ETHNIC POLITICS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF ARMED CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN: A CASE STUDY OF THE JONGLEI STATE

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DECLARATION

I, **ARIKE SIMON**, hereby declare that this research project, "Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict in South Sudan: A Case Study of Jonglei State (2013-2025)" is my original work and has not been submitted in part or full for any other degree or diploma at any other university or higher education institute. Any work or ideas of others used have been fully referenced in accordance with academic standards.

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APPROVAL

I declare that, this research project was undertaken with my supervision and that it is submitted for approval.

Name:.....Feta Simon..... Signature:.....

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DEDICATION

To the people of Jonglei State - the Dinka, Nuer and Murle people - who have suffered so much violence without cause. May this work, in its own small way, help to bring lasting peace. And to all scholars who find it crucial in promoting stability and peace in the South Sudan at large.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the role ethnic politics has played in sustaining armed conflict in South Sudan from 2013-2025, focusing at the sub-national level on Jonglei State. Notwithstanding multiple peace agreements, most significantly the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS, 2015) and the Revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS, 2018), armed conflict has persisted in Jonglei with the United Nations estimating 280,000 internally displaced persons in the state as of early 2026. This research finds that the ongoing violence is not a failure of diplomacy or the result of "primordial" ethnic hatreds between the Dinka, Nuer and Murle peoples, but rather a systematic consequence of ethnic politics: the strategic mobilisation of ethnic identity by national, regional and local political elites to gain and consolidate power, hinder implementation of peace agreements and sustain the formation of armed groups.

Using a constructivist-instrumentalist approach, complemented by the ethnic security dilemma and critical liberal peacebuilding, the study undertakes a qualitative secondary analysis of peer-reviewed literature, institutional and policy documents. The analysis is organised around three research objectives: to analyse the political mobilisation of ethnic identity in Jonglei; to analyse the effects of ethnic politics on armed group formation; and to analyse the effects of ethnic politics on the implementation of peace agreements and national reconciliation.

The research findings show that ethnic identities in Jonglei are socially constructed and instrumentalised, rather than primordial; that armed groups are politically structured formations, enabled by ethnic recruitment, patronage and the social reproduction of masculinities, and sustained by the absence of institutions; and that peace agreement failures are largely explained by elite-controlled fragmentation - the deliberate maintenance of ethnic division and institutional weakness by ruling elites who profit from conflict. The study points to five key gaps in the literature, including the failure to consider sub-national processes in Jonglei; the under-representation of the Murle community in scholarly and policy debate; and the under-theorisation of community-level dynamics of peace agreement failure.

The study offers key recommendations for peace practitioners, the Government of South Sudan, and researchers, which include refocusing peace architecture on sub-national conflict transformation, reforming Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) policy to account for cultural dynamics of armed group membership, operationalising transitional justice mechanisms, and investing in long-term community-led reconciliation processes, such as the 1999 Wunlit Conference.

Keywords:

Ethnic politics, armed conflict, Jonglei State, South Sudan, constructivism, instrumentalism, security dilemma, peace agreements, R-ARCSS, ethnic mobilisation, Dinka, Nuer, Murle.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
AU	African Union
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IPI	International Peace Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
RJMEC	Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement – In Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UN	United Nations
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction.

This study examines the persistence of ethnic politics in fueling armed conflict in South Sudan between 2013 and 2025, with a sub-national emphasis on Jonglei State. The ongoing violence in South Sudan, despite two international peace agreements, are a puzzle in African politics, both analytically and in human cost. With estimates of approximately 280,000 internally displaced persons in Jonglei State alone in early 2026 (UN News, 2026), the human costs of the conflict demands, not only diplomatic efforts, but also the analytical rigour of scholars to unravel the factors that have made peace so elusive.

The following chapters make a multi-faceted argument about this puzzle. Chapter Two reviews the existing literature and theories, and demonstrates that the explanations of the current conflict, based on national elite competition and primordial ethnic hatred, are unable to account for the sub-national recurrent violence. It identifies five major deficiencies in this literature, and develops the study's theoretical underpinning: a hybrid of social constructivism, instrumentalism, the ethnic security dilemma and critical liberal peace-building theory. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology, justifying the need for a qualitative secondary data analysis and a documentary review which directed the evidence-gathering and analysis process. The core chapters of the study are Chapter Four, which examines in three interrelated ways the politicization of ethnic identity, the ways in which ethnic politics enables the emergence and perpetuation of armed groups and the ways in which it undermines local implementation of peace agreements in Jonglei state. Chapter Five draws the study to a close, highlighting a number of theoretical points about the sub-national processes of ethnic conflict reproduction, and including policy recommendations for peace practitioners, the Government of South Sudan and academia.

The three themes intertwine across the five chapters of the study. First, that ethnicity in Jonglei is not a natural fact but a constructed and politicized resource - created by colonial modes of administration, militarized by the SPLA and reproduced by elites whose power depends on its reproduction. Second, that the peace agreements in South Sudan have failed not due to diplomatic incompetence but rather a design failure that is endemic to peace agreements premised upon elite power sharing that overlook the sub-national dynamics of ethnic violence. Third, that a case study of Jonglei State, at the sub-national level, is not a constraint but rather a focus because it is at the community level, among the Dinka, Nuer and

Murle, that the causes of conflict are found and where peace must be made. Readers will appreciate that this book is different to many others on South Sudan in two respects. First, that it is not about Salva Kiir and Riek Machar and second, that the Murle people are not just the spoilers. Both are analytical advances and both provide avenues for research that have been largely neglected. The following chapters explain why.

1.1 Background to the Study

On the 9 July 2011 South Sudan was born as the world's newest state. But the honeymoon didn't last long. It was born with weak institutions: the civil war with Sudan had resulted in a militarized state. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) which led the war for independence, was a coalition of various ethnically-based military factions which were preserved after independence. Rather, they were institutionalized in the new state, institutionalizing ethnic and factional politics in South Sudanese politics (Kulang, 2021). This is evident in South Sudan's northeastern Jonglei State. It's the largest state by territory and the home of the three major groups - the Dinka, Nuer and Murle - whose relations were moderated by a history of cattle herding and cattle raiding, and colonialism. The groups have not been violence-prone. They had fluid identities, transactional relationships and intermittent but not ongoing violence. It was the political economy of the independence and post-independence periods - with its struggles for control of the state and its resources, the emergence of ethnically based armed groups and the politicization of these identities by political entrepreneurs - that transformed these identities into the politically mobilized and militarized groups they are today (Abrahamsen, 2020; Stringham & Forney, 2017).

The post-independence peace ended in December 2013. The war, which started as a political fight between the President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar in the ruling party (SPLM), was soon ethnicised: Kiir flew around to rally his Dinka political and military allies, while Machar organised his Nuer allies, and a political power struggle among the elites was militarised as an ethnic conflict on the ground in some states, such as Jonglei. The results in Jonglei were devastating. The ongoing war between the Dinka, Nuer and Murle intensified due to the selective disarmament of Lou Nuer in the post-CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement) 2005 period (this also contributed to an unequal armaments' build-up that corresponded to Posen's (1993) notion of a structural security dilemma). Inter-ethnic attacks were conducted by ethnic militias such as the Lou Nuer White Army, Dinka Bor militias and

the Cobra Faction (David Yau Yau) in a systematic and coordinated way that was indicative of sub-state ethnic political mobilization.

Then two international peace agreements were negotiated. The Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) was brokered by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), African Union and the United Nations in August 2015. It collapsed a year later. The Revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS) signed in September 2018 led to a transition government and a plan for security sector reform, transitional justice and elections. By the beginning of 2026, there had been four extensions of the transition, none of the other major institutional arrangements under the agreement had taken place (such as the Hybrid Court for South Sudan) and there was violence and displacement in Jonglei (RJMEC, 2026; OCHA, 2026). The Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission had declared all the major parties to the agreement in chronic non-compliance (Amani Africa, 2026). The peace agreement - peace agreement - violence cycle cannot be explained away by the success of the peace negotiations or benevolence of elites. This current study claims it is the interaction between ethnic politics and armed conflicts at the sub-national level, and the absence of this in the national peace agreements and under-theorization in the academic literature. This study is thus framed.

1.2 Problem Statement.

Since December 2013, South Sudan has been experiencing a new armed conflict. Numerous civilians have lost their lives because of the violence. It has disintegrated communities and undermined the institutions of states. The United Nations estimates close to 280,000 displaced civilians in 2026 in Jonglei State. Humanitarian warnings were issued urgently to alert to a looming crisis (UN News, 2026). In 2015, an Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict (ARCSS) was signed. It was followed by the Revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS) in 2018. Included in the mediation have been the IGAD, the African Union, and the United Nations. But with armed violence, the armies have not dropped. Politicization of ethnicity is one of the major causes of this instability. Ethnicity is neutral, in its turn (Abdalla & Yahya, 2021). But this is being used manipulatively by ethnic identity under the power of political elites. Recruitment of fighters is done ethnically. The propaganda that they spread increases distrust between the communities. They encourage loyalty in ethnic groups in the form of patronage networks. They ostracize other communities competing for state resources and governance. This will turn a collective cultural identity into a weapon of military

mobilization (Abdalla & Yahya, 2021). What occurs is deep-rooted ethnic isolation and vengeance murder. Unity among the country's citizens is slowly deteriorating. Kulang (2021) illustrates that this process goes directly against state-building. To manipulate elites, weak institutions are required. Elite manipulation, in its turn, further undermines the institutions. This crisis is exacerbated by economic mismanagement. Political resentment is encouraged by oil dependence, hyperinflation, and currency collapse (Bramston, 2025). Young men who have not been employed are easily enlisted in the ethnic-based armed groups. The key question then has not been adequately addressed in the current literature: why have peace agreements always failed to stop armed conflict in South Sudan?

