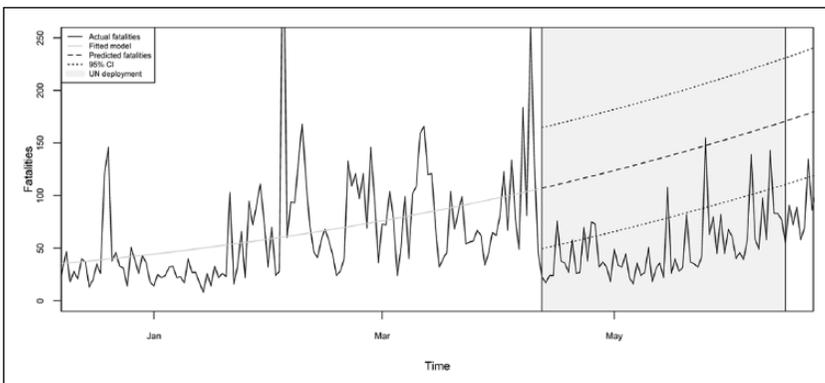*Note*: The shaded period represents LAS deployment. LAS: League of Arab States; CI: confidence interval.



**Figure 4.** Fatalities in Syria from December 2011 to June 2012.
*Note*: The shaded period represents UN deployment. CI: confidence interval.

suggest that UN mediation caused the Syrian regime to update its assessment of the costs of conflict and recognize, for the first time, that the opposition held territory inside Syria.[47] Likewise, the opposition's acceptance of the UN ceasefire is an indication that it had changed from its earlier expectation that the regime would "crumble."[48] As such "corrections" are indications of increased bargaining efficiency, they suggest a plausible link between intervention characteristics and outcomes. Furthermore, several UN interviewees claim that the reduction in fatalities was higher in monitored compared with non-monitored areas, supporting the argument that the temporary and partial reduction in fatalities had to do with the UN intervention.[49]

It deserves to be emphasized that the UN intervention shifted the strategy of *some* actors for *some* of the time, but it did not succeed in shifting aggregate bargaining, across Syria, to a durable non-violent equilibrium. Optimism about military prospects soon re-emerged. "Both sides feel they can't lose," one observer noted in October 2012, indicating that information problems had continued to incentivize violence.[50] Mediation effects also varied across opposition groups, with moderates seemingly more receptive than actors with extreme preferences (e.g. al Nusra Front) or lower costs of conflicts (like the expatriate opposition). These actors disproportionately discounted war costs, leading them to privilege violence over peaceful engagement.

Consideration of alternative explanations further reinforces the impression of a plausible causal link. In the quantitative assessment, I sought to correct for confounding via de-seasonalization by narrowing the time frame and including trend variables that capture the impact of non-observables on conflict intensity. While these adjustments are insufficient to rule out residue confounding, the qualitative evidence gathered for this study, which is quite diverse, suggests few other rapidly shifting variables that may have caused the variation outlined earlier. I will discuss three possible exceptions.[51]

A first possibility is non-observed and sudden shifts in external support by the parties' international patrons (Regan, 2002). If a patron dramatically increased its support or significantly reduced it, this could possibly generate the observed shifts in the fatality-generating process. The evidence collected here cannot affirm this as a potential independent explanation. External interests remained remarkably stable throughout this period, with one camp favoring and supporting the government, and another favoring and supporting the opposition. Rather, the evidence, in particular from the interviews, suggests that the principal part of international leverage — including its temporary shifts — was channeled via the two IOs according to the patterns of waxing and waning unity within the two IOs observed earlier.

A second possible explanation relates to mediator bias. While the impact of mediator bias remains disputed (Kydd, 2003; Svensson, 2007), the UN may have been advantaged by its perception as "reasonably impartial" in the eyes of the Syrian government.[52] In contrast, Syria's relationship to LAS had soured since the start of the conflict as the organization, influenced by new narratives and leaders who had come to the forefront as a result of the Arab uprisings, adopted an anti-regime position. The regime responded by treating LAS as an outlaw organization. While the overall effect of these relationships is inconclusive, it cannot be excluded that they provided a comparative benefit for the UN and, hence, that they present a complementary explanation for its somewhat greater effectiveness.

