

Classifying Armed Non-State Actors in National Security Governance: A PRISMA-Based Systematic Literature Review of Competing Classification Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically examines how armed non-state actors (ANSAs) are classified within national security governance and what legal and policy consequences follow from competing classification frameworks. A Systematic Literature Review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, using the Scopus database and a three-block Boolean search that combined actor terms, classification terms, and governance terms. Eligibility was restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2026 that explicitly analyze armed non-state actors in relation to at least one of five dimensions: governance practices, institutionalization, criminal-political hybridization, securitization, or state capacity. Of 451 records identified, 85 were retained for retrieval, 74 were assessed in full text, and 63 articles were included in a theory-informed narrative synthesis. The findings reveal no dominant or unified classification model. The literature is instead distributed across five competing frameworks: governance-oriented or quasi-state actor approaches (28.6%), terrorism-based approaches (23.8%), criminal or hybrid criminal models (19.0%), non-international armed conflict or IHL-based perspectives (15.9%), and state-capacity or limited-statehood frameworks (12.7%). These frameworks differ not in the empirical behavior they observe but in their classificatory criteria, normative foundations, applicable legal regimes, and institutional consequences: governance-oriented studies privilege *de facto* authority and institutionalization; terrorism and criminal frameworks privilege threat prevention and prosecutorial mechanisms; IHL-based approaches privilege the organization threshold and the legality of force; and state-capacity models treat classification as relationally conditioned by areas of limited statehood. On this basis, the study proposes a multidimensional governance-sensitive framework structured along four analytical dimensions, namely organizational institutionalization, exercised governance capacity, the nature of the articulated political claim, and state capacity as a contextual moderator. Read jointly rather than sequentially, these dimensions generate a classificatory profile rather than a single label, allowing legal qualification and institutional response to be derived from observable attributes instead of from the disciplinary entry point of the analyst.

Keywords: Armed Non-state Actors, Classification Frameworks, National Security Governance, Securitization, Rebel Governance, International Humanitarian law.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) have become central actors in contemporary security governance, challenging the traditional state-centric structure of international law. Across different regions, states confront organized groups that employ violence while advancing political, ideological, or economic claims. Yet the most consequential question is not only how these groups operate, but how they are classified. Whether labeled as separatists, terrorists, insurgents, or criminal organizations, such categorizations function as more than descriptive terms; they shape the legal regime applied, define the scope of state authority, and influence the legitimacy of coercive

responses in both domestic and international arenas.

Legal classification is therefore not a neutral juridical exercise. It operates at the intersection of sovereignty, security, and governance. On the one hand, states invoke territorial integrity and national security to justify coercive measures against armed challengers. On the other hand, certain armed movements articulate claims grounded in self-determination or political representation, invoking normative principles embedded in international law. This structural tension creates an interpretative grey zone in which legal doctrine, political interests, and security narratives converge. In practice, classification reflects not only observable criteria such as organizational structure, targets of violence, or territorial control, but also broader processes of securitization in which political actors frame a situation as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures (Constantin & Carlà, 2025; Kumar et al., 2025). The practical stakes are substantial. Classification determines whether a situation falls under international humanitarian law, counterterrorism legislation, domestic criminal law, or hybrid governance mechanisms; it shapes which institutions take the lead, whether armed forces, law enforcement agencies, or specialized counterterrorism bodies; and it conditions the balance between security imperatives and human rights protections (Fortin, 2022; Jupp, 2022; Page & Williams, 2022).

Scholarship on armed non-state actors has expanded considerably over the past two decades, but it has done so along separate tracks. A first and now substantial track documents a shift from violence-centered to governance-centered analysis. Early work, rooted in civil war theory and insurgency studies, conceptualized armed groups primarily as violent challengers to the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force, with territorial control treated as the principal explanatory variable for civilian collaboration, repression, and conflict duration. More recent contributions instead conceptualize ANSAs as political actors capable of constructing governance systems and exercising de facto authority. Studies of the Islamic State as an "emerging-state actor" (Clancy, 2018), of insurgent courts in Syria (Schwab, 2018), of de facto sovereignty and symbolic governance in LTTE-controlled territory (Terpstra & Frerks, 2018), and of the negotiated character of rebel order (Worrall, 2017) demonstrate that many armed groups institutionalize control through bureaucratic development, taxation, judicial structures, welfare provision, and sovereignty claims. That governance is contested rather than merely tolerated is underscored by work on state campaigns designed specifically to disrupt rebel administrative capacity (Martinez & Eng, 2018).

A second track examines institutionalization as a temporal and cyclical process rather than a fixed condition. Armed groups frequently begin as insurgent challengers seeking territorial footholds and, once consolidation occurs, transition into structured governance actors before fragmenting, adapting, or being delegitimized (Bamber-Zryd, 2022). Governance institutions such as dispute-resolution mechanisms, taxation systems, and service provision enhance internal legitimacy and reduce reliance on coercion alone, and that legitimacy is typically performance-based rather than externally conferred (Schwab, 2018; Skjelderup, 2020; Terpstra, 2022). The durability of such arrangements is visible in post-conflict settings, where the institutional legacies of rebel rule persist long after the armed organization itself has been defeated or transformed (Rickard & Bakke, 2021; Loyle & Onder, 2024; Lambert et al., 2025). Crucially, this track has also destabilized the assumption that governance requires territorial monopoly: research on the PKK in 1970s Turkey (O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023), the M-19 in urban Colombia (O'Connor, 2023), and ULFA in Assam (Waterman, 2023) shows that clandestine and non-territorial groups also construct regulatory authority.

A third track focuses on criminal governance and hybrid armed formations. Studies of politicized crime (Badillo-Sarmiento & Mijares, 2021), the crime-governance nexus in Mexico (Pansters, 2018; Herrera, 2023), militias and self-defense groups in Michoacán and Rio de Janeiro (Díaz & Alves, 2022; de Miranda et al., 2022), post-demobilization criminal orders in Colombia (Durán-Martínez, 2024), hybrid governance in urban Brazil (Souza Pimenta et al., 2021; Quirino, 2025), and urban security breakdown in Ecuador (Mantilla et al., 2023) show that criminal organizations routinely regulate markets, impose informal taxation, arbitrate disputes, and provide protection. The reverse movement is equally documented: insurgent organizations finance themselves through war economies, illicit resource extraction, and kidnapping (Bojičić-Dželilović & Turkmani, 2018; Haass, 2021; Liu & Eisner, 2024). Taken together, this track establishes that categorical distinctions between "terrorist," "insurgent," and "criminal" actors frequently fail to capture organizations that combine ideological narratives, economic extraction, and governance practices simultaneously.

A fourth track treats state capacity as a structural condition shaping the emergence and consolidation of

armed authority. Variations in institutional performance, border control, crisis response, and service delivery significantly influence the expansion or contraction of ANSA authority (Glawion & de Vries, 2018; Koehnlein & Koren, 2022). Pandemics, decentralization, economic collapse, and prolonged conflict alter the balance between state and non-state authority (Davis & Hilgers, 2022; Bonilla-Calle et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2023), while porous and weakly administered border spaces generate conditions in which armed and illicit actors operate with limited interference (Aniche et al., 2021; Ojo, 2020). Within this track, the concept of areas of limited statehood explains how authority is fragmented or negotiated rather than monopolized, and ANSAs are treated as substitute or competing authority structures rather than as free-standing units of analysis.

A fifth track, comparatively thinner, addresses the legal framing and securitization of armed actors directly. Legal categories such as terrorist organization, insurgent movement, or criminal group are shaped by securitization dynamics that reflect political priorities as much as empirical assessments of organizational capacity (Constantin & Carlà, 2025; Lekunze, 2023), and are reinforced discursively through media framing (Kumar et al., 2025). Legal scholarship within the corpus examines the consequences of these categorizations for remedies and accountability where armed groups administer justice (Fortin, 2022), for victims' rights in criminal proceedings (Jupp, 2022), for the legality and assessment of force (Page & Williams, 2022), and for the negotiated de-escalation arrangements that fall between war and peace (Sosnowski, 2020).

