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The Political Dynamics of Human Mobility: Migration out of, as and into Violence

André Bank
German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg
Christiane Fröhlich
University of Hamburg
Andrea Schneiker
University of Siegen

Abstract
Simplistic correlations between human mobility and political violence are on the rise in the European discourse on immigration, especially – but not only – in populist rhetoric. This not only lacks an empirical foundation, but also leads to simplistic solutions for a major political and humanitarian challenge of our time. However, we still lack comprehensive knowledge on the migration-violence nexus. By bringing insights from migration studies and peace and conflict studies into fruitful dialogue, this contribution aims to fill this gap. It first maps some of the central questions regarding the migration-violence nexus. Second, and on this basis, it proposes an analytical framework for future research which encompasses the interdependence of violence-migration dynamics on and between the macro, meso and micro levels by examining human mobility as: (1) a movement out of (physical and structural) violence; (2) a violent process in and of itself; (3) a path into (physical and structural) violence; and (4) it formulates some recommendations that can provide a more holistic basis for policy programmes regarding human mobility.

Policy Implications

- Violence does not stop in the moment a migrant manages to leave a war or conflict zone. Policy measures that aim to help migrants need to reflect migration as a movement out of violence, but also as a violent practice in and of itself and potentially as a movement into violence.
- Humanitarian aid efforts aiming to help migrants can have unintended consequences, like perpetuating pre-existing violent structures or even creating new ones. More knowledge is needed to better understand the make-up of migrant groups, the reasons for and direction of migration, and the violence inherent in the migrant experience.
- It is crucial to reflect on the concept of security underlying policy responses to (im)migration. What or who is to be secured? Is it the populations of destination states or the migrants? The answers to these questions determine policy responses and whether they help the most vulnerable or cater to domestic politics in potential receiving states.
- When designing migration policies, it is key to honour the intersectional differences existing in any given group of migrants. The experiences and needs of female migrants, unaccompanied minors, elderly or sick migrants, young male migrants, etc. are radically different and this needs to be reflected in migration policies.
- There is no empirical evidence for the assumption that the migrants currently reaching or hoping to reach Europe are a danger to European security. They are not 'refugee warriors', but war refugees.
- Migration policies should not only focus on those already on the move, but also on those who may want to move due to political, social, demographic, economic and ecological hardships at home, but who do not have the resources or opportunity to. These trapped populations are the most vulnerable parts of any given society and need to be accounted for in policy making.

The migration-violence nexus in current public discourse

In Europe today, the complexity of human mobility is often reduced in public discourse, with simplistic connections being made between migration and political violence. First of all, it is a common claim that the root causes for current migration movements, especially from the Middle East or Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe, lie at the meso level, for example when people flee from a repressive authoritarian regime, or at the macro level, that is, when people are leaving their home countries due to droughts

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induced by climate change. While examples like the Syrian civil war or the failing Libyan state are certainly a case in point, nevertheless, two problems arise. For one, root causes like state violence or war are the most difficult to change and can therefore lead to political inertia (again, the Syrian civil war is a case in point); for another, focusing on them also deviates attention from other relevant questions, like who exactly is moving when, from where, and why. But it is this very micro level knowledge of the composition of migrant groups and their specific needs that is necessary to formulate adequate policy responses. In addition, taking the micro level into account in a more systematic way reveals that violence can take different forms and that it is not only a reason for migration, but can also occur during the flight or in the places people flee to.

Second, in current European discourses, some causes for migration are considered more publicly acceptable than others. Based on this assumption of legitimate vs. illegitimate migration drivers, some migrants are accredited the right to move, while others are categorized as illegal. In addition, there are different understandings of who is considered a legitimate migrant across space and time. Current European public discourses, for instance, distinguish between the 'good migrant' who is fleeing from war and terror, for example in Syria, where her or his life is constantly threatened, and the 'bad migrant', who is migrating due to miserable economic conditions in his or her country of origin and is looking for better job opportunities in (Western) Europe. Classifying migrants in such a way not only leads to acceptance or rejection of certain groups of migrants in the receiving countries and thereby establishes hierarchies between different groups of migrants. It also endows some migrants with certain rights and denies these same rights to others, thereby contributing to perpetuating violent structures.