Finally, there is a possibility that the UN's greater impact flowed not from its greater capabilities, but from the fact that it intervened after LAS. Indeed, it has been shown that earlier mediation episodes can influence later episodes (Bercovitch and Gartner, 2006). The direction of such interdependence is not clear. An earlier intervention may establish connections and norms that provide an advantage for subsequent interventions, but it may also sour relationships, alienate combatants to negotiated solutions, and lay bare insurmountable differences. Empirical tests (Bercovitch and Gartner, 2006) show that prior success produces an upward bias toward the likelihood of success, and, likewise, a failure increases the odds of subsequent failure. Based on this quantitative finding, the expectation would be that the weak LAS performance biased the likelihood of UN success downwards, leading us to underestimate the "true" effect of the latter. The qualitative evidence aligns with this assessment but provides nuance. Indicating the possibility of a learning effect, interviews suggest that the UN may have sought to adjust for some of the mistakes by LAS. They also indicate, however, that UN mediation was based on its own local networks (especially regarding outreach to the opposition) and that its mission planning was not inspired by LAS as much as by its standing routines for mission deployment. In addition, the regime was embittered by LAS mediation and viewed future efforts with skepticism. As one of the interviewees stated, "Syrians had seen one mission come and fail. Why would another, similar mission, succeed?"[53] A balanced assessment of interdependencies based on the case-specific evidence therefore suggests that interdependencies were marginal and do not threaten the conclusion regarding outcomes.

## Conclusion

The following patterns of covariation emerge from the combined evidence. First, with regard to long-term outcomes, institutional capabilities have little explanatory value: irrespective of capabilities, both IOs failed to stem the bloodshed in Syria. Preference alignment, on the other hand, is not only correlated with the onset and termination of interventions, but seems to have a bearing on long-term outcomes. As interventions were terminated due to lacking membership unity, so was their chance of ultimately achieving a settlement in Syria. Second, with regard to short-term outcomes, that is, temporary shifts in the number of actors relying on violent bargaining strategies, capabilities have a clear effect. Higher capabilities, as in the UN case, are associated with a higher impact, whereas lower capabilities, as in the case of LAS, are associated with a lower impact. Third, the effect of capabilities on short-term outcomes is conditioned on the nature of membership preferences: at times when there is unity, the effect of interventions is sensitive to capabilities; at times when unity is lacking, the effect of interventions is invariant to capabilities. This suggests an interaction between preference alignment and capabilities, where the effect of the latter is conditioned on the former.

Taken as a whole, the evidence from Syria suggests that effective interventions require a combination of high capabilities and lasting preferences in favor of implementing an intervention. Lacking capabilities, preferences would matter less; lacking preference unity, capabilities will not suffice. This suggests that both capabilities and preferences are insufficient but necessary conditions for intervention success.

Interpretation of the results should be made in consideration of a few caveats. While observations on causal mechanisms should be generalizable to other peace-brokering IOs, the invariance of long-term outcomes in Syria implies that this study does not strictly allow for inference regarding intervention success, defined as full and durable settlement. Another limitation is that the measurement of bargaining variables, specifically, actors' beliefs, may be distorted by strategic misrepresentation. I have sought to minimize this problem by using multiple data sources, including insider interviews, as well as by following a stringent research design. A final caveat is that the analysis cannot determine the relative explanatory weight of specific institutional capabilities since the UN scored higher in both dimensions.

The presented results have three key implications for the literature. First, they suggest that there are plausible mechanisms to support the causal nature of previously identified institutional correlations (Boehmer et al., 2004; Hansen et al., 2008). This was done by disaggregating the general bargaining mechanisms — which are routinely used in the literature, but at a very general and abstract level — into more specific mechanisms, focused on the sub-strategies of mediation and monitoring. By linking these sub-strategies to institutional characteristics on one side and to variation in outcomes on the other side, I was able to trace pathways involved in IO conflict management in Syria.

Second, they demonstrate that mediation strategy, frequently used as an independent variable in studies of mediation outcomes (Greig and Diehl, 2012), is not a choice, but dependent on institutional resources and, in particular for IOs, member state preferences. Much of the literature suggests that the choice of mediation strategy is subjected only to resource constraints (e.g. Savun, 2008), but this study demonstrates that strategy selection is conditioned on interaction between institutional resources and member state politics. Hence, mediation strategies must be understood as both resource- and preference-dependent, with variation along these two dimensions shaping outcomes.