Read together, these five tracks describe a field in conceptual transformation but still without a consolidated analytical map. Three gaps follow. First, there is no integrative classification framework that maps ANSAs according to governance capacity and institutionalization rather than violent orientation alone, with the consequence that empirically similar organizations receive incompatible legal qualifications depending on the discipline of the observer. Second, the relationship between securitization processes and observed governance practices remains insufficiently synthesized: governance-centered empirical work and securitization-centered legal-political work rarely speak to each other within the same analytical frame. Third, although state capacity is widely acknowledged as a moderating variable, comparative models linking institutional strength to ANSA transformation, and to the legal regime that consequently applies, remain underdeveloped. What is missing, in short, is not further case evidence but a synthesis that makes explicit the criteria, normative foundations, and policy consequences that distinguish one classification framework from another.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions. First, what conceptual and legal criteria are used in the academic literature to classify armed non-state actors, and how do these criteria differ across competing frameworks? Second, how do theoretical frameworks, particularly sovereignty, self-determination, and securitization, shape and legitimize these classifications? Third, what governance and policy implications follow from adopting one classification framework rather than another in the context of national security? To answer these questions, the study conducts a PRISMA-based systematic literature review of Scopus-indexed scholarship and synthesizes it through a theory-informed narrative approach. Its contribution is threefold: it provides a comparative anatomy of the five classification frameworks that currently structure the field, it maps the legal qualification and institutional consequences attached to each, and it proposes a multidimensional governance-sensitive framework that derives classification from observable organizational attributes rather than from the disciplinary entry point of the analyst.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol in order to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor. The SLR design was selected because the scholarship on armed non-state actors (ANSAs) is dispersed across insurgency studies, criminal governance research, international humanitarian law, and public policy analysis, and because the research questions concern the structure of that scholarship rather than the magnitude of an effect. For the same reason, the study does not perform a statistical meta-analysis. It adopts theory-informed narrative synthesis, which is appropriate where included studies are conceptually heterogeneous and where the analytical objective is to reconstruct competing classificatory logics rather than to pool comparable estimates. The review proceeded through the four sequential PRISMA stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

Identification was carried out in the Scopus database, selected as the primary data source because of its

comprehensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals in security studies, political science, international relations, law, and public policy, and because its analytics functions permit systematic description of the retrieved corpus. The search strategy was constructed as three Boolean blocks intersected by the AND operator: an actor block, a classification block, and a governance block. The full search string was: ("armed group" OR "non-state actor" OR "insurgent" OR "militant" OR "rebel") AND ("terroris*" OR "separat*" OR "political violence" OR "insurgency" OR "criminal") AND ("national security" OR "securitization" OR "governance"). Truncation was applied to the classification block so that morphological variants such as terrorism, terrorist, separatism, and separatist were captured within a single query. The search was executed on title, abstract, and keyword fields and was restricted to the publication window 2010–2026, a period during which counterterrorism designation regimes, criminal governance scholarship, and governance-based analyses of armed groups underwent substantial development. The window was set a priori; the earliest study that ultimately satisfied all eligibility criteria was published in 2017, so the included corpus spans 2017–2025 rather than the full search window.

Eligibility criteria were specified before screening. A record was included if it was, first, a peer-reviewed journal article indexed in Scopus; second, published in English, a restriction adopted to preserve comparability of legal and conceptual terminology across the corpus; third, explicitly concerned with armed non-state actors, insurgent groups, militant organizations, or hybrid armed formations as its object of analysis rather than as background context; and fourth, engaged with at least one of five substantive dimensions, namely governance practices, institutionalization, criminal-political hybridization, securitization, or state capacity. A record was excluded if it addressed interstate war without non-state actors; if it provided descriptive conflict narrative without analytical argument; if it was an editorial, book review, conference paper, book chapter, or other non-peer-reviewed output; or if it addressed military tactics or operational technique without governance or classification implications. Records were also excluded at the identification stage where the full text could not be obtained or where bibliographic information was incomplete, since neither coding nor verification would have been possible.

The screening and eligibility sequence is reported in full in Figure 1. The search returned 451 records. Automated and bibliographic filters applied at the identification stage removed 141 records outside the publication window, 114 records of ineligible document type, 10 records at an ineligible publication stage, 6 non-English records, and 95 records that were inaccessible in full text or bibliographically incomplete, leaving 85 records retained for retrieval. Title and abstract screening against the eligibility criteria excluded a further 11 records that did not engage the governance, securitization, or classification dimensions of armed non-state actors, yielding 74 articles assessed in full text. Full-text assessment excluded 11 additional articles that, on closer reading, addressed military tactics, interstate conflict, or descriptive conflict narrative without analytical relevance to governance or classification. Sixty-three articles were included in the final synthesis.

Data were extracted from each included article into a structured coding sheet recording bibliographic details; the empirical case or region examined; the conceptual vocabulary used to designate the armed actor; the classificatory criteria applied, whether ideological, territorial, governance-based, economic, or legal; the theoretical framework invoked; any legal instrument, doctrine, or jurisprudence relied upon; and the governance or policy consequences the study attributed to the classification adopted. Coding proceeded in two cycles. The first cycle was deductive and applied a provisional coding frame derived from the conceptual map generated through Scopus AI visualization, in which national security governance emerged as the central node connecting three thematic clusters: criminalization, linked to preventive justice and criminal justice systems; terrorism, linked to radicalization and counterterrorism; and separatism, linked to violence control, evidentiary thresholds, and multi-agency public policy coordination. The second cycle was inductive and permitted categories not anticipated by the concept map to emerge from the corpus itself. Two such categories were generated in this cycle and retained: an international humanitarian law category, in which the classificatory question concerns the organization threshold and the intensity of hostilities rather than criminality or ideology, and a state-capacity category, in which classification is treated as relationally conditioned by institutional weakness. Each article was assigned to the framework that governed its principal classificatory claim, so that the categories are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive at the level of primary framework; where an article engaged governance capacity as a secondary analytical dimension, this was recorded separately and is reported as such in the results.

Synthesis was conducted by constant comparison across the coded material, first within each framework to

establish its internal classificatory logic, normative foundation, and characteristic legal anchor, and then across frameworks to identify points of convergence, incompatibility, and unresolved tension. Where the reviewed literature invokes positive legal standards, those standards were verified against the primary instruments and jurisprudence themselves rather than against the reviewed authors' paraphrase, and are cited accordingly; the distinction between *lex lata*, doctrinal interpretation, and scholarly proposal is signaled explicitly in the analysis that follows. Three limitations of this design should be stated at the outset. The review draws on a single database, so scholarship indexed only in Web of Science, HeinOnline, or regional repositories is not represented. The English-language restriction excludes legal scholarship published in Spanish, Portuguese, French, Bahasa Indonesia, and Arabic that is directly relevant to several of the cases discussed. And coding and synthesis were performed by the research team without independent double-coding, so category assignment reflects a documented but ultimately single analytic judgment; the coding frame and extraction sheet are retained to permit audit.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 451 records identified through the Scopus search, 63 peer-reviewed journal articles satisfied all eligibility criteria and were included in the synthesis. The selection sequence, including the number of records excluded at each stage and the reasons for exclusion, is reported in Figure 1. The proportionally small number of exclusions at the screening and eligibility stages, 11 of 85 and 11 of 74 respectively, indicates that the three-block Boolean strategy was thematically precise: the great majority of records that survived the bibliographic filters were in fact concerned with the intersection of armed groups, governance, and national security rather than with adjacent topics.

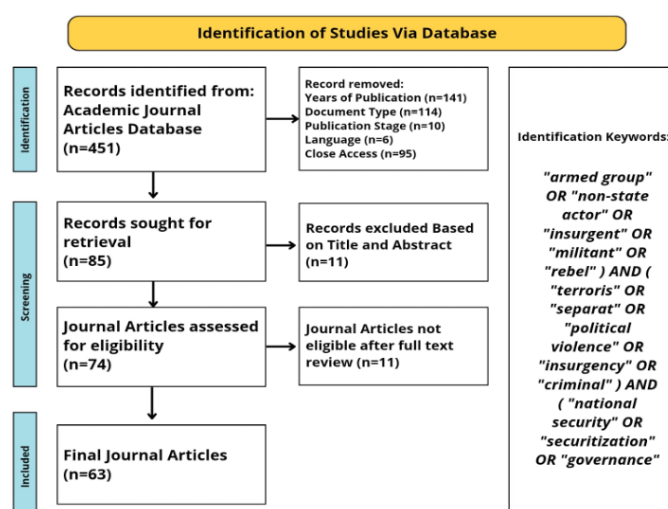


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Article Selection Process.

The included corpus is reported in full in Table 1. It spans nine publication years and a wide range of empirical contexts, including the Middle East (Syria, Iraq), the Sahel and West Africa (Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia), Latin America (Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador), South and Southeast Asia (India, Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Philippines), Turkey, and Northern Ireland, as well as transnational and urban conflict settings. Temporally, output rises from a single article in 2017 to eleven in 2018, falls to two in 2019, recovers to six in 2020 and six in 2021, peaks at twelve in 2022, and remains substantial thereafter with nine articles in 2023, six in 2024, and ten in 2025 (Figure 3). The pattern indicates sustained rather than episodic scholarly attention, with a marked post-2020 concentration that coincides with pandemic-era research on state capacity and non-state authority.