At the sub-national level, the army politics and inter-ethnic war in South Sudan have not been explored in detail. The current scholarship is mostly focused on national elite rivalry. It is mainly centred on President Salva Kiir and the former vice president Riek Machar. Scholarly attention is much less on local and regional ethnic mobilization dynamics. Abrahamsen (2020) makes this gap very explicit. There is a great deal of debate in the analysis of ethnic conflict at the micro level, especially in Jonglei. Jonglei State requires intense and immediate research. It has been one of the most volatile parts of the country since the time of independence. Dinka, Nuer, and Murle inter-ethnic conflicts have been unabated. Self-structured armed groups still go on with impunity. Peace programs and government security agencies have been unable to stabilize the region on a number of occasions (Abrahamsen, 2020). OCHA (2026) ensured that the conflict went on into early 2026. The displacement of masses and civilians did not end. This proves the fact that the existing conflict-resolution strategies are structurally weak. According to Admin (2024), the identified areas of failure are weak implementation, mutual distrust, and community exclusion. Roach (2024) further provides that weak states give elites the ability to pursue their short-term goals of maintaining power, instead of the long-term interests of peace.

I contend that the persistence of war is not an issue of diplomatic ineffectiveness. It shows how ethnicity has been purposely created as a political tool. Current literature identifies general trends, but does not show how local mechanisms occurred. In order to have meaningful analysis, one must understand the sub-national stuff in Jonglei. This local lens is missing, and thus, peace-building initiatives are still shallow and off track. It is not solely an academic gap that has direct consequences on policy and even human lives. This is critically lacking in terms of empirical focus on ethnic politics and reproduction of local conflicts, especially in Jonglei State, the period of 2013-2025 (Levi, 2025; Kulang, 2021). This is

because, according to my argument, the localized dimension is precisely the place of conflict between sustainability and standardization. It is in this gap that this paper fills. It does a scathing review of ethnic politics and the ongoing armed confrontation in South Sudan. The main case study is Jonglei State.

1.3 Major Objective

To investigate how ethnic politics have contributed to the continuation of armed conflict in South Sudan between 2013 and 2025, with a specific focus on Jonglei.

1.3.1 Research Questions

- How has ethnic identity been utilized in South Sudan politically?
- What role has ethnic politics played in creation and maintenance of armed groups?
- What impact does ethnic politics have on the process of peace agreements and reconciliation?

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

- To analyze how ethnic identity is used as a tool for political mobilization in Jonglei, South Sudan.
- To examine the relationship between ethnic politics and the formation of armed groups.
- To assess the effects of ethnic politics on the implementation of peace agreements and national reconciliation.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study is limited in its scope in three ways: thematically, geographically and temporally. Thematically, this study is about the relationship between ethnic politics and armed conflict. This is not a study of all the causes of violence in South Sudan, but rather a focus on the role of ethnic political mobilization (including elite manipulation, client-patron networks, propaganda and formation of armed groups) in prolonging armed conflict and the implementation of the peace agreement. Economic, climatic and regional factors in the conflict are taken into account as far as they influence the themes of the study, but are not independent variables.

This study focuses on Jonglei State, in particular the counties of Bor, Akobo, Ayod and Uror and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), home of the Murle people and where the worst of the sub-national violence has been seen during the period of the study. National issues ranging from the Kiir-Machar power struggle, to IGAD negotiations and the R-ARCSS model are included where they affected the processes of sub-national politics in Jonglei.

The study takes a temporal span from December 2013, the start of the latest phase of the civil war with the onset of violence between SPLA and SPLA-IO, to 2025 and the beginning of 2016 for more recent events that are significant to this study. This includes the ARCSS agreement and failure (2015), the R-ARCSS negotiations and implementation (2018) and the entire history of armed group activity in Jonglei during the period of the study.

1.5 Significance of the study.

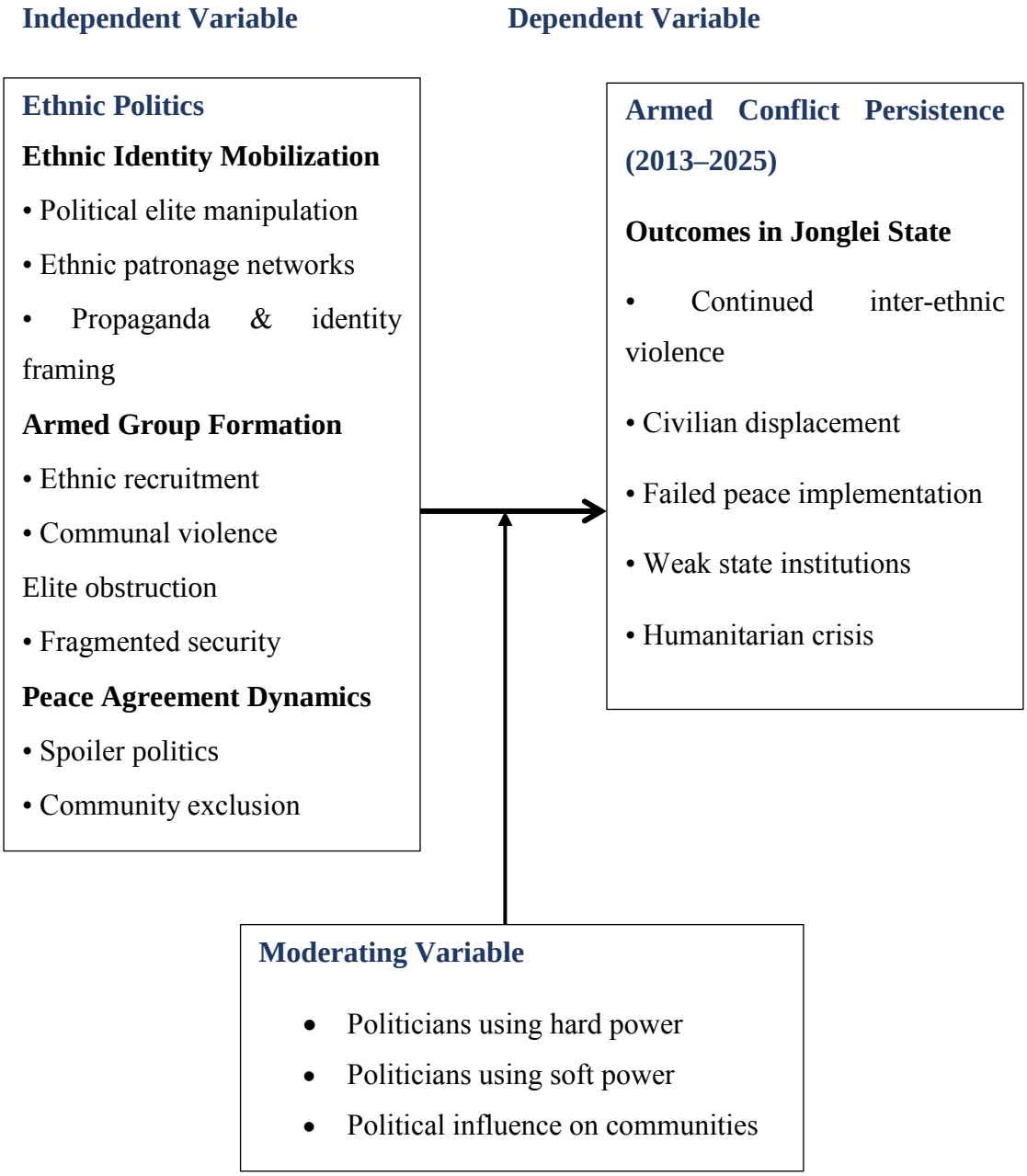
This research makes three types of contributions: theoretical, empirical and policy. First, this study builds on the emerging literature on ethnic conflict and sub-national violence in Africa in that it demonstrates the theoretical limits of primordialism and instrumentalism (with an emphasis on national elites) to explain the Jonglei conflict. By integrating constructivist, instrumentalist (with a focus on elites) and security dilemma theories at the sub-national level, it provides a more comprehensive view of the construction, politicization and institutionalisation of ethnic identity at sub-national levels that moves beyond the analyses that juxtapose elite instrumentalism and primordial sentiments that are typical of South Sudanese studies. This theoretical advancement is a response to the challenge by Abrahamsen (2020) and elaborated on by Levi (2025).

In terms of empirical research, it also offers a systematic and empirical analysis of ethnic political developments in Jonglei State over the period 2013-2025 - a period and sub-national level of analysis that has been overlooked. The study's review of peer-reviewed literature, policy and institutional reports and policy documents and its emphasis on an analysis of the three major Jonglei ethnic groups (the Dinka, the Nuer and the Murle) corrects a gap in the literature, which has focused on the Dinka-Nuer conflict to the exclusion of the Murle. The empirical aspect of this study is significant not only for research on South Sudan, but also for comparative research on sub-national ethnic conflict in post-colonial Africa.

Policies-wise, the study has relevance to peace practitioners, international peacemakers and the South Sudanese Government. Having demonstrated that the failure of ARCSS and R-ARCSS in Jonglei is related to the structural role of elite-based peace-building, not its

implementation, the study suggests that the peace-building strategy should change: of sub-national conflict transformation, locally-owned reconciliation and transitional justice mechanisms. These lessons emerge from the empirical case study of Jonglei, and are responsive to the local dynamics of ethnic political reproduction identified in the analytical chapters. In a conflict that has resulted in the displacement of 280,000 people (UN News, 2026) and humanitarian crisis, the policy relevance of such research is not a privilege, but a responsibility.

1.6 Conceptual Framework



Citation: The work is based on the modification of Abdalla and Yahya (2021), Kulang (2021), and Abrahamsen (2020); the researcher modified it (2025).

The conceptual framework illustrates how ethnic politics and the continuation of armed conflict in South Sudan are interrelated, with a particular view to Jonglei State during the timeframe 2013 to 2025. The framework is set up based on the three particular objectives of the study and the ethnic politics are defined as the independent variable, armed conflict persistence as the dependent variable and institutional and external conditions as the moderating variable.

The independent variable, ethnic politics, acts by way of three inter-related dimensions that directly relate to the three particular objectives. The first dimension is ethnic identity mobilization that explores the deliberate use of ethnic identity by the political elites in Jonglei to develop political power bases and recruit followers using patronage networks, propaganda and identity framing. The second dimension is armed group formation, which discusses how the organization of ethnic identity leads to ethnically based armed group formation involving communal violence, ethnic recruiting, and a disorganized security environment. The third dimension is peace agreement dynamics, which studies the role of ethnic elites in blocking peace implementation as spoiler politics, community exclusion, and strategic maintenance of conflict to continue to receive political rents.