This contribution claims that we need a more holistic understanding of the complex migration-violence nexus. Therefore we propose to apply a broad understanding of (political) violence and forced migration that goes beyond the reasons for migration as codified in the United Nation's 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Hence, in this article, we use 'migration' as the main term for human mobility. We consciously do not to use the dominant categories 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', 'labour migrants', 'economic refugees', etc. in order to avoid the positive and negative connotations connected to these different terms and to be able to deconstruct their genesis. We thus acknowledge the fact that the legal categories 'migrant' and 'refugee' stem from a different time, namely the 1940s and 1950s, and do not fully represent the reality of human mobility today (see Betts, 2013).

Therefore, and in order to facilitate the comprehensive study of the dynamic relationship between migration and violent conflict, our understanding of security goes beyond the traditional narrow understanding of 'security from physical threat' with a focus on nation-states. Rather, we suggest an understanding of security that aims to provide comprehensive security for individuals and societal groups regardless of, for example, their nationality, ethnicity, age or gender. This allows for policies aiming to protect those who are endangered not only by wars and military attacks, but also by other, non-military threats, such as poverty and environmental disasters. Accordingly, we suggest not limiting our understanding of violence to physical violence, but to include structural violence (Galtung, 1969), that is, the deprivation of individuals or certain parts of society of the opportunity to be free from fear and want on the grounds of intersectional markers like nationality, gender, health status, race, age, etc. Such a broad understanding of security also requires us to consider the various levels and actors involved in violent processes, ranging from the individual to societal groups, to the state and international (non)governmental organizations, from a perspective of intersectionality.

Against this backdrop, we understand political violence as being closely connected to violent conflict and societal insecurity and, thus, different from criminal activity. We understand violence to be a dynamic phenomenon which can (and does) continuously change with respect to its form, intensity, geographical reach, type and number of actors involved. In order to deal with and to operationalize such complexity, we suggest to unpack it by distinguishing between migration as: (1) a movement out of (physical and structural) violence; (2) a violent process in and of itself; and (3) a path into (physical and structural) violence.

In the following, we first summarize the findings of existing research on the migration-violence nexus and highlight some of its shortcomings. Based thereon we propose our framework in order to analytically differentiate between distinct dimensions of the interrelation between migration and violence in order to gain insights into when, how and to what extent violence escalation and de-escalation processes intersect with human mobility. Third, we formulate some broader lessons and recommendations which provide a more holistic basis for policy programmes with regard to the current political crisis in the field of migration. Thereby we seek to map the terrain for research on the dynamic interactions between human mobility and violence.

The migration-violence nexus: insights from existing research

Overall, systematic knowledge about the migration-violence nexus is still scarce. So far, the central questions of whether and under what conditions migration interacts with violence on the macro, meso and micro levels remain largely unanswered. While the number of empirical studies is fast increasing in the context of the on-going political crisis in the field of migration, a considerable conceptual deficit remains. Also, there is little overlap between the different disciplines engaging with human mobility so far. We argue that migration studies and peace and conflict studies in particular should be put into fruitful dialogue with each other in order to gain more comprehensive insights on how migration and violence intersect. This is one of the goals of this article.

For a long time, the phenomenon of human (im)mobilities has more or less exclusively been the subject of

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migration studies, with some interjections from economics (e.g. Constant and Zimmermann, 2013; Pradella and Cillo, 2015) and legal studies (e.g. Andrade, 2013; Düvell, 2011). Migration research has extensively analysed the push and pull factors of human mobility, the effects of migration corridors and networks as well as the conditions of immigrant integration (Castles and Miller, 1998; Lee, 1966; Massey, Axinn and Ghimire, 1993; for an overview, see Han, 2010)

However, they do not usually take into account the complex relationship between migration and processes of conflict escalation and de-escalation. While migration researchers have often addressed single macro level aspects of the issue, such as the developmental and political conditions leading to migration (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014), European immigration (King and DeBono, 2013; King et al., 2013), or the effects of climate change on human mobility (Massey et al., 2007; Morrissey, 2009; Zolberg, 2001), they mostly lack a more systematic analysis of the relationship between human mobility and violence.