Third, the results suggest that shifts in member state preferences can explain some "time-inconsistency problems," that is, why mediation does well to facilitate short-term peace but frequently fails to deliver a durable resolution (Beardsley, 2008). In cases where IO interventions rest on fragile compromises among IO principals, as in Syria, we are not likely to observe more than temporary conflict abatement. Disputants on the ground may react positively to the short-lived and artificial incentive structures that are brought into place while the intervention enjoys broad-based support, but they will likely revert to their previous, violent strategies once that support deteriorates.

Taken together, the conclusions underline the importance of the improved theorizing and measurement of IO heterogeneity in conflict management scholarship, especially in the large-*N* tradition. Quantitative studies naturally need to rely on parsimonious measures, but if they are so parsimonious that they fail to capture institutional diversity, they are very likely to lead to biased results. For example, if we seek to study the impact of IOs on wars using historical data that cover decades or even longer periods of time, as is routine in the discipline, we need measures that reflect how IO characteristics changed over that time. Static measures of institutional capabilities based on some average or maximum amount of institutionalization (e.g. Boehmer et al, 2004; see also, more recently, Tir and Karreth, 2018) are insufficient when used in longer time series. Similarly, if we seek to measure the impact of institutional capabilities, we also need to consider,

and measure, how those very same capabilities, via the causal mechanisms discussed here, depend on the leverage and legitimacy that broad preference alignment can bring.

In a wider light, the results indicate some conclusions regarding burden-sharing between the UN and regional organizations. By pointing to the value of institutional capabilities, the analysis here may seem to suggest that the UN, the most resourced of all peace-brokering IOs, should be shouldering the majority of, or even all, IO civil war interventions. All else equal, delegating the task to a less-resourced regional organization would only seem to invite a higher likelihood of failure. An important conclusion of the analysis here, however, is that the value of higher capabilities is conditioned on preference alignment among IO principals. Alignment unlocks the leverage and legitimacy that underpin the operational side of interventions. With an international system trending toward increasing multipolarity and contestation of the norms surrounding IO interventions, it is not an unlikely scenario that preference alignment in the UN Security Council, which has been difficult to attain in the past, will become rarer. This means that despite its stronger capabilities, the UN might not always be the most suitable vehicle for civil war interventions, and that despite their weaker instruments, regional organizations may become more important.

The experience of LAS in Syria shows that regional organizations are not always ready to step into those shoes. To enhance their ability to do so, the results of this study suggest that reformers should focus on two key areas. A first area of reform would be to strengthen the material capabilities of regional organizations, enhancing the ability of their secretariats to execute mediation and other forms of conflict management. There is no shortage of proposals or plans in this regard, and even though there is considerable variation across regions, several IOs, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, have taken steps forward in recent years.

A second area of reform, more important and more challenging, relates to member state commitments. Syria demonstrates that capabilities can make a difference at the margin but also suggests that intervention success is premised on member state alignment. When IO memberships fail to unite broadly behind an intervention — thereby undercutting its material support, leverage, and legitimacy — interventions have lower chances of success. Cultivating preferences in support of a specific intervention at a specific place is a political task, little of which can be designed in advance. However, member state commitments can be encouraged in the long term. The strengthening of normative and regulatory frameworks, such as charters for democratic transitions or human rights, or even more specific security protocols, can help solidify expectations that an IO's membership is committed to protecting peace and security within its domain.

## Funding

## Notes

1. Scholars (e.g. Gleditsch et al., 2014; Walter, 2009) have called for greater attention to the micro-dynamics of conflict resolution, especially within the bargaining approach. The case-based literature on IO interventions (e.g. Autesserre, 2010; Howard, 2008; Stedman et al.,

2002) provides a wealth of causal process observations but remains focused on post-conflict peace implementation, especially peacekeeping, overlooking interventions earlier in the conflict cycle, such as mediation and ceasefire monitoring.