The dependent variable will be the continuance of armed conflict in the Jonglei State between 2013 and 2025, which will be measured in five observable outcomes of continued inter-ethnic violence, mass displacement of civilians, failure of the implementation of peace agreement, weak institutions of the state and the consequent humanitarian crisis. I would argue that these are not just accidental results but directly generated and reproduced by the ethnic political processes as found in the independent variable.

Moderating variable in this framework is the political influence through Hard power, including power, coercion, and security force control, and soft power, including persuasion, political messaging, and community influence, are used by political leaders to influence the way people react to ethnic politics. This impact may reinforce or undermine the linkage between ethnic politics and the continuation of armed conflict in the Jonglei State by stimulating communities to condone violence or by fostering cooperation and peace.

Collectively, the framework asserts that ethnic politics is not a pre-existing situation of the South Sudanese conflict but its main mechanism. The moderating variable is used to describe the variation in intensity and duration at various periods and sub-regions, whereas the dependent variable identifies the cumulative human and institutional effects. The following chapters are based on empirical analysis guided by this framework.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The chapter is a review of the available academic literature on ethnic politics and armed conflict in post-independence South Sudan and Jonglei State specifically in the year 2013-2025. The review is structured on the basis of four thematic pillars which include the conceptual definition of key variables, theoretical framework of the understanding of ethnicity and political mobilization, critical engagement with the prevailing arguments in the field as well as identification of the gaps that the current study aims to fill. I rely on the literature in comparative politics, conflict studies and African political economy to place the Jonglei State case in the context of more general debate. Simultaneously, I would argue that a large portion of the available literature considers ethnicity as a static structural state as opposed to a dynamic political tool, which this research will aim to redress.

2.1 Ethnic Identity

In this study, ethnic identity is subjective perception of belonging to a social group named which has members that have a belief in a common ancestry, culture, language, or historical memory (Horowitz, 1985). My ethnicity is based on a constructivist, as opposed to a primordialist interpretation. Primordialists like Geertz (1963) opined that ethnic attachments are profound, innate and emotive, therefore they are an irreversible source of political fragmentation. I cannot agree with this opinion. Ethnicity is not a matter of heredity, but it is actively formed, negotiated and instrumentalized by political elites who have a vested interest in its mobilization (Abrahamsen, 2020). This is vividly exemplified in how Dinka, Nuer and Murle identities have been redefined numerous times to fit the aims of recruitment and territorial domination by leaders of armed factions in Jonglei State, especially following the failure of the 2013 peace process.

Stringham and Forney (2017) provide a subtle explanation of how ethnic identity is formed in South Sudan by demonstrating that soldiers and combatants tend to accept ethnic labels not due to primordial loyalty but because of material insecurity, fear, and manipulation by the elite. I concur with this reading and further expand it to claim that ethnic identity in Jonglei is not a source of conflict but rather a channel, which is used to articulate and further develop political competition.

2.2 Political Mobilization.

Political mobilization, in this context of this research, denotes the way in which political players mobilize, organize and channel collective action towards a fixed group of people to achieve political goals (Tilly, 1978). Ethnic political mobilization is a term that is used specifically to refer to the fact that ethnic identity is used as the major cornerstone of the recruitment of the followers, grievance framing, and the collective action justification. In South Sudan, Kulang (2021) shows that politics of mobilization based on ethnicity has been the most dominant approach of the government and opposition forces since independence in 2011. I contend that this trend is acutely felt in Jonglei State, where there are no effective state institutions and ethnically organized armed groups have seized the vacuum of governance easily.

I will argue that mobilization is not just spontaneous, but has to be framed by political entrepreneurs who have to transform structural grievances, including land disputes, cattle raiding, and resource competition, into ethnic discourses. This coincides with resource mobilization theory of social movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) that proposes that collective action is contingent on organizational resource availability, organizational leadership and coherent collective identity. The armed group of the Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor, as well as the Cobra Faction of David Yau Yau, in Jonglei, exemplifies this dynamic exactly.

2.3 Armed Conflict

The defining concept of armed conflict in this paper is defined as organized, protracted political violence between at least one-armed force with at least one side having more than a set number of casualties (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2023). I draw a line between interstate conflict, civil war and sub-national armed conflict. Most of the violence in Jonglei State would fall into the third category: localized yet politically relevant armed conflict between ethnically organized militia groups, government forces and opposition groups. Rolandsen (2015) rightly observes that the conflicts in South Sudan are not just ethnic conflicts, but are overlaid with resource competition, representation in politics, and local power. I develop on this observation to suggest that armed conflict in Jonglei is best interpreted as the expression of ethnic political rivalry in the form of violence and not ethnic hatred per se.

2.4 Peace Agreement Implementation

Peace agreement implementation is the level at which parties involved in a negotiated settlement uphold their commitments such as ceasefire, security sector reform, transitional governance and accountability mechanisms (Stedman, 1997). The main peace framework that will be explored in this paper is the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS, 2018). Abdalla and Yahya (2021) observe that the application of the R-ARCSS has been severely limited owing to the still existing competition among elites along the ethnic lines, which directly informs the third goal of the research undertaken. I can say that especially in the Jonglei State, ethnic politics has compromised the peace implementation not only at the elite level but also at the community level of society where armed factions representing ethnic constituencies have declined to disarm and integrate into a single security apparatus.

2.5 Theoretical Review.

2.6 Realism

The most ancient and most powerful theoretical tradition of international relations is realism. It is based on the premise that the international system is anarchic, i.e., there is no overarching central authority that can control the behavior of actors, and that in the context of anarchy, self-interested actors are driven to seek power and security as their chief concerns. According to the classical realists like Morgenthau (1948), the pursuit of power is a natural aspect of human nature, thus making conflict an enduring aspect of political existence. The explanatory focus of structural realists (most notably Waltz 1979) was moved to the international system structure rather than human nature, and structural realists suggested that anarchy in itself generates the behavior of competition and self-help irrespective of the intentions of the individual actors. Applied to sub-state situations, realism sheds light on the actions of political elites in weak or failed states under the same logic of power maximization and survival as classical realists had applied to states in the international system. In South Sudan, where the post-independence state quickly turned into an elite struggle over political and military dominance instead of a state apparatus that could in fact govern the country, the realist approach can be used to explain why the political leaders, such as the President, Salva Kiir, and his Dinka-based networks, and the former Vice President, Riek Machar, and his Nuer-based forces, were always interested in the ret In this work, realism offers the analytical

prism based on which the behavior of the elites in the fragile state of South Sudan can be interpreted.

Realism has been the subject of continuous and extensive criticism on both ends of the international relations theory. Liberal institutionalists have claimed that the realism emphasis on power and material interest cannot explain the ability of international institutions, norms, and cooperation to alleviate conflict and generate lasting peace even in the anarchic conditions (Keohane, 1984). Most prominently, Wendt (1999) constructivists dispute the idea that state interests are pre-constituted and fixed, asserting that interests and identities are social and thus subject to change. Regarding ethnic conflict in particular, realism has been accused of being state-centric in a sense that makes it analytically blind to the communal dynamics of the sub-state; emphasizing states and elites as the main actors in the game, it overlooks the agency of ordinary communities, local armed forces and civil society actors whose action determines the results of conflicts in ways that can no longer be explained by the elite. Critics, too, observe that the pessimism of realism regarding human nature and the unending nature of conflict may be self-fulfilling in policy terms, offering a fatalistic justification as to why it is not, instead, trying to pursue trans-formative peace-building techniques that would otherwise be successful.

I support the idea of realism as a model of explaining the behavior of elites in South Sudan and Jonglei State, but I do not follow a purely structuralist interpretation. The fact that the civil war of December 2013 arose as a power struggle at the pinnacle of the South Sudanese state, namely, the struggle of Kiir and Machar over the SPLM and the means of state power, is quite in line with the realist narrative of elite power maximization under the circumstances of institutional weakness. Kulang (2021) shows that factional interest over institutional loyalty was a constant practice of political actors in SPLM, which realism predicts accurately. I would argue that realism is a better explanation of the motivation pattern that leads to elite conflict in South Sudan. But I agree with the critics that realism is not sufficient to understand the rise of ethnic identity, as opposed to class, region, and ideology, as the main means of political mobilization, or why communities in Jonglei are still experiencing violence years after the immediate competition between elites in 2013 has been partially tamed. In these dimensions, realism should be complemented with the constructivist and instrumentalist frames involved below.

2.7 Social Constructivism

Social Constructivism is a theoretical paradigm of international relations and social science, which argues that the most important structures of political behavior are social and not material, and that the identities and interests of actors are not pre-determined or fixed but are co-constructed in a historical process, in political discourse, and in common normative frameworks. Alexander Wendt developed the theory in the most systematic way in international relations, in a 1992 article that stated that anarchy is what states make of it, directly questioning the realist belief that the anarchic nature of the international system mechanically generates self-help behavior. Wendt (1999) argued that the international system is an order of ideas as opposed to material forces and that state identities and interests were constructed in the course of social interaction and not pre-determined by the structural position. When applied to the topic of ethnicity and armed conflict, constructivism assumes that ethnic identities are not primordial but social constructions that have been created and reproduced as part of historical processes, political institutions, colonial legacies, and ongoing political struggle. Theorists, including Anderson (1983) and Brubaker (2004), have created this logic specifically for ethnic and national identities, showing that the communities that people consider natural are, in fact, imagined and created organizationally. Abrahamsen (2020) directly applies this argument to the politics of African security by claiming that identity-based violence in African states cannot be explained outside of the political dynamics through which the categories of belonging and exclusion are produced by both state and non-state agents.