Similarly, and in spite of the discursively manifested multiple interconnections between human mobility and violence, peace and conflict studies are only just beginning to study the migration-violence nexus in a more systematic manner, particularly following the increasing immigration from Europe's Southern and Eastern periphery and the current crisis of border and mobility governance within the EU. Most studies focus on single case studies relating to immigration to Europe or guerrilla fighters roaming from one conflict to the next, while some critically engage with the securitization of (im)migration to the EU (Baldwin, 2013, 2014; Baldwin, Methmann and Rothe, 2014; Castles et al., 2014; Huysmans, 2000). However, apart from these few exceptions, there is little reflection on the concepts of security which form the basis of common assumptions about the relationship between human mobility and violence. But the ways in which security and violence are conceptualized determine which actors and objects of study are considered relevant, thereby applying explicit and implicit lenses to research design as well as findings. This in turn influences possible pathways towards responses to and mitigation of political violence.

Conceptualizing the intersection of migration and violence

On this basis, we propose an analytical framework that encompasses the interdependence of the dynamics between human mobility and political violence on and between different levels. We suggest to examine migration as: (1) a movement out of (physical and structural) violence; (2) a violent process in and of itself; and (3) a path to (physical and structural) violence. Thus, we focus mainly on forced migration, but go beyond the traditional understanding of it to include also inherent violent structures and possible violent patterns in the places that are commonly considered safe havens, like 'Western' receiving states.

In the case of *migration from violence*, both the multiple reasons for migration and the micro level decision-making process regarding who should leave (and if so, when and to where) and who should stay, are multi-layered and complex. This requires us to ask a variety of questions in order to understand such a complex phenomenon. It is important to take into account that people who flee (and those who do not) are not just passive victims, but also active agents of decision-making. Even those who stay are bound into a migration network, for instance as receivers of remittances. At the same time, the decision-making process is embedded in pre-existing social structures which may or may not be inherently violent.

We have to analyse who is exercising the violence that leads people to leave their homes. Is it state actors or non-state actors or both? Even though in some contexts this might be difficult to differentiate, it is important to know who is exercising the violence people move away from, for example when seeking to negotiate with armed actors in order to provide assistance to victims. Furthermore, we have to ask what forms the violence takes, thereby differentiating between physical and structural violence. What type of violence, or what combination of different types of violence, makes people leave their homes? People can, for example, seek refuge somewhere as a result of an armed conflict, but other forms of violence-induced drivers of migration also exist. Particularly in authoritarian-repressive regimes, there are different forms of violence at the meso level which may influence migration decisions. The violent persecution of oppositional activists can lead them, their families and friends to leave their homes behind, for example, in order to prevent the dangers of imprisonment, torture, or targeted killings. Another driver for migration can be the construction of individuals belonging to a social group as allegedly 'endangering national security', for example, by belonging to an ethnic or religious minority or by being LGBTQ. One such driver can be seen, for example, in authoritarian Eritrea: Over the last years, tens of thousands of Eritreans have fled their country to avoid the so-called 'national service', an unpaid, quasi-endless forced labour, which according to many observers borders on state-organized slavery (*Economist*, 2014; Hirt, 2016).

Apart from these rather overt forms of political violence, people may also leave their homes because they do not have enough food to sustain their children and themselves due to political decision-making on the meso level. In pre-revolutionary Syria, for example, hundreds of thousands of people have had to leave their homes as internal migrants because they suffered from a prolonged, climate-related drought period with little to no assistance from the Syrian government or the international community (Fröhlich, 2016). Such a breach of the social contract between citizens and government can also arguably be classified as an – albeit indirect – form of political violence.

All these different reasons for migration out of violence require different responses, either when seeking to address root causes of migration or when formulating policies of protection and assistance, which is why they have to be separated analytically. Furthermore, it is important to analyse *when* people begin to migrate. Do they leave their

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homes when the violence reaches a certain level? Do different groups of people have different 'migration thresholds'? In the case of the Syrian civil war, for example, it was only with the beginning of regime bombardments of civilian neighbourhoods in the summer of 2012 that many people left their homes, either to other parts of the country (as 'internally displaced people', IDPs) or to neighbouring states. Later in the war, especially with the rise of the so-called 'Islamic State' in 2014, many Syrians fled not only the regime bombardments and the ensuing violent practices of pro and anti-regime militias, including sectarian killings, but also the immense danger of becoming victims of terrorist attacks or of kidnapping. Without a better knowledge of the different thresholds with regard to migration out of violence, prevention and mitigation efforts remain ad hoc and largely untargeted.