2.  For a discussion of alternative mechanisms, see Braddon and Hartley (2011).
3.  Shannon (2009) counts 25 such IOs, including LAS and the UN.
4.  As argued by Beardsley (2008: 729), "from a probabilistic standpoint, the likelihood of crisis actors being willing to sign an agreement should increase when the bargaining process is more efficient."
5.  The online appendix provides a list of principal documents and news sources, and an anonymized list of interviewees. These sources are only referenced when quoted.
6.  The Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria (available at: http://vdc-sy.org) and the Syrian Revolution Database (available at: http://syrianshuhada.com).
7.  Arab League Resolution 7438.
8.  UN S/Res/2042 and S/Res/2043.
9.  UN (2012) S/2012/363.
10. In January 2019, the DPA was integrated into the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA).
11. The capability difference between the UN and LAS is reflected in staff numbers. Whereas the UN had several hundreds of staff (the DPA alone had about 250 staff in 2012) devoted to political analysis and mission support, LAS had only a handful.
12. In January 2019, the DPKO was integrated into the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and the DFS into the Department of Operational Services (DOS).
13. UN official 3.
14. UN official 2.
15. See Annan (2012).
16. LAS official 1. See also: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15607681 (accessed November 18, 2013).
17. It is noteworthy that the strategy of counseling on the costs of conflict extended to the disputants' international patrons. For example, in meetings with President Putin of Russia, Annan warned that "Assad will drag you down with him" (UN official 2), implying that continued Russian sponsorship of the Syrian regime would have costly consequences.
18. Hill (2015) relates how Annan stressed the importance of a simple plan to coordinate attention on a few key points.
19. LAS official 1; UN official 3.
20. UNSC briefing, March 16, 2012.
21. UN (2012) S/2012/618; interviews with UN officials.
22. UN official 6; letter from the Secretary General, April 10, 2012.
23. LAS expert 1.
24. LAS monitors recognized this mismatch, noting that "there is an armed entity that is not mentioned in the [Arab Action Plan]" in an implicit reference to the armed opposition. LAS mission report, para. 71.
25. UN official 1; see also Hill (2015).
26. UN official 2.
27. UN official 4.
28. UN official 2.
29. UN official 3.
30. UN officials 2 and 3.
31. UN (2012) S/2012/363.
32. For deployment details, see Arab League (2012: 20) and UN (2012) S/2012/523.

33.  UN officials 1 and 9.
34.  UN (2012) S/2012/250, para. 23.
35.  LAS mission report, para. 22.
36.  LAS mission report, para. 45–48.
37.  LAS mission report, para. 45–48.
38.  Diplomat 2.
39.  LAS expert 1.
40.  Regional expert 3.
41.  UN official 1.
42.  De-seasonalization used a longer time series, spanning the years 2011–2016, and seasonal decomposition tools provided in the R *forecast* package (Hyndman and Khandakar, 2008).
43.  These tests suggest that the LAS time series follows an ARIMA (0,1,2) pattern, whereas the UN series follows an ARIMA (0,1,1) pattern. Both time series were differenced ($d = 1$) to attain stationarity. Fit statistics and deployment coefficients for alternative ARIMA specifications are reported in Tables A3 and A4 in the online appendix.
44.  The online appendix reports full models.
45.  This result is robust to the more demanding test of shifting the intervention backwards by two weeks in order to consider possible strategic escalations in anticipation of the ceasefire.
46.  Predicted fatalities are based on models fitted to data up until the point of deployment.
47.  UN officials 1, 3, 4 and 7.
48.  Regional expert 2.
49.  UN officials 1, 4 and 9. As more data on fatalities become available, it may be possible to undertake a spatially disaggregated analysis of the relative impact on fatalities.
50.  Regional expert 1. See also UN (2012) S/2012/618: "The Government is convinced that it will be able to succeed militarily against the opposition.… At the same time, the opposition remains equally convinced that its military efforts will succeed in toppling the regime and refuses to accept the Government preconditions for dialogue."
51.  Further research should be undertaken to assess the weight of additional explanations for the observed patterns. These may include examination of the impact of extreme preferences (Fearon, 1995), state sponsors (Salehyan, 2010), or spoiler dynamics (Cunningham, 2006). These are likely complementary explanations to the account of ultimate failure in Syria, but they are unlikely to explain the observed variation in strategies and short-term outcomes across cases as there was little variation in these factors in the studied period.
52.  UN officials 1 and 2.
53.  UN official 4.

## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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