Constructivism has received a lot of criticism along various lines of theory. According to realists, constructivism is empirically indeterminate: when it comes to explaining why states behave in certain ways due to their ideational factors, like shared norms and identity, it simply fails to explain why certain normative frameworks are embraced by states and others are discarded, or why states often betray their commitment to cooperative norms when material interests dictate it. Rationalists also criticize constructivism as methodologically indeterminate, as providing process-tracing accounts of the formation of identities that cannot be systematically empirically falsified. Another, more narrow criticism is about the state-centrism inherent in the formulation: since Wendt limits his analysis to the systemic level of state-state interaction, the framework can do little to explain the sub-state ethnic dynamics, which form the main conflict arena in Jonglei (Koo, 2015). According to the post-structuralist critics, constructivism, although social in its orientation, is too complacent with the

methodological assumptions of positivism, in that it considers social structures to be stable enough to be studied as objects rather than as constantly battled discursive formations. Also, constructivism has been criticized as comparatively silent on the political economy forces that justify why particular elites make particular investments in certain identity constructions at certain historical junctures, as opposed to other ideational structures which could be equally rational in political terms.

I believe that constructivism is an essential ontological structure to this study, and I stand on this position despite the critics because of the fact that Jonglei State forces me to do so. The attack on state-centrism, although justifiable in the systemic terms of the original version of Wendt, does not deride constructivism as an analytical tool when used, as I use it here, at the sub-state and community level of ethnic identity construction. The Dinka, Nuer and Murle are not natural, primordially constituted categories: they are communities whose identities have been generated and solidified over centuries in the process of creating the administrative boundaries of the colonial state, in the work of organizing military units on ethnic lines by the SPLA, and in the course of decades of war that entrenched previously mobile communal boundaries into politically salient and mobilizable identities. The argument by Pruniere (2019) has the historical footing it needs, as it shows how colonial and post-independence politics shifted ethnic categories within South Sudan from loose social groupings to hardened political units. I accept the political economy critique: constructivism describes how ethnic identities are constructed, but not how particular constructions are strategically invoked at certain times. I hence combine constructivism with the instrumentalist approach discussed below, viewing the two as analytically complementary, but not competing: constructivism, how ethnic identities were made and institutionalized; instrumentalism, how they were mobilized and why strategically.

2.8 Instrumentalist Theory of Ethnicity

The Instrumentalist Theory of Ethnicity is the view that ethnic identity is neither a primordial nor inherent characteristic of human social existence but a highly changeable and flexible political asset that elites strategically utilize to gain power, attract adherents, define grievances, and further material interests. It has its main links with Bates (1983) and Brass's (1991) frames. Bates (1983) showed in the African context that ethnic appeals are indeed a rational political tactic by which politicians mobilize electoral constituencies, in the selective dispensation of patronage system, and delegitimize their opponents, not because ethnicity is

the most effective available instrument of organizing political support but because, at least, it is the most effective available instrument to mobilize political support under weak state institutions and competitive politics. Developing the framework, Brass (1991) has shown how ethnic symbols, historical accounts, and community resentment are strategically made and mobilized by political entrepreneurs to fulfill certain strategic functions, and how the communities react to these elite framings in manners that strengthen, but do not cross, ethnic boundaries. In the instrumentalist perspective, ethnic conflict occurs not due to pre-existing cultural hostility or primitivism; rather, it is a strategic decision on the part of an elite actor to mobilize ethnicity as a strategically useful tool of power acquisition, consolidation, and maintenance in situations where the state is unable or unwilling to resolve political rivalry using neutral institutional processes.

In spite of its usefulness in analytics, instrumentalism has received considerable criticism. The most longstanding critique is that the theory overvalues the elite agency at the cost of ordinary actors, making ethnic communities passive and manipulable objects of elite tutelage and thus distorting the extent to which ordinary people actually wield real agency in accepting or rejecting ethnic political projects. Williams (2015) argues that no individual theory is strong enough to explain ethnic conflict in all its complexity and that instrumentalism, with its overly narrow approach to elite motives of greediness and strategy, does not pay enough attention to the complexity and sincerity of communal resentments that drive common people without the guidance of the elite. This criticism is directly supported with empirical evidence in the study of Stringham and Forney (2017), who go further to prove in the case of South Sudan in particular that ethical solidarity on a community level is not only partially a matter of life survival strategy among individuals who suffer material insecurity and physical danger but also an artefact of elite manipulation. Another theoretical criticism is that instrumentalism is prone to circularity: when ethnicity is instrumentalized by any elite actor in any situation, the concept loses its analytical clarity and fails to explain why ethnic mobilization in different cases can have different degrees of success when the political actor is similarly opportunistic.

I concur with instrumentalism in a significant part as the main account of the smoldering of ethnic strife in Jonglei State, and I consider the empirical record to be compelling. The civil war that broke out in December 2013 was not the result of a historical issue of communal hatred; rather, it was a political break between Kiir and Machar - a power struggle in the SPLM, which was quickly ethicized by both leaders as a tactic of recruiting military forces.

As Kulang (2021) shows, the use of ethnic appeals by South Sudanese politicians to establish power bases and distribute patronage is systematic and the tendency is empirically observable in Jonglei, where armed group commanders in the Lou Nuer, Dinka Bor, Murle and other affiliated groups structured recruitment in explicitly ethnic terms as a means to mobilize fighters, maintain organizational cohesion, and obtain The Cobra Faction of David Yau Yau presents a rather vivid example: Yau Yau preached on Murle grievances about their lack of political representation and disarmament to maintain an armed insurgency to serve his political goals as much as those he allegedly served, communal interests.

I concede to the critics, however, that instrumentalism is analytically inadequate when used alone. The enduring insecurity experienced by the Murle community, based on decades of state marginalization, discriminative disarmament in relation to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and a history of cattle loss, illustrates that real, structurally created grievances perpetuate conflict at the communal level without the need to be organized by the elite. I thus support the view of Stringham and Forney (2017) that material insecurity cannot be reduced to elite manipulation at the community level, and that instrumentalism should be used in conjunction with constructivism and the ethnic security dilemma to give a full explanation of ethnic mobilization and armed conflict in Jonglei.

2.9 Security Dilemma of Ethnicity.

Posen (1993) and later Lake and Rothchild (1996) extend the classical understanding of the security dilemma to intra-state ethnic relations in situations of state weakness or collapse by applying the security dilemma to the intra-state level. In the traditional realist version of the security dilemma, the defensive actions of one state aimed at improving its security are interpreted as offensive preparations by the neighboring states, leading to the development of counter-armament and, ironically, weakening the security of all the participants. Posen (1993) applied this structural reasoning to ethnicities in collapsing states, by saying that where central governmental power collapses and is no longer able to ensure security, ethnic groups experience structural compulsion to defend themselves by arming and mobilizing, even when this is not accompanied by aggression. Neighboring groups see the defensive preparations of each group as the offensive preparations of the other, and a spiral of counter-mobilization and violence starts. Lake and Rothchild (1996) further developed this model by determining three main ways in which structural insecurity is transformed into organized ethnic violence: information failures, in which communities are not able to provide credible signals of

defensive intentions; commitment problems, in which no one can provide credible guarantees that agreements will be met once the security environment changes; and elite outbidding, in which the political elite escalate ethnic rhetoric to outcompete other In the context of international security, the ethnic security dilemma is a structural theory of sub-state conflict based on the logic of anarchy applied to the domestic level of ethnically fragmented and institutionally weak states.

The ethnic security dilemma has been attacked on a number of grounds. The framework, first, introduces into communal settings where decision-making is decentralized, emotionally filtered, and entrenched in locally specific political economies of cattle, bridewealth, and masculinity that the model fails to capture, rationalist assumptions of unitary, instrumentally rational actors. According to Stringham and Forney (2017), communal violence cannot be strategically calculated as the reduction of the South Sudanese context is both a social and economic institution that is rooted in community reproduction patterns. Second, the model has been criticized as structural determinism: since it views the security dilemma as a mechanically generated condition of state weakness, it runs the risk of concealing the agency of the political entrepreneur who creates insecurity to justify his or her mobilization and the political rents that prolonged conflict creates. According to Kindersley and Rolandsen (2019), leaders of armed groups in Greater Jonglei have deliberately instigated inter-communal attacks to trigger retaliatory cycles that they can use to solidify their power and enlist fighters. Third, the security dilemma model has a hard time explaining variation among structurally analogous instances of state weakness: why do some communities in Jonglei cope with episodic instances of inter-communal conflict without the full development of violence, whereas others degenerate into endemic violence given ostensibly similar structural circumstances?

I support the basic structural logic of the ethnic security dilemma and insist that the empirical record in Jonglei is too regular to its predictors to be discounted. The asymmetry in communal weaponry documented by the selective disarmament of the Lou Nuer by government forces and SPLA after the 2005 CPA led to mutual fear between the Lou Nuer and Murle, rational calculations in favour of re-armament by the Nuer, and triggered the spiral of retaliatory violence that escalated in 2009 and 2011 and directly prompted the 2 Kindersley and Rolandsen (2019) empirically record this sequence of events and it is congruent with the mechanism that was identified by Posen (1993): state-sponsored partial disarmament, which strengthened, not weakened, the structural preconditions of communal

insecurity. This does not exist as a speculation in theory, but it is recorded historical sequence. I do leave a strictly structural reading, however, by concurring with the critics in noting that the security dilemma in Jonglei is not merely a situation passively received, but is a policy actively promoted by political actors who have a vested interest in the continued existence of the situation. The ethnic security dilemma thus offers the structural framework of the Jonglei war, yet instrumentalism elucidates the intentional mobilization of that framework by participants with material interest in its perpetuation.

2.10 Liberal Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation Theory.

Liberal Peacebuilding Theory is of the view that sustained post-conflict peace can most certainly be attained by promoting democratic rule, the rule of law, market liberalization, protection of human rights, and the establishment of civil society institutions, which are able to control political contests non-violently. Liberal peacebuilding is based on Kantian liberal internationalism and institutionalized by the post-Cold War practices of the United Nations and Western donor states, which presupposes a functional relationship between democratic political structures, economic development, and the mitigation of violent conflict. One of the most rigorous scholarly formulations of this framework was that offered by Paris (2004), who suggested the existence of an institutionalization before liberalization, the slow, staged development of democratic and market institutions before fast political opening as the most promising method of creating sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. Another complementary and more transformative form of peacebuilding theory is the conflict transformation framework by Lederach (1997; 2016), which redefines peacebuilding not as the control of violence as an engineering of institutions but as a process of changing the relational structures, social identities, and systemic injustices that create and reproduce conflict. The pyramid model developed by Lederach presupposes that the three levels—top level (political and military leaders), mid-level (religious leaders and leaders of civil society), and grassroots communities should be engaged at the same time. This multi-level involvement, Lederach believes, is the only method that can achieve socially embedded peace, which is durable, as opposed to institutionally imposed peace, which is fragile.