We also have to ask *who* is moving. Those who are exposed to the highest levels of violence in a particular region or those who fear that they might be exposed to high levels of violence in the near future? What about those who want to move but cannot do so, because they might be trapped in beleaguered cities or do not have the resources to migrate? Are all members of a particular group moving or only parts of it, for example, only young men, women, children or old people? Who decides when to migrate and who is ultimately moving? Can people decide for themselves or do others, for example family members, decide on their behalf? What role do diasporas play (Kapur, 2014; King and Olsson, 2014)? When do they act as pull factors for those who move?

Against this background, the micro level decision-making of individual refugees or their families are dependent on potentially violent social structures, for example, when only those family members are provided with the means to migrate who are considered most likely to survive and build a new life for themselves, which can then provide for the financial needs of those who remain at home. Such decisions are influenced by deeply ingrained, but essentially socially constructed gender images and other assigned roles and attitudes. Insights into such cases can help us understand the composition of migration movements, for example, young men on the Italian island of Lampedusa or Syrian families in Jordan. This is important for host countries in dealing with new immigrants on a meso level as well as for the development of strategies to combat the root causes of migration on a macro level. A good and comprehensive knowledge of who is moving and why, taking into account already existing research on parts of these issues, but expanding it with systematic studies on this topic, is a prerequisite both for attempts to curb the multiple reasons for human mobility and for successful integration of immigrants.

In addition to these more common and intuitive questions regarding the relationship between human mobility and violence, migration can also be a *conflict-charged, insecure and violent process* in itself. Border crossings, navigating the Mediterranean, and the political economy of human trafficking are potentially just as violent as the life people are trying to get away from or as what awaits them in the places they move to, however temporarily. We lack systematic knowledge about the violent structures which emerge on boats on which people cross the seas, in camps or in shelters and informal settlements. This is linked to the question of who is moving away from which types of violence, but also relevant for how to respond to migration movements.

From the very few analyses that exist, for example, Inhetveen's (2010) comprehensive ethnographic study of two refugee camps in Zambia, we can assume that political orders emerge on a meso level inside camps and shelters, in particular at the intersection of power dynamics within the refugee group and the involvement of the international refugee regime, including organizations like the UNHCR as well as a plethora of state and non-governmental agencies. Therefore, we have to ask which local, national, international and transnational actors interact and are thereby creating which type of violent structure(s), leading to which type of violent process. The internal power dynamics in camps and shelters are constituted, among other things, by the socio-structural composition of the inhabitants, their ties and social networks as well as their resource endowments in terms of finances (Inhetveen, 2010). Reports about the Zaatari camp for Syrian refugees in Northern Jordan, currently hosting approx. 80,000 refugees (August 2016), show that, on the one hand, an origin-based camp structure facilitates interaction between individuals and social groups stemming from the same region in Syria. On the other, it perpetuates hierarchical structures of social status and family prestige and renders living together difficult beyond these pre-existing identity markers. But what happens when camps or shelters do not replicate the same hierarchical structures as in the home countries of the inhabitants, because, for example, camps or shelters are composed of a lot of people from different countries, with different cultural backgrounds, traditions, values and norms? Hence, when planning and managing shelters, those responsible should be aware of the intersectional markers (Crenshaw, 1991; Knudsen, 2007) characterizing the people they are trying to protect. Disaggregated data on gender, age, health, ethnicity, religion etc. is a necessary prerequisite for this, but is also just the very first step on the way to a comprehensive understanding of the social stratifications of refugee societies in different settings.