Three further descriptive observations can be made briefly, since they characterize the field's institutional location rather than its analytical content. Publication is geographically concentrated: the United Kingdom and the United States are the largest contributors, followed by the Netherlands, then Brazil and Germany,

with Norway, Colombia, Spain, and Canada forming a smaller tier (Figure 5). Institutional concentration is moderate rather than hierarchical, with Utrecht University and the Leibniz-Institute für Globale und Regionale Studien leading, followed by the London School of Economics and Political Science and Wageningen University & Research, and with a second cluster that includes Brazilian and Norwegian institutions alongside Harvard University and the University of Leeds (Figure 6). Disciplinary location is overwhelmingly social-scientific, with the Social Sciences accounting for roughly two-thirds of subject-area assignments and Arts and Humanities for a further eighth (Figure 7); the residual categories reflect Scopus's practice of assigning journals to multiple subject areas and should not be read as substantive disciplinary contributions to this literature. Publication outlets are dispersed across specialist and generalist journals rather than concentrated in a single venue (Figure 4). This dispersion is analytically relevant in one respect only, and it is a respect that anticipates the substantive finding below: the debate on classification is distributed across disciplinary and methodological traditions rather than consolidated within a single epistemic platform.

The conceptual map generated at the coding stage, reported in Figure 2, situates these studies within a single structure. National security governance emerges as the central analytical node, linked to three dominant thematic clusters: criminalization, which branches into preventive justice and criminal justice systems; terrorism, which branches into radicalization and counterterrorism; and separatism, which branches into violence control, evidentiary thresholds, and multi-agency public policy coordination. The clusters are connected rather than discrete, which is the first indication that classification operates within a governance architecture rather than as a free-standing descriptive label.

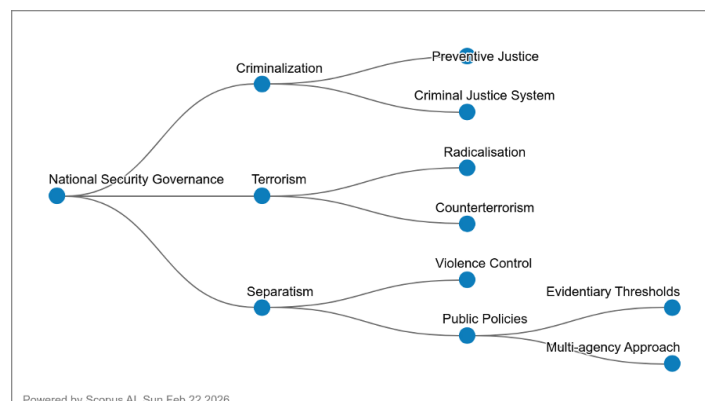


Figure 2. Conceptual Mapping of National Security Governance and Armed Non-State Actors (Scopus AI Visualization)

Table 1. Selected Articles

No	Author(s)	Year	Title
1	Clancy, Timothy	2018	Theory of an emerging-state actor: The Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) case
2	Bamber-Zryd, Matthew	2022	Cyclical jihadist governance: the Islamic State governance cycle in Iraq and Syria
3	Badillo-Sarmiento, Reynell; Mijares, Víctor M.	2021	Politicised crime: causes for the discursive politicisation of organised crime in Latin America
4	Schwab, Regine	2018	Insurgent courts in civil wars: the three pathways of (trans)formation in today's Syria (2012–2017)
5	Terpstra, Niels; Frerks, Georg E.	2018	Governance Practices and Symbolism: De facto sovereignty and public authority in 'Tigerland'
6	Fortin, Katharine M.A.	2022	The Procedural Right to a Remedy When the State has Left the Building? A Reflection on Armed Groups, Courts and Domestic Law
7	Martinez, José Ciro; Eng, Brent	2018	Stifling stateness: The Assad regime's campaign against rebel governance

No	Author(s)	Year	Title
8	David, Ojochenemi James	2025	Boko Haram and Niger Delta Avengers: unraveling the greed-need-creed spectrum in Nigeria's security-development nexus
9	Haass, Felix	2021	Insurgency and Ivory: The Territorial Origins of Illicit Resource Extraction in Civil Conflicts
10	Skjelderup, Michael Weddegjerde	2020	Jihadi governance and traditional authority structures: al-Shabaab and Clan Elders in Southern Somalia, 2008-2012
11	Flynn, D. J.; Stewart, Megan A.	2018	Secessionist social services reduce the public costs of civilian killings: Experimental evidence from the United States and the United Kingdom
12	Worrall, James E.	2017	(Re-)Emergent Orders: Understanding the Negotiation(s) of Rebel Governance
13	O'Connor, Francis Patrick; Jongerden, Joost	2023	Rebel governance without territorial control: The experiences of the PKK in 1970s Turkey
14	Waterman, Alex	2023	The shadow of 'the boys:' rebel governance without territorial control in Assam's ULFA insurgency
15	Díaz, Antonio Fuentes; Alves, José Cláudio Souza	2022	Michoacan and Rio de Janeiro: Criminal Governance, Social Control and Obtaining Profit and Political Power by Armed Self-Defense Groups and Militias
16	Souza Pimenta, Marília Carolina B.; Suarez, Marcial Alécio Garcia; Ferreira, Marcos Alan S.V.	2021	Hybrid governance as a dynamic hub for violent non-state actors: Examining the case of Rio de Janeiro
17	Rubin, Michael A.	2020	Rebel Territorial Control and Civilian Collective Action in Civil War: Evidence from the Communist Insurgency in the Philippines
18	Pansters, Wil G.	2018	Drug trafficking, the informal order, and caciques. Reflections on the crime-governance nexus in Mexico
19	Londoño Bedoya, David Andrés; Padilla-Bueno, Maritza; Areiza-Padilla, Jose Andres; Veas-Gonzalez, Iván A.	2025	The denying threat to national security and defense: Hezbollah's presence in Colombia
20	Ripamonti, Denise; Dowd, Caitriona; Patel, Ronak Bhailal; Gleason, Kelsey M.; Polzin, Samuel S.	2024	Non-state armed groups as food system actors in Somalia and Haiti
21	O'Connor, Francis Patrick	2023	Clandestinity and insurgent consolidation: The M-19's rebel governance in urban Colombia
22	Terpstra, Niels	2022	Opportunity Structures, Rebel Governance, and Disputed Leadership: The Taliban's Upsurge in Kunduz Province, Afghanistan, 2011–2015
23	Rickard, Kit; Bakke, Kristin M.	2021	Legacies of Wartime Order: Punishment Attacks and Social Control in Northern Ireland
24	Ojo, John Sunday	2020	Governing "Ungoverned Spaces" in the Foliage of Conspiracy: Toward (Re)ordering Terrorism, from Boko Haram Insurgency, Fulani Militancy to Banditry in Northern Nigeria
25	Lambert, Laurent A.; Tayah, Jad; Adam, Hamed A; Esmail, Suhail	2025	From rebel governance to energy and environmental policies in a post-war setting: The case of the Taliban in Afghanistan
26	Durán-Martínez, Angélica	2024	Path-Dependent Criminality: Criminal Governance after the Paramilitary Demobilization in Cali and Medellín
27	Herrera, Joel Salvador	2023	Rejecting the Social Contract: Criminal Governance, Agrarian Inequalities and the Autodefensa Movement in Michoacán, Mexico
28	Bøås, Morten; Cissé, Abdoul Wakhab; Mahamane, Laouali	2020	Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?

No	Author(s)	Year	Title
29	Bojičić-Dželilović, Vesna; Turkmani, Rim	2018	War economy, governance and security in Syria's opposition-controlled areas
30	Voller, Yaniv	2022	Rethinking armed groups and order: Syria and the rise of militiatocracies
31	Constantin, Sergiu; Carlà, Andrea	2025	The Vicious Circle of Securitization Processes in the Former Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir
32	Bozçali, Firat	2024	Corridors of countersovereignty: Insurgency, smuggling, and post-nation-state politics in Turkey's Kurdish highlands
33	Loyle, Cyanne E.; Onder, Ilayda B.	2024	The Legacies of Rebel Rule in Southeast Turkey
34	Berlingozzi, Laura; Raineri, Luca	2023	Reiteration or reinvention? Jihadi governance and gender practices in the Sahel
35	de Miranda, Ana Paula Mendes; de Oliveira Muniz, Jacqueline; de Almeida, Rosiane Rodrigues; Cafezeiro, Fausto	2022	'Terreiros' Under Attack? Criminal Governance in the Name of God and Armed Dominion Disputes over Control in Rio de Janeiro
36	Baldaro, Edoardo; Diall, Yida Seydou	2020	The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali
37	Maher, David; Thomson, Andrew	2018	A precarious peace? The threat of paramilitary violence to the peace process in Colombia
38	Davis, Diane E.; Hilgers, Tina	2022	The Pandemic and Organized Crime in Urban Latin America: New Sovereignty Arrangements or Business as Usual?
39	Quirino, Júlia	2025	The Crime Panopticon: Armed Power, Surveillance, and The Transnational Expansion of the PCC and CV
40	Newman, Edward; Saikia, Jaideep; Waterman, Alex	2023	The Impact of COVID-19 on Insurgency and Rebel Governance: Lessons from India's Northeast
41	Bonilla-Calle, Daniel; do Nascimento, Emerson Oliveira; Arias, Marcela Maria Vergara	2022	Pandemic, Criminal Governance and Mechanisms of Social and Economic Regulation in Three Latin American Contexts
42	Rolandsen, Øystein H.; Selvik, Kjetil	2024	Disposable rebels: US military assistance to insurgents in the Syrian war
43	Lekunze, Manu	2023	Insurgency and national security: a perspective from Cameroon's separatist conflict
44	Hansen, Stig Jarle	2022	'Forever wars'? Patterns of diffusion and consolidation of Jihadism in Africa
45	Abdullah, Farhad Hassan	2025	Hydro-Insurgency: Weaponization of Water Resources and Infrastructure in Northeast Syria
46	Liu, Lu; Eisner, Manuel P.	2024	Beyond Ransom and Political Concessions? Explaining Changes in Insurgents' Kidnapping Involvement Versus Event-frequency
47	Mantilla, Jorge; Andrade, Carolina; Vallejo, Maria Fe	2023	Why Cities Fail: The Urban Security Crisis in Ecuador
48	Koehnlein, Britt; Koren, Ore	2022	COVID-19, state capacity, and political violence by non-state actors
49	Sosnowski, Marika	2020	Towards a typology of ceasefires: order amid violence
50	Steele, Abbey; Schubiger, Livia Isabella	2018	Democracy and civil war: The case of Colombia
51	Glawion, Tim; de Vries, Lotje	2018	Ruptures revoked: Why the Central African Republic's unprecedented crisis has not altered deep-seated patterns of governance
52	Schmiedl, Martin	2023	On Current Armed Insurgencies in the Sahel and the Role of Climate Change: Merging Political Ecology and Environmental Security