The largest body of critical scholarship in the recent history of peace and conflict studies has been on liberal peacebuilding theory. Richmond (2011) contends that liberal peacebuilding is a paradigm of uniformity that foists Western democratic and market values on those with radically different political economies, traditions of governance, and cultures. Richmond

argues that the language of local ownership, which is often used by international organisations to justify their interventions, is usually used to integrate local elites into externally formulated processes at the expense of grassroots groups and traditional structures of authority. Paffenholz (2014) and Mac Ginty (2011) build a related critique of liberal peacebuilding that it ignores the existence of hybrid political orders whereby state institutions and customary authorities co-exist in complex and contesting formations, and that it does not address the everyday practices by which communities actually reproduce and produce peace at the local level. Specifically applied to South Sudan, Abdalla and Yahya (2021) note that the implementation of the R-ARCSS of 2018 has been highly limited by the inability to stop elite ethnic competition manifesting, which proves that the internationally designed R-ARCSS power-sharing arrangements are powerless against the structural incentives that ethnic political entrepreneurs have to flout the commitments to peace. The opponents of the conflict transformation model developed by Lederach point out that although its focus on transformation of relationships is theoretically advanced, the methodological implementation of it is difficult in terms of ongoing violence, where the long-term character of its application is what the conflict situation makes most difficult to realize.

I largely concur with the opponents of liberal peacebuilding theory, and the facts in Jonglei State make it hard to take a different view. The sequence of failures of externally mediated peace accords in South Sudan, the CPA of 2005, the ARCSS of 2015, and the R-ARCSS of 2018, shows that institutional forms that are constructed without sufficient attention to local social structures, communal security dilemmas, and the political economies of armed forces are structurally incompetent to deliver lasting peace. The CPA civilian disarmament campaign in Jonglei is the best example of how Richmond would critique this action: the fact that the Lou Nuer alone were targeted by disarmament, and other communities were left with their weapons, was an externally sanctioned intervention that exacerbated the ethnic security dilemma, turned peace mechanisms into perceived ethnic dominance, and solidified the ethnic grievances that were directly translated into the 201 This was not a failure of implementation or accident, but rather the foreseeable result of implementing an architecture of liberal peace in a place of great communal insecurity and institutional frailty.

I do not, though, support a wholesale rejection of peacebuilding theory. I would argue that the model of transformation of conflict proposed by Lederach, including its focus on multi-level interaction, the importance of relational reconstruction, and the focus on the centrality of community ownership, offers a much more empirically based framework of what a durable

peace in Jonglei would entail. The Jonglei experience of inter-communal dialogue processes and local peace mechanisms indicates that when international actors embrace locally-based processes and utilize customary structures of authority instead of circumventing them, more sustainable results can be attained at communal levels. I would align myself with reformed peacebuilding: the institutional structure of the liberal model is a needed structure, but must be radically localized, must place the Lederachian imperative of grassroots relational change at the heart of it, and must explicitly address the ethnic security dilemma at the community level, instead of depending on elite-level power-sharing formulae which have been shown ineffectively to reduce violence levels in Jonglei

2.11 Theoretical Synthesis

The five theories discussed in this review are complementary to each other and not exhaustive. Realism describes the underlying logic of elite power competition that precipitated the December 2013 crisis and has supported the subsequent elite obstruction of peace implementation; Social Constructivism describes how ethnic identities used to be historically created, politicized and made mobilizable; Instrumentalism describes the deliberate mobilization of those I suggest that the ethnic politics and armed conflict in Jonglei State between the years 2013 and 2025 can be explained only by the joint effect of all five frameworks, and that any attempt to explain the conflict by a theoretical framework, i.e., as a realist power struggle, primordial ethnic hatred, structural security dilemma, or implementation failure, will result in an analytically poor and practically misleading analysis.

2.12 Gaps in the Existing Literature

The above literature is a rich one and forms significant grounds on this study. However, there are still a few gaping holes that present the current study. In the first place. The issue of ethnic politics and armed conflict in South Sudan is analytically underexplored on the sub-national level. A great part of the extant literature is based on the national elite rivalry between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar and does not adequately describe the functioning of ethnic mobilization on the local and regional norms. Abrahamsen (2020) admits that this gap is present, as much of the scholarly literature does not address the micro-level analysis of any local ethnic conflict to this day, especially in such regions as Jonglei. The case of Jonglei State is especially acute to investigate: since the period of South Sudanese independence, it has been one of the most unstable areas in the country with inter-ethnic conflicts between Dinka, Nuer, and Murle people, the presence of

self-organized armed groups, and the incompetence of both governmental security forces and peace efforts to sustain a stable situation in the area. OCHA (2026) reported that conflict in Jonglei extended into early 2026, in which armed confrontations led to the displacement and mass civilian fatalities, indicating that the current methods of resolving conflicts are entirely ineffective and need additional structural reasons that are incompletely explained. According to Admin (2024), weak implementation, distrust between the parties, and omission of the key actors in the community are the main contributors to the failure of peace accords, and Roach (2024) puts forward the addition of the fragility of the state, as an unruly political elite whose calculations of power in the short term always surpass the long-term demands of peace and constitutional reforms. It is against this that this paper finds a serious gap in the literature; there is a lack of empirical and analytical focus on how ethnic politics specifically contributes to the continuation of the armed conflict at the sub-national level, especially in Jonglei State between the years 2013 and 2025. This paper thus aims at bridging this gap by conducting a critical analysis of the connection that exists between ethnic politics and South Sudan's persistent armed conflict, especially in the State of Jonglei as a principal case study.

Second, the current literature is inclined to study ethnic politics and armed conflict as two independent phenomena, and the scholars of conflict concentrate on the relationships between violence and politics, whereas the scholars of political science concentrate on elite competition and the design of institutions. Few studies attempt to trace the connections between ethnic identity mobilization, armed group formation and the collapse of peace implementation in a single coherent analytical framing. This paper fills that gap by considering these three phenomena as related aspects of one political process.

Third, although researchers like Kindersley and Rolandsen (2019) and Stringham and Forney (2017) have already created valuable empirical research on the communal conflicts in South Sudan, the years between 2018 and 2025, including the implementation phase of the R-ARCSS and the ongoing chaos of the armed groups in Jonglei, is still unexplored. Recent OCHA reports (2026) record continued humanitarian crises due to intercommunal violence in Jonglei, but little academic attention is being paid to this timeframe. This paper helps to fill that time gap.

Fourth, the prevailing theoretical perspectives in the literature, instrumentalism, constructivism and the security dilemma, have a tendency of either treating ethnic mobilization as elite based or structural. They also pay too little attention to the feedback

between elite policies and community-level reactions and to how communities themselves become invested in ethnic political projects over time. I would argue that the dynamics of Jonglei cannot be described without the inclusion of these levels of analysis, and this research has tried to capture them with its multi-level research design.

Lastly, the current literature provides a minimal interaction with the particular processes, in which ethnic politics subverts the implementation of peace agreements in sub-national contexts. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) refer to elite obstruction as the key mechanism on a national level, although the community-level and armed group-level resistance to the implementation in Jonglei is linked with other dynamics, such as ethnic distrust, failures of the local structures of authority, and the existence of parallel armed governance, which cannot be fully represented by the literature on the national level. This research therefore not only contributes empirically but also to the theoretical understanding of the mechanisms of peace agreement failure at the sub-national level it finds that these mechanisms are unique to those that occur at the elite level.

2.13 Summary.

The main theoretical and empirical literature concerning this study has been reviewed in this chapter. I have outlined the major variables of ethnic identity, political mobilization, armed conflict and implementation of peace agreements and critically interacted with the instrumentalist, constructivist, security dilemma and horizontal inequality theories. I have found five substantive gaps in the current literature: absence of the sub-national Jonglei case, distance between conflict and political science literatures, lack of study of the post-2018 period and the lack of integration between elite and community levels of analysis, and lack of focus on sub-national mechanisms of peace agreement failure. The next chapter outlines the theoretical framework which this study takes to fill these gaps,

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

The chapter introduces the approach taken to examine the role of ethnic politics in perpetuating armed conflict in the South Sudan Jonglei State between 2013 and 2025. It presents philosophical and practical decisions that directed the research process, including the field of research and sources of data, starting with the design of research tools, data collection methods, quality control measures, data processing and analysis methods, and the ethical issues that dictated the entire research process. All the methodological choices in this chapter are directly connected with the three particular goals of the research: to evaluate the use of ethnic identity as a political mobilization tool in Jonglei; to evaluate the correlation between ethnic politics and the establishment of armed groups; and to evaluate the impact of ethnic politics on the actualization of peace agreements and national reconciliation. The chapter justifies a qualitative research design as the most suitable research design to conduct research of this nature because the main research problem demands an interpretive explanation of the political processes, community experiences, and institutional processes that cannot be adequately described using quantitative measures.

3.1 Area of study

The geographical area of the study is Jonglei State, which is in northeastern South Sudan. Jonglei is the biggest state in South Sudan in terms of land area, and the three major ethnic groups in the Centre of this study, namely: the Dinkas, the Nuer, and the Murle. The state borders Ethiopia to the east, the Upper Nile State to the north, the Unity State to the northwest, and the Lakes and Warrap States to the southwest. It has its capital at Bor, which is also a part of the Nile River, the administrative and political Centre of the Bor Dinka community.

The main reason why Jonglei was chosen as the main case study is because of a number of reasons which are intertwined. To begin with, it is also one of the most repeatedly violent areas of South Sudan since the beginning of the war in December 2013, with the cases of large-scale inter-ethnic violence by organized community militias being recorded throughout the scope of study, that is, from 2013 to 2025. Second, the state demonstrates, especially clearly, the three-dimensional dependence between ethnic identity mobilization, armed group

formation, and the hindrance of the peace agreements, which is the conceptual framework of this study. Third, although Jonglei is at the heart of the South Sudan conflict, at the sub-national level, it is vastly under-researched, and most of the available scholarship is skewed towards the national elite competition between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar. This analytical and geographical gap is a direct reason why the current study can be located in Jonglei.