Furthermore, even though camps and shelters should be controlled by the state on whose territory they are built, security within these places is not necessarily provided by the state as a public good, but can be a private good, provided only for those who have relevant personal connections to security forces and/or resources which allow them to pay for security. In the already mentioned Zaatari camp, security is not only or even primarily provided by Jordanian state agencies; rather, influential Syrians who have strong connections to both the 'UNHCR mayor' as well as the Jordanian head of security are said to exert informal violent control, thereby excluding those whom they do not feel connected to (Sullivan and Tobin, 2014). International actors

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have to take this into account, because their actions can potentially exacerbate existing tensions or even create new ones. This might create new reasons for migration, this time out of camps and shelters, but under changed conditions: Private resources will have been at least partly exploited or often even completely depleted to reach the first destination and to sustain life there, and registration in international refugee databases may prohibit further movement. Nevertheless, we know very little so far about both trapped populations as well as multiple displacement and its reasons and consequences, while at the same time those who are displaced more than once are often the most vulnerable parts of refugee societies.

Last but not least, when people manage to get to a camp or shelter, they might be provided with services that allow them to satisfy their basic needs, but they might be deprived of other things such as freedom of movement. For example, the Syrian refugees are currently not allowed to leave Zaatari, making them akin to camp prisoners in the semi-desert. Leaving and being caught outside the camp without the necessary documentation could lead to the immediate forced deportation by Jordanian security forces back to Syria, namely, to the Southern war-zone in the proximity of Deraa (Bank, 2016). Hence, the Syrian refugees in Zaatari are also a type of 'trapped population' (Humble, 2014) even though they are not trapped in their country of origin, but in a refugee camp (Stevens and Fröhlich, 2015). Therefore people might prefer informal shelters over official refugee camps. However, political orders and hierarchies as well as violence are very likely to also exist in informal shelters, where they might be even more difficult to control and regulate.

Migration can also be a *movement into violence*. Crime statistics and research show that the vast majority of refugees are themselves not reaching for weapons, nor contributing to conflicts in their home regions and present locations in any way. There is thus no indication whatsoever that the majority of current refugees, especially those trying to reach Europe, are 'refugee warriors'. Rather, they are 'war refugees' fleeing mass violence and persecution in their home countries (Leenders, 2009). But migrants may again become victims of structural and physical violence themselves in the places they flee to.

Migrants may be victims of physical violence that can be based on intersectional markers such as gender, age, health, or sexual orientation, for example in refugee shelters. Therefore, it is important to understand the composition of migrant groups in order to provide for special forms of protection for particularly vulnerable groups, such as female migrants or unaccompanied minors. But it is not only physical violence which migrants are suffering from.

Today, massive reservations towards refugees exist throughout the EU. For example, 64% of the Polish people are said to not want refugees coming to Poland (Cienski, 2016). Such attitudes are reflected in and supported by simplistic connections between migration and terrorism which have repeatedly been articulated by politicians across Europe. They mainly stem from a populist calculus, aiming to score easy points with one-sided messages. Thereby people's fear of terrorist attacks is instrumentalized to sweepingly criminalize migrants. Statements such as '70% of the migrants are young men and they look like an army' (by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, quoted in The Guardian 2015) or 'We must not allow our compassion to imperil our security' by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage (2015) are by no means the exception. However, directly linking migration and violence is not only devoid of empirical evidence. It also leads to simplistic solutions for dealing with one of the major political and humanitarian challenges of our time and, even worse, may foster outright xenophobia.

Even though the majority of the alleged terrorists responsible for the attacks in Paris on 7 January and 13 November 2015, in Brussels on 22 March 2016, or in Nice on 14 July 2016 were no migrants themselves but grew up in the European Union, both politicians and pundits across Europe have referred to some of the perpetrators' 'migratory backgrounds' as second or third-generation immigrants whose families hailed from Northern African, Muslim-majority countries. Many political decision-makers and pundits further stressed the training that some of the attackers had received since 2014 in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, in territories dominated by the so-called 'Islamic State', the jihadist-terrorist organization that has claimed responsibility for the Paris, Brussels and Nice attacks. Against this background, an image of the 'refugee-as-(potential-)terrorist' has emerged since 2015 – and it seems to resonate quite strongly in a number of European countries.[1]

Taken together, the relative simultaneity of the flight of hundreds of thousands of migrants across the Mediterranean and the terrorist attacks in Europe in combination with the economics of public attention, have allowed these opinions to become rather loud and prominent all around. Thereby, migrants have become victims of structural violence, this time not in the countries they flee from, but in the countries in which they seek refuge.