No	Author(s)	Year	Title
53	Ong, Andrew; Steinmüller, Hans	2021	Communities of care: Public donations, development assistance, and independent philanthropy in the Wa State of Myanmar
54	Plakoudas, Spyridon	2019	How insurgencies end: The quest for government victory
55	Devereaux, Tessa	2025	The Determinants of Insurgent Gender Governance
56	Kumar, Roopak; Tarai, Shashikanta; Daimary, Rachan; Kumar, Ajay Vinod	2025	Media mediation and discourse construal of Naxalism in India
57	Giri, Keshab	2025	Intimacy, Progressive Politics and Maoist Insurgencies in South Asia
58	Page, James Michael; Williams, John	2022	Drones, Afghanistan, and beyond: Towards analysis and assessment in context
59	Jupp, John	2022	Strengthening Protection and Support for Victims of Terrorism in Criminal Proceedings in Afghanistan
60	Chinwokwu, Eke Chijioke; Michael, Christopher Eraye	2019	Militancy and violence as a catalyst to kidnapping in Nigeria
61	Kuldova, Tereza	2018	When elites and outlaws do philanthropy: on the limits of private vices for public benefit
62	Bania, Radoslaw	2025	Islamic Fundamentalism and the Political Systems of North African States Before the Arab Spring
63	Aniche, Ernest Tooichi; Moyo, Inocent; Nshimbi, Christopher Changwe	2021	Interrogating the nexus between irregular migration and insecurity along 'ungoverned' border spaces in West Africa

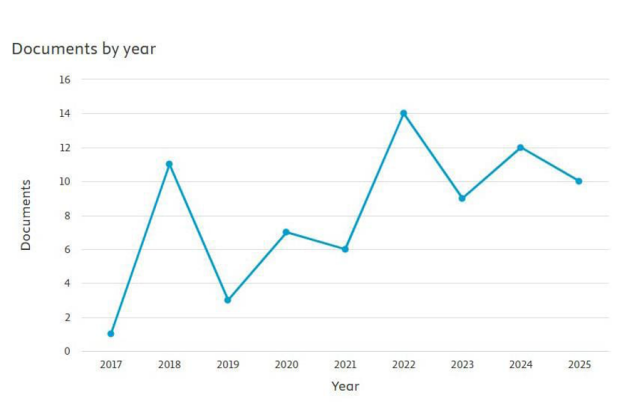


Figure 3. Documents by Year

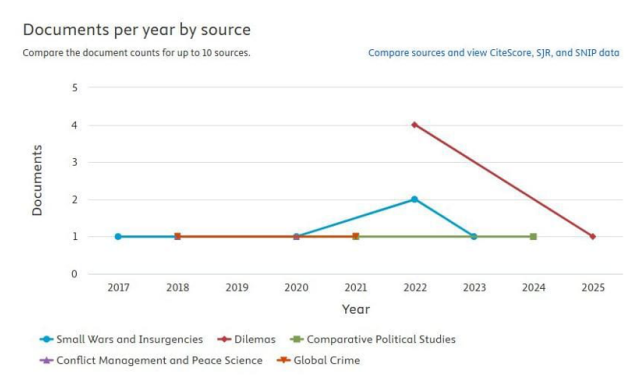


Figure 4. Documents per Year by Source

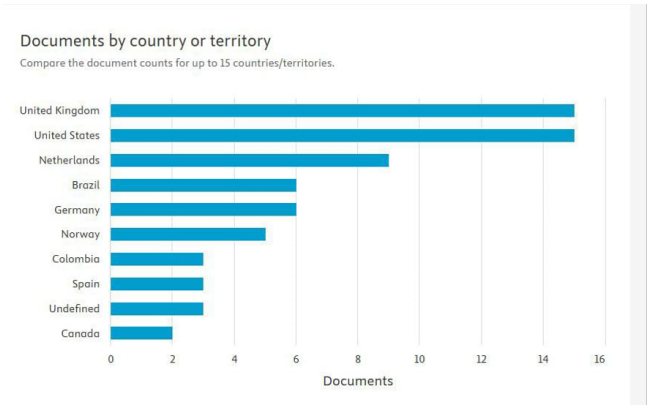


Figure 5. Documents by Country

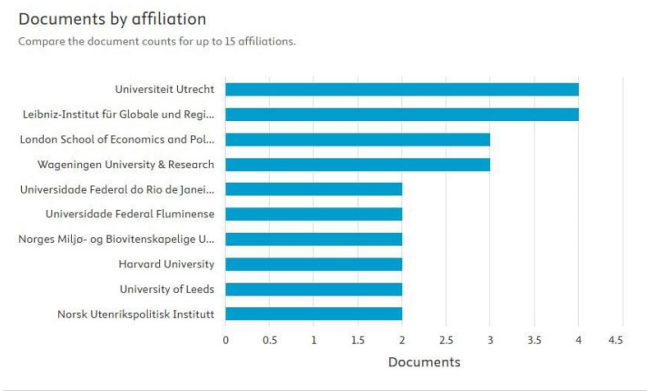


Figure 6. Documents by Affiliation

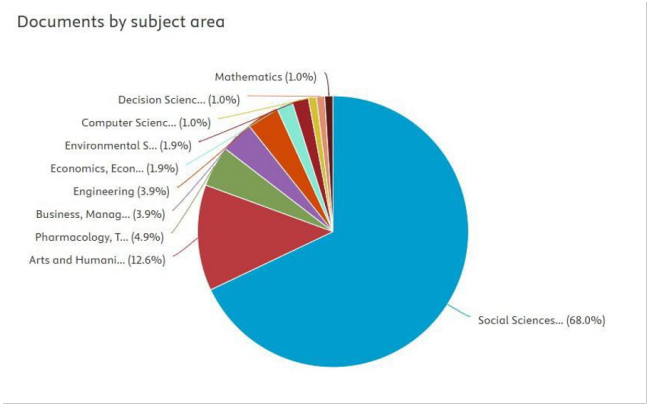


Figure 7. Documents by Subject Area

Table 2 reports the publication outlet, volume, issue, pagination, and DOI of each included article. Reporting the DOI rather than a journal-ranking indicator is a deliberate choice: it makes every item in the corpus independently verifiable by the reader, which is the property a systematic review actually requires. The distribution of outlets is notably dispersed. The 63 articles appear in 48 distinct journals, and 39 of those journals contribute a single article each. Only *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (six articles) and *Dilemas: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* (four) contribute more than two. The corpus spans generalist international relations and comparative politics journals (*International Affairs*, *International Organization*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*), specialist conflict and security outlets (*Small Wars & Insurgencies*, *Security Studies*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *Civil Wars*, *Journal of Global Security Studies*), area-focused journals (*Modern Asian Studies*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, *African Security Review*), regional-language and regionally edited journals (*Dilemas*, *Colombia Internacional*, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, *Revista Científica General Jose Maria Cordova*, *Czech Journal of International Relations*), legal and human-rights journals (*Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *European Journal of International Security*), and disciplinary journals outside political science

altogether (*Systems, Geoforum, Anthropological Theory, Critique of Anthropology, World Water Policy*). This dispersion is itself a finding rather than a limitation, and it anticipates the substantive result reported below: a debate distributed across 48 outlets and several disciplinary traditions is unlikely to have converged on a single classificatory vocabulary, and it has not.