The study specifically focuses on the Greater Pibor Administrative Area that hosts the Murle community and the location of the Cobra Faction led by David Yau Yau and the counties of Bor, Ayod, Akobo, and Uror, which have experienced the major instances of inter-communal militia violence throughout the study period. The work also relies on the evolution in Juba and other national-level locations as much as they directly relate to the political dynamic in Jonglei, as this framework acknowledges the interdependence of local and national dynamics, although this may be in a different way than the prevailing literature indicates.

3.2 Sources of Information

The paper is based purely on secondary sources of information. Due to the character of the research topic, an active armed conflict, political violence, and politically sensitive ethnic relations in an active conflict zone, primary fieldwork in Jonglei State was not possible within the constraints of time and resources of the current study. The application of secondary sources is long-standing in conflict studies research, especially where direct access to the communities and armed actors, as well as political elites, is limited due to security, ethical, or logistical considerations. The secondary sources used in the present study are arranged in four groups in an orderly manner.

The former group includes peer-reviewed scholarly materials, such as journal articles, dissertations, and edited academic volumes that cover the ethnic politics, armed conflict, and the implementation of peace agreements, and the fragility of the state in South Sudan and the African context in general. This group is the theoretical and empirical foundation of the work and contains earlier work by Abdalla and Yahya, Kulang, Abrahamsen, Kindersley, and Rolandsen, Roach, Levi, and Bramston, the work of which is directly addressed in all three analysis chapters.

The second group includes institutional and policy reports by international organizations that have a presence in South Sudan. These are reports published by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office

of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, and the African Union. These sources give empirically based records of the violence incidents, statistics of displacement, compliance checks, and developments of the peace processes that support and anchor the theoretical assertions made in the scholarly literature.

The third group includes those reports and analyses created by specially focused research and policy institutions, such as the Small Arms Survey, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the Humanitarian Practice Network, and the International Peace Institute. These organizations have a strategic analytical position between academic work and governmental institution reporting, and their publications often build on fieldwork, interviews, and records that would otherwise be closed to researchers working beyond South Sudan.

The fourth set is of credible media coverage, especially that of the AP News, The New Humanitarian, and UN News, which can be seen as having presented contemporaneous records of the events of the conflict and humanitarian developments in Jonglei at the time of the study, and even into early 2026. This type is employed to support or exemplify the conclusions made using the first three source types, and is not a major source of analysis in itself.

3.3 Population and Sampling techniques.

The concept of population and sampling in qualitative research involving secondary data does not pertain to the human respondents but is rather the body of existing literature and documentation on which material is to be drawn to analyse. This study population is therefore considered to be the total amount of published and documented information that relates to the subject of ethnic politics, armed conflict, and peace agreement dynamics in South Sudan, with the main geographical subject of Jonglei State between the years 2013 and 2025. Out of this wide population, a purposive sampling method was used to find and select specific sources to inform this study. Purposive, also known as criterion-based or judgment sampling, is a sampling technique that entails the selection of sources (intentionally) based on their relevance, analytical quality, and direct relevance to the research problem and goals. The qualitative secondary research strategy is suitable here since it guarantees that the chosen content can produce an analytically meaningful result, and not simply be numerically representative.

The selection criteria used in the choice of the sources in this study were as follows. First, direct association to the research problem, that is, the source needed to discuss ethnic politics, armed conflict, implementation of peace agreements, or state fragility in South Sudan, with a bias towards sources that specifically were about Jonglei State or the population that live there. Second, analytical quality, i.e., that peer-reviewed academic sources were given preference, and institutional and policy reports could be accepted provided that they satisfied accepted standards of methodological transparency and documentation of facts. Third, the temporal coverage, that is, the sources that encompass the research time, 2013-2025, were prioritized, but sources that offer underpinning theoretical foundations during earlier times were incorporated as needed. Fourth, diversity in point of view, i.e., sources that represented various disciplinary orientations such as political science, conflict studies, international relations, and humanitarian studies were used to make sure that the analysis is not overly influenced by either analytical tradition.

In practice, systematic searches of scholarly databases, institutional archives, and verified online sources were used, along with citation tracing, i.e., the sources located were searched using their citation networks to find other potentially relevant literature. The sources that did not comply with the mentioned requirements or whose factual statements could not be confirmed by cross-referencing them with other reliable sources were not included in the study. This method of sampling agrees with the constructivist epistemological orientation of the study that considers knowledge to be socially and politically constructed and thus requires the sources of that knowledge to be evaluated critically, as opposed to mindlessly.

3.4 Research Tool Design

The main research instrument that is going to be used in the present study is a structured secondary data analysis framework, which is aimed at systematically retrieving, cataloging, and interpreting data on the documentary resources that were selected during the sampling process mentioned in the section above. Since there is no primary data collection (interviews, surveys, observation) in the study, the research tool is, in fact, the analytical prism by which the available documentation is read and questioned.

This tool is designed based on the three particular study objectives and the dimensions of the conceptual framework. Each objective had a set of analysis guiding questions that were formulated to guide the reading and extraction of relevant material in the secondary sources. The initial analytical questions are concerned with how ethnic identity is instrumentalized in

the mobilization of politics in Jonglei, scrutinizing in particular how elite manipulation, ethnic patronage networks, and propaganda are used to construct ethnic political divisions. The second group looks at how ethnic political dynamics create and maintain organized armed groups, looking at the recruitment of ethnic groups, communal violence, fragmented security, and the material and social incentives that support organized armed group membership. The third cluster discusses the connection between ethnic politics and the hindering of the implementation of peace agreements, the phenomenon of spoiler politics, the marginalization of communities, poor implementation, and the impunity of ethnic violence despite the formality of peace promises.

The conceptual framework modifying variables represented by the use of hard power and soft power by the politicians and the political influence on the communities, brought about another dimension of analysis that cut across all three areas of objectives. These moderating variables were factored into the tool as cross-cutting themes, which were used where the source material stated that political actors were influencing the strength or nature of ethnic conflict either through coercive, persuasive, or structural practices. The tool was operationalized in a thematic extraction matrix by objective and moderating variable where the passages, arguments and evidence of each source were systematically documented in the relevant and corresponding entries. This matrix has enabled the systematic cross-source comparison, finding the convergences and contradictions in the literature, and tracking of causal dependencies within the three dimensions of analysis. The interpretive and critical method of the study is reflected in the design of the tool: the letter was not applied mechanically to enumerate occasions of themes, but was employed in justifying a critical ongoing interaction with arguments and evidence throughout the existing literature of the chosen works.

3.5 Data Collection

This study used a systematic documentary review as a way of data collection. This was done in three phases. The initial step involved a thorough search of the existing sources with the help of academic databases, institutional repositories, and proven online archives. The search terms were created based on the major concepts of the study, such as ethnic politics, ethnic mobilization, armed conflict, peace agreements, state fragility, Jonglei State, South Sudan, Dinka, Nuer, Murle, and the specific agreements and organizations that are related to the

case, such as the R-ARCSS, UNMISS, RJMEC, and the Small Arms Survey. This first search resulted in a wide range of potentially useful sources.

In the second phase, all sources located in the first search were evaluated in accordance with the sampling criteria set out in the section above. The sources that fitted the above criteria were kept; sources that did not were discarded. Citation tracking was also utilized during this phase to find other sources that were of interest but not found during the initial database searches. This was done repeatedly until theoretical saturation was reached, i.e., the stage at which further research sources were not yielding any new analytical contribution to the research goals in a substantially new way.

The third stage involved systematic thematic extraction of the retained sources by the analytical framework outlined in the research tool design section. The thematic extraction matrix captured relevant arguments, factual claims, and documented events arranged according to the objective of the research and moderating variable. The primary focus was put on sources that documented empirically certain events, actors, or processes in the Jonglei State, because only then can the generalized theoretical arguments presented by the academic literature be based on a concrete case-specific evidence. Cross-referencing with the sources has been undertaken during this phase to determine convergences, contradictions, and gaps in the available documentation that are translated into the critical engagement with the literature that is evident throughout the analytical chapters of this paper.

3.6 Quality and Control of Error.

Quality control measures aimed at ensuring the credibility, reliability, and analytical integrity of a study based on secondary sources must be conscious and transparent. A number of these measures have been used during the research so that the risk of analysis error can be reduced and so that the findings can be based on verifiable and critically evaluated evidence. The main quality control was source triangulation. All substantive assertions presented in the analytical chapters of this paper are justified by evidence based on over one independent source. If there was only one source to a claim, we recognize this constraint and make the claim with due epistemic care. Triangulation between source types, i.e., between academic literature, institutional reports, policy analyses, and credible media reports, was especially crucial for claims concerning particular events and statistics, i.e. displacement numbers, number of casualties, and compliance violations, which are highly subject to variation and contention in conflict zone records.

There was a critical source review during the process of data collection and analysis. The sources were evaluated in terms of their methodological transparency, institutional credibility, possible bias, and factual claims foundation. Party-based sources, such as government-aligned press articles, party-linked commentators, and advocacy groups with publicly stated political viewpoints, were subjected to additional scrutiny and were not utilized unless their arguments could be vindicated independently. The quality of methodology and the sufficiency of evidence base of academic sources were evaluated with a preference towards peer-reviewed publications and sources that critically examined alternative interpretations. Reflexivity, awareness of the researcher with regard to their own analytical stance, was also observed during the research. The theoretical approach used, which is a blend of constructivism and instrumentalism and the horizontal inequalities theory, has to influence the questions posed and the interpretation provided. To cope with this, alternative theoretical explanations, such as primordialism and greed-based explanations of the conflict, were directly taken into account and dealt with in the analytical chapters, as opposed to sitting back and merely thinking that they were not sufficient. Such reflexivity in relation to rival frameworks enhances the internal validity of the conclusions of the study. Lastly, the methodological criterion that no scholarly source can be used in this study without first being verified as existing, authored by the correct author, with the correct publication date, and having a traceable argument was adhered to by the strict methodological standard. This is essential in the face of one of the gravest quality risks in the secondary research; the addition of false or fake citations, which compromises the evidentiary basis of the whole research.