Furthermore, receiving countries classify migrants into different categories, thereby deciding who is entitled to receive which type of assistance. Such decisions can be based on intersectional categories and lead to hierarchical relations between different groups of migrants including differentiated access to and benefit of certain rights (Mountz, 2003; Yea, 2015). While the effects of this depend on the composition of the specific migrant group, which is why it is important to know who is moving when from what form of violence, ultimately this can lead to structural forms of violence and hinder the integration of migrants in the receiving societies.

Overall, we do not yet fully comprehend the impact of human mobility across the different levels of a receiving society, from civil society, jurisprudence, to executive authority. It is still an open question, for example, why migration leads to welcoming hospitality in the host countries in some contexts, while in others it fosters exclusion and xenophobia. Outright hostility against immigrants and a very strongly pronounced goodwill and willingness to help immigrants from war-zones often co-exist, for instance in Germany and Sweden today.

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Broader Lessons

Even though not every single study can take into account all the questions raised above, we argue that it is important that researchers and policy makers alike are aware of the (different forms of) violence inherent in the migrant experience. The common assumption that the violence ends in the moment that a migrant reaches a place which is not considered 'at war', 'under siege' or 'in distress' urgently needs to be revised. For instance, while refugee camps can certainly provide safe havens for human beings trying to get away from violence, they may just as well reproduce old or create new patterns of violence. They also may protect some and at the same time expose others to violence. Also, while integration policies usually aim to eventually turn immigrants into full members of their new host society, they often do not even come close to considering the intersectional characteristics of different groups of migrants and their diverging needs. Instead, policy and public discourses as well as some academic studies tend to conceive of immigrants as a homogenous group with largely similar needs, and lose sight of the individual experience of being forced to leave your home for the sake of economizing and mainstreaming migration management practices. The experience of a migrating unaccompanied minor, however, is radically different from that of a female migrant, from that of a family migrating together, from that of an old person migrating, etc. Similarly, migration and integration policies tend to conceive of migrants as passive victims, ignoring the fact that they have agency and want to determine their own fate and future.

With the questions raised in this article, we aim to draw attention to the fact that both designing migration policies and working with migrants from whichever background can have a myriad of unintended consequences which need more attention. Therefore, we urge policy makers and researchers to bring back the micro level to studies of migration as well as migration policies, even though a perceived increase in human mobility on the global scale may lead to a perceived need for ad hoc measures. We are, of course, aware that this is a huge challenge, since motivations for and forms of migration are constantly changing, and studying these phenomena involves numerous methodological and ethical considerations, not least due to questions of access and the role of the researchers themselves. However, in our opinion this is the only way to honour the humanity of migrants and a necessary step to fully protect them from physical, psychological and structural harm.

Notes

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1. See for example, Hungarian PM Orbán quoted in Al Jazeera (2015) or Filip Dewinter, leading figure of the Flemish secessionist Vlaams Belang party quoted in Al Jazeera (2015).

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Author Information

André Bank is Senior Research Fellow at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Institute of Middle East Studies, in Hamburg, Germany. His research has been published, among others, in *Democratization*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Middle East Policy*, *Third World Quarterly* as well as a number of edited volumes. Email: andre.bank@giga-hamburg.de

Christiane Fröhlich is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Hamburg, Germany. Her research focuses on reasons for migration, with a particular focus on environmental drivers. Her work has been published, among others, in *Migration and Development*, *Peace Review*, *Contemporary Levant* as well as a number of edited volumes. More information at www.christianefroehlich.de

Andrea Schneiker is Professor of Political Science at the University of Siegen, Germany. Her research focuses on international security and non-state security actors. She is author of the book *Humanitarian NGOs, (In)Security and Identity* (Routledge, 2015) and has published in *Voluntas*, *Disasters*, *Millennium*, *Security Dialogue*, and *Critical Military Studies*. Email: schneiker@sozialwissenschaften.uni-siegen.de

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