Table 2. Included Articles by Outlet, Volume, Pagination, and DOI

No	First Author	Year	Journal & DOI	Vol(Issue)
1	Clancy	2018	<i>Systems</i> https://doi.org/10.3390/systems6020016	6(2) p. 16
2	Bamber-Zryd	2022	<i>Small Wars & Insurgencies</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2116182	33(8) pp. 1314–1344
3	Badillo-Sarmiento	2021	<i>Global Crime</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2021.2024804	22(4) pp. 312–335
4	Schwab	2018	<i>Small Wars & Insurgencies</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1497290	29(4) pp. 801–826
5	Terpstra	2018	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i> https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000822	52(3) pp. 1001–1042
6	Fortin	2022	<i>Journal of Human Rights Practice</i> https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huab062	14(2) pp. 387–414
7	Martinez	2018	<i>Security Dialogue</i> https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010618768622	49(4) pp. 235–253
8	David	2025	<i>Frontiers in Political Science</i> https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1562472	7 p. 1562472
9	Haass	2021	<i>Comparative Political Studies</i> https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020957682	54(8) pp. 1327–1361
10	Skjelderup	2020	<i>Small Wars & Insurgencies</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1780686	31(6) pp. 1174–1195
11	Flynn	2018	<i>Research & Politics</i> https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018810077	5(4) –
12	Worrall	2017	<i>Small Wars & Insurgencies</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1322336	28(4-5) pp. 709–733
13	O'Connor	2023	<i>Geoforum</i> https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103904	147 p. 103904
14	Waterman	2023	<i>Small Wars & Insurgencies</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2022.2120324	34(1) pp. 279–304
15	Díaz	2022	<i>Dilemas</i> https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v15esp4.52506	15(Esp 4) pp. 179–204
16	Souza Pimenta	2021	<i>Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional</i> https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202100207	64(2) –
17	Rubin	2020	<i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i> https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719863844	64(2-3) pp. 459–489
18	Pansters	2018	<i>Global Crime</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2018.1471993	19(3-4) pp. 315–338
19	Londoño Bedoya	2025	<i>Cogent Social Sciences</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2500653	11(1) –
20	Ripamonti	2024	<i>Conflict, Security & Development</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2380289	24(4) pp. 339–367
21	O'Connor	2023	<i>Political Geography</i> https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102930	105 p. 102930
22	Terpstra	2022	<i>Studies in Conflict & Terrorism</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1702256	45(4) pp. 258–284
23	Rickard	2021	<i>Security Studies</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1976822	30(4) pp. 603–636
24	Ojo	2020	<i>African Security</i> https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2020.1731109	13(1) pp. 77–110

No	First Author	Year	Journal & DOI	Vol(Issue)
25	Lambert	2025	Journal of Political Ecology https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.6985	32(1) –
26	Durán-Martínez	2024	Colombia Internacional https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint119.2024.01	(119) pp. 3–36
27	Herrera	2023	Journal of Latin American Studies https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000918	55(1) pp. 51–76
28	Bøås	2020	The International Spectator https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833567	55(4) pp. 118–132
29	Bojičić-Dželilović	2018	Stability https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.569	7(1) –
30	Voller	2022	International Affairs https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia047	98(3) pp. 853–871
31	Constantin	2025	Journal of Global Security Studies https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogae034	10(1) –
32	Bozçali	2024	Anthropological Theory https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996241232755	24(3) pp. 325–343
33	Loyle	2024	Comparative Political Studies https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231204223	57(11) pp. 1771–1803
34	Berlingozzi	2023	International Feminist Journal of Politics https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2023.2229860	25(5) pp. 843–866
35	de Miranda	2022	Dilemas https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v15esp4.52535	15(Esp 4) pp. 651–682
36	Baldaro	2020	The International Spectator https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566	55(4) pp. 69–83
37	Maher	2018	Third World Quarterly https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1508992	39(11) pp. 2142–2172
38	Davis	2022	Journal of Illicit Economies and Development https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.134	4(3) pp. 241–256
39	Quirino	2025	Dilemas https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v18.n3.69219	18(3) p. e69219
40	Newman	2023	Journal of Global Security Studies https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogad006	8(2) –
41	Bonilla-Calle	2022	Dilemas https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemas.v15esp4.52508	15(Esp 4) pp. 287–310
42	Rolandsen	2024	Mediterranean Politics https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2183664	29(4) pp. 528–549
43	Lekunze	2023	Third World Quarterly https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2177149	44(6) pp. 1155–1173
44	Hansen	2022	Small Wars & Insurgencies https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2021.1959130	33(3) pp. 409–436
45	Abdullah	2025	World Water Policy https://doi.org/10.1002/wwp2.70024	11(4) pp. 924–938
46	Liu	2024	Journal of Conflict Resolution https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231166347	68(1) pp. 30–52
47	Mantilla	2023	Journal of Strategic Security https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.16.3.2147	16(3) pp. 141–153
48	Koehnlein	2022	Journal of Peace Research https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211063034	59(1) pp. 90–104
49	Sosnowski	2020	Australian Journal of International Affairs https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1780196	74(5) pp. 597–613
50	Steele	2018	Conflict Management and Peace Science https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894218787780	35(6) pp. 587–600
51	Glawion	2018	The Journal of Modern African Studies https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X18000307	56(3) pp. 421–442
52	Schmiedl	2023	Czech Journal of International Relations https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir-mv.116	58(3) pp. 73–98

No	First Author	Year	Journal & DOI	Vol(Issue)
53	Ong	2021	Critique of Anthropology https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X20974099	41(1) pp. 65–87
54	Plakoudas	2019	Revista Científica General José María Córdova https://doi.org/10.21830/19006586.523	17(28) pp. 923–938
55	Devereaux	2025	International Organization https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818324000419	79(1) pp. 36–80
56	Kumar	2025	Discover Global Society https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00293-3	3(1) pp. 1–22
57	Giri	2025	Civil Wars https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2024.2397759	27(1) pp. 139–164
58	Page	2022	European Journal of International Security https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.19	7(3) pp. 283–303
59	Jupp	2022	Studies in Conflict & Terrorism https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1657657	45(2) pp. 133–152
60	Chinwokwu	2019	International Journal of Police Science & Management https://doi.org/10.1177/1461355719832619	21(1) pp. 17–35
61	Kuldova	2018	Trends in Organized Crime https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-017-9323-6	21(3) pp. 295–309
62	Bania	2025	Religions https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050603	16(5) p. 603
63	Aniche	2021	African Security Review https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2021.1901753	30(3) pp. 304–318

The descriptive profile above establishes where the field is produced; it does not establish how the field classifies. The substantive results follow. Table 3 reports the corpus grouped by dominant analytical focus, and Table 4 reports the corresponding distribution of classification frameworks.

Table 3. Synthesis of the Corpus by Dominant Analytical Focus

Literature Focus Category	Number	Primary Analytical Focus	Dominant Framework
Governance and Institutionalization of ANSAs	18	De facto authority, insurgent governance, bureaucratic consolidation, territorial administration	ANSAs as governance-producing or quasi-state actors
Terrorism and Counterterrorism Regimes	15	Political violence, radicalization processes, security discourse, legal designation mechanisms	Terrorist organizations
Criminal Governance and Hybrid Armed Formations	12	War economies, organized crime–political nexus, informal regulation, hybrid authority structures	Criminal or hybrid political-criminal actors
Use of Force and International Humanitarian Law	10	Jus ad bellum, non-international armed conflict (NIAC), proportionality, legality of state force	Parties to a non-international armed conflict
State Capacity and Areas of Limited Statehood	8	Governance vacuums, fragmented sovereignty, institutional weakness, negotiated authority	Substitute or competing authority structures

The distribution reported in Tables 3 and 4 supports a single principal finding: no classification framework commands the field. The largest category, governance-oriented or quasi-state actor approaches, accounts for 18 of 63 studies (28.6%), which is a plurality but not a majority. Terrorism-based approaches account for 15 studies (23.8%), criminal or hybrid criminal models for 12 (19.0%), IHL-based analyses for 10 (15.9%), and state-capacity or limited-statehood frameworks for 8 (12.7%). Since each article was assigned to the framework governing its principal classificatory claim, these proportions describe primary analytical commitments rather than topical coverage. Measured as a secondary dimension, governance capacity is considerably more pervasive

Table 4. Distribution of Classification Frameworks Across the Corpus

Classification Framework	Number of Studies	Percentage
Governance-Oriented / Quasi-State Actors	18	28.6%
Terrorism Framework	15	23.8%
Criminal / Hybrid Criminal Actors	12	19.0%
Non-International Armed Conflict (IHL-Based)	10	15.9%
State Capacity / Limited Statehood Framework	8	12.7%
Total	63	100%

than its primary-framework share suggests: 28 of the 63 studies (44.4%) examine de facto authority, institutionalization, service provision, dispute resolution, or regulatory functions somewhere in their analysis, including studies whose primary framework is terrorism-based or criminal. Governance capacity therefore operates as a cross-cutting variable in the literature even where it is not the organizing category.