3.7 Data Processing and Analysis

The processing of data in the present study implied the systematic arrangement of the material obtained in the secondary sources according to the thematic framework of the research objectives and the analytical levels of the conceptual framework. After the documentary review and thematic extraction mentioned in the data collection section, the extracted material was compiled into three main areas of analysis based on the three particular objectives of the study. In each domain, the material was further categorized by theme based on the dimensions of the conceptual framework, i.e., mobilization of ethnic identity, forming armed groups, and the dynamics of peace agreements, and moderating variables that cross-cut across the three, i.e., hard power, soft power, and political influence on communities. The analytical approach is the critical thematic analysis, used in a

qualitative interpretive context. Thematic analysis is a method that entails the identification, analysis, and interpretation of meaning patterns within and between a given set of textual materials. The analysis in the present study is not descriptive but clearly critical: it does not merely report what the existing sources say, but questions the arguments they put forward, what assumptions those arguments are based on, how well and representatively their evidence is, and forms its own analytical stance on the research questions by sustained interaction with the rival interpretations available in the literature.

The analysis process was carried out in several steps that are interconnected. First, each of the selected documents was analyzed within-source to determine the main points, the pieces of evidence used to support them, and any explicit or implicit causal, agency, and nature of ethnic politics assumptions in South Sudan. Second, cross-source synthesis was done between sources that dealt with the same field of analysis, where there were areas of agreement where several independent sources agreed on the same interpretive conclusion, and where there were areas of disagreement or tension when the sources conflicted, or the evidence was unclear. Third, gap analysis was performed to see areas of the research problem that were not adequately covered or not covered at all by the current literature, especially regarding the sub-national nature of ethnic politics in the Jonglei State. Fourth, explanatory integration was carried out in order to bring the cross-source synthesis as well as gap analysis into a logical and coherent explanation of how ethnic politics has helped in maintaining armed conflict in Jonglei, organized under the conceptual framework and the three specific objectives of the study.

Through the analytical procedure, caution was observed to discriminate what the sources report as fact of empirical research, what they offer as a form of interpretive argument, and what the researcher develops as his or her original analytical contribution. This difference is critical to the intellectual standards of the research that not only critically (and contentiously) interplays with an already existing body of research but also aims to contribute to that research in terms of a more empirically based and theoretically sensitive treatment of the Jonglei case.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The issue of ethical responsibility in research is not limited to those studies that involve direct human subjects. The secondary research that records, evaluates, and states assertions regarding the current armed warfare, political violence, and susceptible populations comes

with its ethical responsibilities, which were heeded during the process of conducting this study.

The former ethical duty deals with truthfulness and intellectual integrity. The study of conflict and political violence has practical implications: false or poorly reported assertions will add to a lack of understanding, reality distortion, and misguided policy actions. This paper is bound to the greatest principles of factual accuracy, such as the rigorous verification of all references used, the transparent recognition of the limitations of certainty, and the fair presentation of the levels of certainty that the evidence at hand can be considered to support. Where the evidence is controversial, musty, or partial, it is explicitly noted, but not swept under the carpet in the quest to achieve analytical tidiness.

The second moral responsibility is the representation of the affected communities. The Dinka, Nuer, and Murle people of Jonglei State are not theoretical analysis units; they are living communities that have paid a colossal human price due to the conflicts that this paper analyzes. The work is dedicated to giving analytical respect to these communities, opposing the tendency of reducing their experiences to the variables in a political equation, and criticizing and not reproducing the ethnic stereotypes and propaganda narratives that have been at the heart of the conflict continuation. This involves an analytical attempt to study all three communities as both producers and consumers of ethnic political processes, instead of pre-determined roles of perpetrator and victim that reproduce instead of challenging the very political setup that this study aims to challenge.

The third ethical requirement is in the utilization of institutional and organizational data. Empirical documentation in the present study is based on reports issued by such organizations as UNMISS, OHCHR, OCHA, and the Small Arms Survey. The paper acknowledges that such organizations exist within institutional environments, requirements, and political limits and that their reports are not necessarily neutral reflections of reality but that they themselves are the result of certain analytical and institutional attitudes. This identification guides the skeptical treatment of source evaluation outlined in the quality control section, and the fact that institutional documentation must be regarded as a piece of evidence to be evaluated as opposed to a power to be blindly surrendered.

The fourth ethical requirement is on the management of sensitive political information. The paper discusses the behavior of designated political figures, such as President Salva Kiir, former Vice President Riek Machar, David Yau Yau, and many unidentified local

commanders and traditional chiefs, with regard to violence, manipulation, and impediment to peace processes. The assertions regarding the actions of specific persons are only made where they are backed by plausible and separately reported evidence and are a result of the examination of evidence and not a reflection of personal or political views. This research is not intended to help any political cause in South Sudan but to add to the academic knowledge of a conflict whose human aftermath requires stringent and transparent examination.

The fifth ethical requirement is about academic integrity. It is written according to the academic standards of the institution at which it is submitted, in that it provides adequate reference to all ideas, arguments, and evidence presented in the literature on the topic, it is free of plagiarism in any of its forms, and it makes a clear statement of the limitations to analysis that are due to the secondary data design of the research. These undertakings are based on the realization that academic integrity is neither a procedural sham nor an ethical nicety of academic writing, especially in the research that touches on human suffering and political accountability.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSIONS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the analysis and discussion of the study's findings on secondary sources reviewed in Chapter Three. It is structured according to the three research objectives of the thesis, which are: first, to explore the role of ethnic identity in mobilizing political groups in Jonglei State; second, to analyse the relationship between ethnic politics and the formation of armed groups; and third, to determine the influence of ethnic politics on implementation of peace agreements and national reconciliation. Each of these objectives is explored by critically engaging with the academic literature, official reports and events that have transpired in Jonglei between 2013 and 2025. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how political actors use hard power, soft power and long-term influence in the community to institutionalize ethnic politics as a self-sustaining aspect of the conflict.

4.1 A CASE

4.2 ETHNIC IDENTITY MOBILIZATION

4.3 Political Elite Manipulation

Political elite manipulation is an intention to use ethnic identity by the influential political forces to establish and maintain bases of power. This has been the focal point in the perpetuation of armed conflict in the Jonglei State. These players include the national political elite of South Sudan, mainly President Salva Kiir and his networks of Dinka allies, and former Vice President Riek Machar and his forces of Nuer origin, including in the Lou Nuer, Dinka Bor, and Murle groups.

Elite manipulation was achieved as structural grievances (cattle raiding, land disputes, and inter-community historical tensions) were transformed into intentional ethnic political discourse. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) state that three main strategies employed by political leaders in South Sudan are ethnic recruitment of fighters, fear-based propaganda, and the building of patronage networks, which reward ethnic loyalty and punish non-members of the group. Specifically, Kulang (2021) shows that in Jonglei, these strategies were most effective in the environment of weak state institutions that they created. Political control over ethnicity, in the absence of formal courts, in the absence of functioning security forces, and in the

absence of a position of leading figures to account to, takes a new form, via political manipulation of ethnicity.

The manipulation of elites perpetuates armed conflict, in that the same actors who are the core signatories of peace accords are the same actors who fuel ethnic division. Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025) outline what they term elite-controlled fragmentation, whereby the ruling elites ensure that they preserve ethnic division and institutional feebleness as a way of staying in power. In Jonglei, it implied that, despite the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, local commanders and local politicians still used ethnic grievances in the manipulation of the ethnicity issue at the community level. Real-world example: Once, after December 2013, the war between Kiir and Machar, which was essentially a power struggle within SPLM, was quickly ethnicized. Kiir was able to rally Dinka support, and Machar relied on Nuer identity, as an elite-level political conflict turned into an ethnic war at the community level in areas such as Jonglei. As of 2020, UNMISS and OHCHR (2021) recorded that thirty-six or more direct or indirectly supported ethnic militias in Jonglei by at least fifty traditional chiefs and political elites, despite the R-ARCSS being formally in effect.

4.4 Ethnic Patronage Networks

Ethnic patronage is the selective allocation of resources, positions, and protection on ethnic lines, which produce systems of loyalty and exclusion. Actors present in Jonglei are both national and local political elites, who determine access to governmental jobs, weaponry, humanitarian aid, and grazing fields.

The Jonglei patronage networks operated through the distribution of material benefits, such as government jobs, security, and resources such as cattle redistribution, in favor of the members of the dominant ethnic political group. This provided a political incentive to communities to join the armed group or political group that would be able to provide some sort of protection and access to resources. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) explain the functioning of these patronage systems, which do not happen through any formal institutions but through ethnic commanders and local political leaders who become the controllers of livelihood and security. According to Bramston (2025), this dynamic is linked to the collapse of the national economy caused by oil dependency, hyperinflation, and currency failure that further impoverished Jonglei and further politicized the resources of patronage, such as cattle and land.

By building ethnicity as the sole way to security and resources in a context where there are no functional institutions of the state, ethnic patronage networks perpetuate conflict. The young men of Jonglei who lack official jobs, land tenure, and protection of the state, the fact that they belong to an ethnic armed group provides the nearest possible alternative. Real-life example: The Murle community of Cobra Faction, where David Yau Yau is the leader, is a good example. Yau Yau built an armed insurgency by positioning Murle political marginalization and government-led selective disarmament within the Murle ethnic injustice, distributing the leadership and military assets via Murle ethnic networks, and framing armed membership as a political obligation, as well as a means of material security. This patronage system ensured armed group unity even when peace agreements were made at a national level.

4.5 Framing and Propaganda

In the case of ethnic mobilization, propaganda is a wilful creation of a narrative that depicts other ethnic groups as existential dangers and justifies the use of violence in the name of collective self-defence. In Jonglei, there are many actors in the game: armed group leaders, traditional leaders who have been co-opted, and social media, which has become a growing contributor to ethnic fear messages.

Propaganda worked by seizing genuine acts of violence, cattle raids, village burnings, or kidnappings and reshaping them to not be a local crime or resource struggle but an ethnic conspiracy that must be dealt with through a concerted effort. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) name propaganda as one of three key tools of ethnic mobilization, where the elite, and this paper elaborates the point more by not considering propaganda as an auxiliary to ethnic mobilization, but as the foundation of the whole mechanism. And in the absence of the story that the other community is an existential threat, recruitment will fail, and patronage networks will be unable to be maintained. OCHA (2026) mentioned the utilization of funeral ceremonies and community messaging to instigate revenge after attacks in Jonglei, showing how propaganda can be enshrined in culturally resonant practices to maximise its impact.