A distribution, however, only demonstrates that the frameworks coexist. It does not show what separates them. Table 5 accordingly disaggregates each framework along four axes that the coding process treated as analytically distinct: the core classificatory criterion, the theoretical foundation, the principal normative or legal anchor invoked, and the studies in the corpus that exemplify it.

Table 5. Comparative Anatomy of the Five Classification Frameworks

Framework (%)	(n; Core Criterion	Theoretical Founda- tion	Principal Legal An- chor	Representative Studies
Governance-oriented / quasi-state actor (18; 28.6%)	Exercise of de facto authority: bureaucratic consolidation, taxation, adjudication, service provision	Rebel governance theory; state-formation theory; empirical statehood	Analogy from AP II Art. 1(1) and Monte- video Convention 1933 Art. 1. Doctrinal	Clancy (2018); Terpstra & Frerks (2018); Schwab (2018); Worrall (2017); Bamber- Zryd (2022); Martinez & Eng (2018)
Terrorism (15; 23.8%)	Intentional violence against civilians for communicative effect; ideological motivation	Securitization theory; threat-construction models	UNSC Res. 1373, 1566, 2178; domestic proscrip- tion statutes; FATF standards	Constantin & Carlà (2025); Ku- mar et al. (2025); Hansen (2022); Baldaro & Di- all (2020); Jupp (2022)
Criminal / hybrid political-criminal (12; 19.0%)	Profit-driven violence, il- licit market regulation, material orientation	Criminal governance theory; political econ- omy of violence	UNTOC Art. 2(a); UN- CAC; domestic criminal law & procedure	Badillo-Sarmiento & Mijares (2021); Pansters (2018); Díaz & Alves (2022); Durán- Martínez (2024); Herrera (2023)
Non-international armed conflict / IHL-based (10; 15.9%)	Cumulative thresholds: organization of armed group and intensity of hostilities	International humani- tarian law doctrine; jus in bello reasoning	Common Art. 3 GC I- IV; AP II Art. 1(1); ICTY Tadić decision; ICRC Customary IHL Study	Fortin (2022); Page & Williams (2022); Sosnowski (2020); Rolandsen & Selvik (2024); Jupp (2022)

Framework (%)	(n; Core Criterion	Theoretical Founda- tion	Principal Legal An- chor	Representative Studies
State capacity / limited statehood (12.7%)	Relational: gap between formal state authority and effective administrative reach (8;	Governance theory; ease of limited statehood	ARSIWA Arts. 11 (attribution) and diligence obligations	8, 9, Glawion & de Vries (2018); Koehnlein & Koren (2022); Davis & Hilgers (2022); Bonilla-Calle (2022)

Three features of Table 5 warrant emphasis because they are not visible in the aggregate distribution. First, the frameworks apply criteria that are not merely different but non-commensurable. The governance framework asks what the group does for a population; the terrorism framework asks whom the group attacks and why; the criminal framework asks what the group extracts and for whose material benefit; the IHL framework asks how organized the group is and how intense the hostilities are; and the state-capacity framework asks what the state fails to do in the contested territory. These questions can be answered simultaneously and affirmatively for the same organization. The apparent contradiction between studies that classify a given actor as a governance provider and studies that classify it as a terrorist organization is therefore not, in most cases, an empirical disagreement. It is the predictable consequence of asking different questions of the same object.

Second, the frameworks differ sharply in the legal status of their foundations, and the literature frequently elides this. Only the IHL framework rests on a settled body of positive law: the existence of a non-international armed conflict is determined by the two cumulative criteria of organization and intensity established in Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions as interpreted in *Tadić*, with the additional and more demanding threshold of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol II where that instrument applies. The criminal framework likewise rests on a treaty definition, Article 2(a) of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, although its application to politically motivated groups remains contested. The terrorism framework, by contrast, operates without a general treaty definition: Security Council Resolutions 1373 (2001), 1566 (2004), and 2178 (2014) impose obligations and supply a working description, but the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism remains unadopted, and designation consequently depends on domestic statutes and executive determinations. The governance and state-capacity frameworks have no positive-law anchor at all; they are analytical constructs whose legal relevance is indirect. Studies that move between these frameworks without marking the shift therefore move between *lex lata*, doctrinal interpretation, and scholarly proposal without signaling it, which is a recurring weakness in the reviewed literature rather than an occasional lapse.

Third, the frameworks are unevenly distributed across regions and cases in a way that tracks the source literature rather than the phenomena. Latin American cases are coded predominantly through the criminal governance framework (Badillo-Sarmiento & Mijares, 2021; Pansters, 2018; Díaz & Alves, 2022; Durán-Martínez, 2024; Herrera, 2023; Souza Pimenta et al., 2021; Quirino, 2025; Mantilla et al., 2023), Middle Eastern and Sahelian cases predominantly through governance and terrorism frameworks (Clancy, 2018; Schwab, 2018; Bamber-Zryd, 2022; Baldaro & Diall, 2020; Hansen, 2022), and African state-fragility cases predominantly through the state-capacity framework (Glawion & de Vries, 2018; Ojo, 2020; Aniche et al., 2021). Structural stressors beyond institutional weakness, including climate-induced resource pressure and the political dynamics of electoral competition during conflict, operate in the same direction (Schmiedl, 2023; Steele & Schubiger, 2018). This regional patterning is analytically significant: it suggests that framework selection is partly a function of scholarly tradition and regional research community rather than of organizational attributes, which in turn strengthens the study’s central claim that classification is driven by analytical entry point rather than by empirical consensus.

3.1. Discussion

The results establish that the field is organized around five competing classification frameworks and that these frameworks differ in criteria, foundations, and legal status. This discussion addresses the three research questions in turn: what distinguishes the criteria applied across frameworks, how theoretical framing and securitization legitimize particular classifications, and what governance and policy consequences follow. It then sets out the multidimensional governance-sensitive framework that the synthesis supports.

a. Classificatory Criteria and Their Incommensurability

Across the corpus, four criteria recur: ideological motivation, territorial control, governance capacity, and economic activity. Terrorism-oriented scholarship foregrounds ideological violence, treating the deliberate targeting of civilians and symbolic institutions, and the communicative production of fear, as the defining marker (Constantin & Carlà, 2025; Hansen, 2022; Baldaro & Diall, 2020). Criminalization-focused studies emphasize illicit economic networks, market regulation, and the applicability of prosecutorial standards, shifting the lens from political grievance to material benefit (Badillo-Sarmiento & Mijares, 2021; Pansters, 2018; Durán-Martínez, 2024). Separatism-oriented work weights territorial claims, historical grievance, and the invocation of self-determination, classifying groups by their articulated pursuit of autonomy and their attempts to construct parallel political authority (Lekunze, 2023; O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023; Bozçali, 2024).

The corpus complicates each of these criteria in turn, and it does so empirically rather than by assertion. Territorial control, long treated as the discriminating variable, is shown to be neither necessary nor sufficient: groups without sustained territorial monopoly nonetheless construct regulatory authority in clandestine and urban settings (O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023; O'Connor, 2023; Waterman, 2023), while territorial control itself generates outcomes, such as illicit resource extraction, that the criminal framework would code quite differently (Haass, 2021; Bozçali, 2024). Ideological motivation is complicated by evidence that groups with explicit religious or revolutionary programmes also operate systematic taxation, adjudication, and welfare systems, and negotiate with customary authorities in order to govern (Skjelderup, 2020; Berlingozzi & Raineri, 2023; Lambert et al., 2025), and by evidence that ideological programmes are themselves conditioned by the political systems within which they emerge rather than being freestanding drivers of conduct (Bania, 2025). Economic activity is complicated symmetrically: criminal organizations perform adjudication, protection, and social regulation that are indistinguishable in function from insurgent governance (Díaz & Alves, 2022; de Miranda et al., 2022; Souza Pimenta et al., 2021; Quirino, 2025). A fourth complication cuts across all three: the stated claim and the observed conduct of a group frequently diverge, whether because insurgent organizations appropriate local grievances they did not generate (Bøås et al., 2020), because ostensibly political violence is monetized through kidnapping and extortion (Chinwokwu & Michael, 2019), or because philanthropic and welfare provision is deployed instrumentally to launder reputation and secure consent (Kuldova, 2018). Classification that relies on articulated motive alone is therefore vulnerable to the group's own strategic self-presentation.

Governance capacity functions differently from the other three. Present as a secondary dimension in 44.4% of the corpus, it cuts across the terrorism, criminal, and separatist frameworks rather than competing with them, and it is measured by what an organization does rather than by what it claims or by whom it targets. This is why the governance turn is better described as a change in the level of analysis than as the emergence of a sixth category. It moves classification from event-based assessment, which registers tactics, to structural assessment, which registers authority, legitimacy, and institutionalization. The consequence is that binary legal categorizations become harder to sustain: an organization may satisfy the criteria of the terrorism framework and the governance framework at the same time, without contradiction, because the two frameworks are answering different questions about different properties.

b. Securitization, Legal Framing, and the Performativity of Classification

Classification is not only analytical; it is constitutive. Designation as a terrorist organization activates an exceptional legal regime comprising counterterrorism legislation, expanded surveillance authority, preventive detention, financial monitoring, and intensified intelligence coordination, and in many jurisdictions it lowers evidentiary thresholds and widens executive discretion relative to ordinary criminal law. This is the sense in which the label is performative: it does not describe a governance environment so much as create one, converting an assessment into an institutional mandate. The corpus documents this dynamic most clearly where securitization becomes self-reinforcing, with exceptional measures producing the grievances that justify their continuation (Constantin & Carlà, 2025), and where media framing stabilizes a designation independently of the organization's conduct (Kumar et al., 2025).

Criminalization activates a different institutional pathway with a different temporal logic. Where armed actors are framed as criminal organizations, the response runs through prosecution services, investigative capacity, judicial oversight, asset seizure, and anti-money-laundering cooperation, and it is governed by ordinary evidentiary standards and procedural safeguards. The distinction from the counterterrorism pathway is not

the presence or absence of coercion but its authorization: criminal law reasons retrospectively about acts committed, whereas counterterrorism reasons prospectively about threats anticipated. The corpus shows, however, that this boundary is porous, since organized crime is itself frequently securitized and discursively politicized into a national security matter (Badillo-Sarmiento & Mijares, 2021; Davis & Hilgers, 2022).

Separatism classification produces a hybrid response model. Because separatist movements articulate claims grounded in territorial autonomy or self-determination, state responses frequently combine security enforcement with negotiation, decentralization, or autonomy arrangements (Lekunze, 2023; Sosnowski, 2020). Unlike terrorism designation, separatism classification does not foreclose political dialogue; it situates the conflict within both security governance and political management. This is precisely why the substitution of a terrorism label for a separatism label is so consequential in practice, and why the corpus treats such label-shifting as a governance strategy rather than as a neutral correction of categories.

The IHL framework occupies a distinctive position within this dynamic, and the literature underestimates it. Because the existence of a non-international armed conflict is determined by objective criteria of organization and intensity rather than by executive designation, the IHL classification is the only one of the five that a state cannot unilaterally confer or withhold. It is also the only one that imposes obligations on the state at the same time as it imposes them on the armed group. States therefore commonly resist it, on the assumption that acknowledging a NIAC confers legitimacy on the adversary, although Common Article 3 expressly provides that its application does not affect the legal status of the parties. The reviewed legal scholarship identifies the practical consequences of this resistance for remedies, accountability, and victims' rights (Fortin, 2022; Jupp, 2022), but the corpus contains no systematic study of when and why states elect a counterterrorism qualification over an IHL qualification in situations where both are available. This is an identified gap rather than a finding.

Table 6 sets out the legal qualification, applicable regime, institutional lead, and characteristic risk associated with each framework. Its purpose is to make explicit what the reviewed literature typically leaves implicit: that the choice of framework is simultaneously a choice of legal regime, of lead institution, and of the procedural protections that will apply.

Table 6. Legal Qualification and Governance Consequences of Each Classification Framework

Framework	Legal Qualification	Applicable Legal Regime	Institutional Lead	Principal Risk
Governance-oriented / quasi-state	De facto authority; not a legal status	No dedicated regime. Recognition of governance functions affects IHL applicability	Political and civil-administration bodies; negotiation, service substitution	Risks conferring de facto legitimacy on coercive actors
Terrorism	Terrorist organization by executive designation	Counterterrorism regime; preventive logic; lowered evidentiary thresholds	Intelligence services, specialized CT units; proscription, surveillance	Forecloses political dialogue; expands executive power
Criminal / hybrid	Organized criminal group	Domestic criminal law and procedure; retrospective logic	Police, prosecution services, FIUs; investigation, asset tracing	Depoliticizes genuinely political grievances; capacity-dependent
Non-international armed conflict (IHL)	Party to a non-international armed conflict	International humanitarian law, applied concurrently with human rights law	Armed forces under legal review; targeting rules, detention regimes	Threshold determinations are contested; states resist classification
State capacity / limited statehood	Substitute or competing authority structure	No dedicated regime; conditions feasibility of other regimes	Whole-of-government: institutional reform, service delivery	Explains conditions rather than assigning status

c. State Capacity as Moderating Condition

Across the corpus, state capacity conditions both the emergence of ANSA authority and the effectiveness of the response that classification selects. Where administrative reach is limited, judicial systems are fragile, and

service delivery is thin, armed actors consolidate governance functions and embed themselves in local authority structures (Glawion & de Vries, 2018; Ojo, 2020; Aniche et al., 2021). Exogenous shocks that reduce state presence produce measurable shifts in this balance, as the pandemic-era studies in the corpus demonstrate for both insurgent and criminal actors (Koehnlein & Koren, 2022; Davis & Hilgers, 2022; Bonilla-Calle et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2023). Conversely, where administrative reach is extensive and public services are resilient, the opportunity space for parallel authority narrows. The corpus also indicates that the terminal phase of an insurgency is shaped by the same variable, since government victory and durable settlement both depend on administrative consolidation rather than on coercive success alone (Plakoudas, 2019), and that residual armed formations frequently persist after formal settlement where that consolidation does not occur (Maher & Thomson, 2018).

The policy implication is more specific than the general proposition that capacity matters. Each classification framework presupposes an institutional capability, and the presupposition fails precisely where the framework is most often invoked. Criminalization presupposes a functioning investigative and judicial apparatus, and is therefore least viable in the areas of limited statehood where criminal governance is most entrenched. Counterterrorism presupposes intelligence reach and financial-system control, which are weakest in the border spaces where designated groups operate most freely. IHL-based responses presuppose disciplined armed forces subject to legal review. State capacity is thus not merely a moderating variable in the literature; it is a feasibility constraint on classification itself, and a classification chosen without reference to it is likely to be declaratory rather than operative.

d. The Internal Architecture of the Literature

Figure 8 maps the internal conceptual structure of the corpus under the umbrella of insurgency governance and conflict dynamics. It systematizes how the reviewed scholarship organizes its analytical focus rather than introducing new empirical findings, and it shows the literature to be structured around five interconnected clusters: insurgency governance theory, social control mechanisms, the political economy of insurgencies, comparative case studies, and civilian impact.

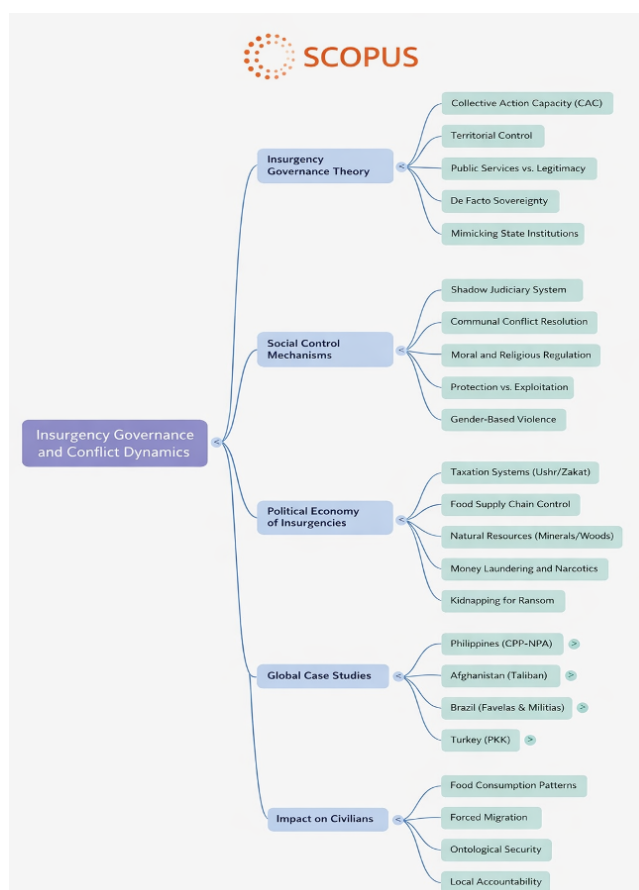


Figure 8. Multilevel Classification of Analytical Clusters in the Corpus

The clusters are analytically continuous with the frameworks identified above. Insurgency governance theory supplies the collective-action, territorial-control, service-provision, and *de facto* sovereignty variables on which the governance framework rests, together with the typological innovations, such as militiatocracy, that the corpus has generated to describe layered and fragmented authority (Voller, 2022; Ong & Steinmüller, 2021). Social control mechanisms, encompassing shadow judicial systems, communal dispute resolution, moral and religious regulation, and gender governance, show that governance extends beyond administration into normative and coercive social structuring (Schwab, 2018; Berlingozzi & Raineri, 2023; Devereaux, 2025; Rickard & Bakke, 2021; Giri, 2025). The political economy cluster, covering systematic taxation, resource extraction, control of food supply, and kidnapping for ransom, is precisely the terrain on which the governance and criminal frameworks overlap (Bojičić-Dželić & Turkmani, 2018; Haass, 2021; Ripamonti et al., 2024; Liu & Eisner, 2024; Chinwokwu & Michael, 2019), and it extends to the weaponization of infrastructure and water resources as an instrument of territorial control (Abdullah, 2025). The case-study cluster demonstrates that governance-oriented analysis is comparative rather than region-bound, spanning the Philippines, Afghanistan, Brazil, and Turkey (Rubin, 2020; Terpstra, 2022; Souza Pimenta et al., 2021; O'Connor & Jongerden, 2023). The civilian-impact cluster foregrounds the societal consequences of armed governance, including displacement, food insecurity, and local accountability (Ripamonti et al., 2024; Flynn & Stewart, 2018). Read across the five clusters, the figure reinforces the central finding: the literature already operates with the components of a multidimensional classification, but distributes them across subfields rather than integrating them.

Figure 9 consolidates the review's principal analytical claims: the paradigmatic fragmentation of the field, the shift from violence-centered to governance-centered approaches, the empirical prevalence of hybridization, the moderating role of state capacity, and the multilevel consequences of legal classification. Taken together, these five elements describe classification not as a fixed legal determination but as a governance-embedded process shaped by disciplinary entry points, normative commitments, and institutional context.

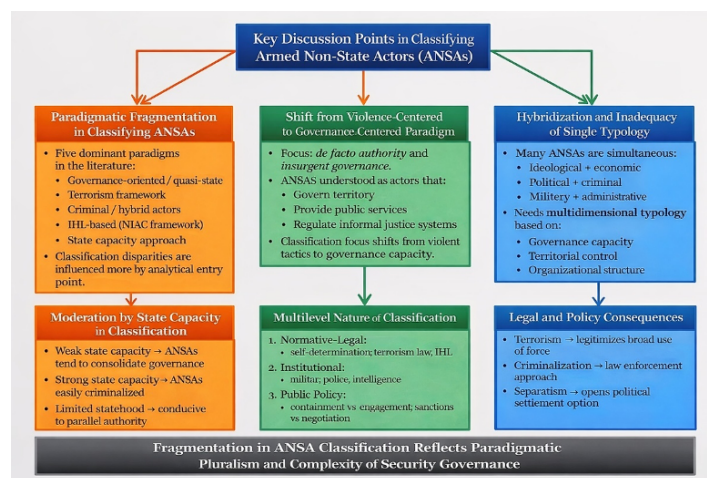


Figure 9. Key Analytical Claims of the Review

e. Toward a Multidimensional Governance-Sensitive Framework

The preceding analysis supports a specific conclusion rather than a general plea for nuance. Because the five frameworks apply non-commensurable criteria, a group's classification under any one of them is not falsified by its classification under another; and because the frameworks carry different legal regimes, the choice among them cannot be left to disciplinary convention. What is required is a framework in which classification is derived from observable organizational attributes, and in which the applicable legal regime is derived in turn from that profile. Table 7 sets out the four dimensions on which such a framework can be constructed, each drawn from criteria already operative in the corpus rather than introduced from outside it.

Four features define the proposed framework. First, the dimensions are assessed jointly rather than sequentially, so that the output is a profile rather than a label: an organization is described as, for example, highly institutionalized, exercising broad governance functions, advancing a territorial self-determination claim, and operating in a context of low state administrative reach. Second, the dimensions are analytically separable, so that a group's governance capacity does not determine, and is not determined by, the nature of its claim; this

Table 7. The Proposed Multidimensional Governance-Sensitive Framework

Dimension	Conceptual Definition	Observable Indicators	Classificatory Function
D1. Organizational institutionalization	The degree to which the group possesses a stable internal structure capable of issuing decisions	Responsible command; disciplinary system; capacity to plan/sustain operations	Determines whether the IHL organization threshold is met and if group can bear obligations
D2. Exercised governance capacity	The range and depth of state-like functions the group actually performs over a population	Taxation/extraction; adjudication; service provision; regulation of markets and social conduct	Distinguishes governing from predatory actors and locates the group on the authority continuum
D3. Nature of the articulated claim	The stated and demonstrated objective the group advances through violence	Territorial/self-determination claim; transnational ideological project; material/market-control objective	Differentiates separatist, ideological, and profit-driven orientations without assuming exclusivity
D4. State capacity as contextual moderator	The effective administrative and judicial reach of the state in the contested territory	Territorial administrative presence; judicial functionality; service delivery; border control	Conditions the feasibility and durability of each response and explains variation across similar actors

is what permits the framework to accommodate the hybridity the corpus documents without collapsing into indeterminacy. Third, legal qualification is derived from the profile rather than asserted alongside it: D1 and the intensity of hostilities together determine whether an IHL qualification is available, which is a matter of *lex lata* and not of policy preference; D3 bears on whether the political-settlement track is open; D2 bears on which population is dependent on the group and therefore on what a coercive response will cost civilians; and D4 bears on whether the selected response is feasible at all. Fourth, the framework is explicitly a proposal, *de lege ferenda* in the strict sense, and it does not displace the existing legal categories. It is a structured assessment tool intended to make the choice among those categories visible, auditable, and defensible rather than tacit.

Two limitations of this proposal should be acknowledged. It is derived from a synthesis of secondary literature rather than from primary case testing, so its discriminating power remains to be established empirically; and the indicators in Table 7 are ordinal rather than metric, which means that threshold-setting on each dimension will require case-based calibration. Both are tractable in subsequent research, and the framework is offered on that basis.

f. Limitations of the Review

Four limitations qualify the findings. The review draws on a single database and on English-language sources, which under-represents Spanish-, Portuguese-, French-, Arabic-, and Indonesian-language legal scholarship on cases which feature prominently in the corpus. Framework assignment reflects a single analytic judgment without independent double-coding, so category boundaries, particularly between the criminal and governance frameworks, involve interpretation that another coder might draw differently. The descriptive bibliometric distributions reported in Figures 4 to 7 derive from database analytics and are reported as context rather than as evidence bearing on the classificatory findings. Finally, narrative synthesis supports claims about how the literature is structured, not claims about the prevalence of the phenomena themselves; the finding that 28.6% of studies adopt a governance-oriented framework is a statement about scholarship, not about armed groups.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 63 Scopus-indexed journal articles finds that scholarship on armed non-state actors is characterized by structured conceptual fragmentation rather than analytical convergence. Classification is distributed across five competing frameworks, namely governance-oriented approaches (28.6%), terrorism regimes (23.8%), criminal or hybrid models (19.0%), IHL-based analyses (15.9%), and state-capacity perspectives (12.7%), none of which achieves epistemic dominance. The central explanatory claim of the study follows

from this distribution: the frameworks diverge not because they observe different behavior but because they ask non-commensurable questions, respectively about what a group does for a population, whom it attacks and why, what it extracts and for whose benefit, how organized it is and how intense the hostilities are, and what the state fails to do in the contested territory. Classification outcomes are therefore a function of analytical entry point rather than of empirical disagreement.

Two further findings qualify this claim. First, the frameworks differ in the legal status of their foundations in ways the literature routinely elides. Only the IHL framework rests on settled positive law, and it alone cannot be unilaterally conferred or withheld by a state; the criminal framework rests on a treaty definition of contested application to politically motivated groups; the terrorism framework operates without a general treaty definition and depends on domestic designation; and the governance and state-capacity frameworks have no positive-law anchor at all. Second, classification is performative as well as descriptive. It selects the applicable legal regime, the lead institution, the evidentiary standard, and the procedural protections that will apply, and in doing so it determines whether a political-settlement track remains open. State capacity then operates as a feasibility constraint on that selection, since each framework presupposes an institutional capability that is typically weakest precisely where the framework is most often invoked.

The study's principal contribution is the multidimensional governance-sensitive framework set out in Table 7. It organizes classification along four jointly assessed dimensions, namely organizational institutionalization, exercised governance capacity, the nature of the articulated claim, and state capacity as contextual moderator, and it yields a classificatory profile from which legal qualification and institutional response are derived rather than asserted. The framework does not displace existing legal categories. Offered *de lege ferenda*, it is a structured assessment tool whose purpose is to render the choice among those categories explicit, auditable, and defensible.

The findings are subject to the limitations set out above, principally single-database and English-language coverage, single-coder framework assignment, and the fact that narrative synthesis supports claims about the structure of the literature rather than about the prevalence of the phenomena. Three lines of further research follow directly. The proposed framework should be tested against primary case material in order to establish its discriminating power and to calibrate thresholds on each dimension. The conditions under which states elect a counterterrorism qualification over an available IHL qualification, which the corpus does not systematically address, warrant dedicated study. And the regional patterning of framework selection identified in this review invites comparative work on how scholarly traditions themselves shape the classification of otherwise comparable armed actors.

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Availability of Data and Legal Materials

All legal materials, court rulings, or supporting data analyzed in this research are fully included in this manuscript.

Statement on AI Usage

The authors declare that no Generative AI technology or AI assistance tools were used during the preparation, drafting, or analysis of this manuscript.

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