Propaganda establishes vicious circles of violence by rendering the reconciliation process psychologically and politically expensive. When the communities sincerely feel that their very existence is being threatened in the name of ethnicity, any such peace initiative on the part of the other side can be interpreted as a form of deception. Real-life case example: The Murle people have been systematically portrayed in propaganda propagated across the Dinka

and Nuer communities as an unceasingly aggressive raiding community, instead of as a victim group to ethnic targeting. This asymmetry specifically becomes a research gap as noted by Abrahamsen (2020). This unilateral story intensified Dinka and Nuer animosity towards the Murle, who were the victims of organized inter-ethnic assaults in 2020, which prevented the reconciliation process. Nova Southeastern University (2020) affirms this piled-up propaganda deposits grievances unresolved that have not been directly confronted by a peace deal signed at Addis Ababa.

4.6 ARMED GROUP FORMATION

4.7 Ethnic Recruitment

Ethnic recruitment: The leaders of armed groups recruit by targeting their own ethnic group members, as the primary mobilization message, because of their ethnicity, a common complaint, and fear of extinction. In Jonglei, it takes place among the local commanders of the Lou Nuer, Dinka Bor, and Murle armed groups and local politicians who offer logistical and financial assistance.

The recruitment was executed based on political message and material incentives, and cultural appeal. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) define that leaders of armed groups in South Sudan appeal to recruitment existential: otherwise, your community will be destroyed. This message is effective in Jonglei since there was a real history of intercommunal violence, which makes the story credible. Kulang (2021) further includes that where there is virtually no formal institution of governance in a state, the ethnic armed group becomes the key institution that provides protection, dispute resolution, and even basic social services. Membership is thus a political decision but a survival strategy.

Ethnic recruitment contributes to the survival of armed groups, groups that are, as a result of community loyalty and need, but not political conviction, by individual members, so that groups are not easily deposed by peace deals that involve only elite actors. It also institutionalizes the membership of armed groups in the process of cultural identification, so that the experience of disarmament is felt as ethnic capitulation. Example in real life: A well-documented example of mass ethnic recruitment in Jonglei is the Lou Nuer White Army. After the selective disarmament of the Lou Nuer by SPLA troops following the 2005 CPA, which left neighbouring communities armed, the Lou Nuer faced what Posen (1993) would call a structural security dilemma. It was the lop-sided armament, rather than primordial

hatred, that provoked the reconstitution of the White Army as an ethnically recruited army. As was reported by UNMISS and OHCHR (2021), the year 2020 recorded thousands of organized inter-village attacks by ethnically recruited fighters comprising the Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities in Jonglei, proving that the ethnic recruitment process was even successfully carried out several years after formal peace agreements were reached.

4.8 Communal Violence

Communal violence is violence involving ethnic groups at the group level, usually precipitated by acts like cattle raids, land conflicts, or target killings and degenerating into larger patterns of retaliatory armed conflict. The Dinka community, Nuer community, and Murle community have been the victims and perpetrators of this cyclical violence in Jonglei.

Jonglei communal violence did not occur out of primordial hatred. It was structurally created through the coming together of resource rivalry, insufficient state institutions, and the intentional manipulation of the elite. Both Kulang (2021) and Rolandsen (2015) indicate that cattle raiding and land conflict are the material basis of a large portion of the inter-communal tension, but that the political elites are intentionally re-packaging these resource-based events to be perceived as an ethnic existential attack in order to justify armed retaliation. Kindersley and Rolandsen (2019) further raise the matter, registering the fact that armed group leaders across Greater Jonglei have been actively able to provoke inter-communal attacks to initiate cycles of retaliation that cement their grip among the populace and increase their recruitment pool.

Communal violence establishes feedback mechanisms. The cycle of mobilization is explained by the fact that each attack breeds new grievances. According to Nova Southeastern University (2020), the legitimacy of the armed conflict is based on historical grievances that have not been resolved, with their historical basis being based on real communal violence. Real case: The case of the intercommunal violence in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area in 2020, reported by UNMISS and OHCHR (2021), involved organized village attacks by thousands of fighters belonging to Dinka, Nuer, and Murle militias. In a sequence, Nuer cattle camps were raided by Murle, leading to large-scale retaliation attacks on the Murle settlements by Lou Nuer, further fueling Murle counter-mobilization. It was an unbroken cycle even in the context of the official operation of the R-ARCSS, which proves that communal violence is motivated by local processes that national-level agreements are not able to achieve.

4.9 Fragmented Security

Fragmented security: A situation whereby no single power, be it the state, military, or traditional institution, has an effective monopoly on the use of force, leading to the simultaneous presence of multiple armed actors functioning within the same space. This segmentation in Jonglei comprises the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), opposition-aligned forces, ethnically structured community militias, as well as single armed group commanders.

There were two processes that resulted in fragmented security in Jonglei. First, the state itself could never provide a stable security governance in the region, as reported by Kulang (2021) and confirmed by Humanitarian Practice Network (2013). Second, the national government at different times actively assisted ethnic armed groups in Jonglei as a political instrument, as claimed by Roach (2024), and armed some groups and disarmed others, further fragmenting the situation instead of its solution. This kind of fragmented security management provided that communities would be split up, that they would rely upon ethnic armed groups to offer them security, and that they would not be able to create the type of cross-ethnic coalitions that could threaten the power of the central government.

Security fragmentation renders the implementation of peace structurally impossible, due to the lack of one commanding authority that can give an order to cease fire and see it followed. Every military faction possesses its command, resource base, as well as political sponsor or support, and that is, despite the national leaders signing agreements, local actors have an independent ability to fight. Real-world example: The Small Arms Survey (2023) entitled A Pause Not a Peace reported that in each nominal ceasefire in Jonglei, the presence of fragmented security structures resulted in the continued activities of local armed actors. The report identified that government actions and NGO programmes constantly failed to tackle the structural issue of broken security, that is, ceasefires created temporary resolutions, rather than actual peace. As early as 2026, OCHA (2026) attested that armed violence and displacement persisted in Jonglei, where villagers were killed by gunmen in the Ayod County of Jonglei, which AP News (Falzetta, 2026) said was evidence of fragmented security functioning despite the peace process.

54.10 PEACE AGREEMENT DYNAMICS

4.11 Spoiler Politics

Spoiler politics is the process whereby actors, out of self-interest, choose to sabotage peace acts that might jeopardize their political or material interests. The context of South Sudan has several actors playing the role of spoilers, including the leaders of national political parties, regional politics, and the leaders of local armed groups in Jonglei.

Spoiler politics in Jonglei was used by non-observance of the terms of peace agreements in an intentional manner. According to Roach (2024), in weak states such as South Sudan, the political elites strive to gain power in the short term, whereas in the long term, the promise of peace, the conflict itself becomes a political resource. This is actually exemplified by Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025) in their discussion of the R-ARCSS, when they reveal that fragmentation controlled by the elite, the deliberate maintenance of ethnic division, enabled those in charge to amass personal power in the name of representing ethnic constituencies. Local armed group commanders in Jonglei also fit the typical spoiler: as Abdalla and Yahya (2021) determine, a local commander who takes charge of cattle distribution, implements violence, and enjoys the respect as a protector of his people will lose all these powers once a peace agreement manages to disarm his force and to demobilize it.

Spoiler politics is the assurance that even peace agreements that are officially penned do not come to fruition. Joshi (2025) affirms that the transitional phase, which began in 2018 after signing the R-ARCSS, has been extended four times to date, the latest being to December 2026, while the ethnic political conflicts that gave rise to the transitional period have not been resolved. As of the end of 2025, RJMEC (2026) announced that all major parties to the agreement were systematically violating compliance. Real case: The Hybrid court of South Sudan, which would look into the atrocities committed in the conflict, was not formed as required by the R-ARCSS. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2025) verified that by the year 2025, there was no transitional justice mechanism in operation. This is because of simple spoiler politics: It is the same leaders who would be prosecuted, and then it is the same leaders who would have established the court.

4.12 Community Exclusion

Community exclusion is the planned exclusion of routine communities, especially those that are most adversely impacted by the conflict, in peace negotiation and implementation efforts.

The marginalized communities in the case of Jonglei are families displaced, widows of conflict victims, women's organizations, youths, and the non-co-opted politically based traditional structures of power.

The peace accords in South Sudan were always tailored towards elite pacts. According to Admin (2024), community exclusion is one of three main structural failures of the peace process. As Horn Review (2025) explicitly notes, the R-ARCSS was premised on elite negotiations that deemphasized the significance of civil society, women's organizations, and traditional authorities. This translated, in Jonglei, to the communities that were to bear the actual cost of the war, the ones who had lost family members in cattle raids, who had lost their children in kidnappings, whose villages had been burnt, were not involved in the accords that were supposed to safeguard them.

The uninvolvement of the community ensures that peace arrangements do not have local credibility, and they do not respond to the real grievances that motivate communal-level armed mobilization. The national peace agreements in Jonglei can never be documents without acceptance by the community until the cattle raid grievances of the Murle community are addressed, the displacement experiences of the Lou Nuer are addressed, and the marginalization of the non-Dinka communities in the political structures in Jonglei are addressed. Real-world example: The opposite of the 1999 Wunlit Conference is educative. According to the New Humanitarian (2023), Wunlit, the process that united members of the Dinka and Nuer communities in dialogue and ritual moderated by leaders of the church community over a lengthy duration, has been the most effective peacebuilding initiative in the post-independence history of South Sudan. Wunlit is the model that communities indicate should be repeated. However, it has always been the international actors that have been putting money into the one-off events of dialogue that are short-term and not the type of long-term, culturally rooted, community-owned process that Wunlit was

4.13 Elite Obstruction

Elite obstruction is actively engulfing political power by the national, regional, and local leaders, to resist the implementation of peace agreements, which would deprive them of their control and expose them to accountability, or dissolve the ethnic patronage base upon which their control is founded. This hindrance in Jonglei is an issue that includes national political leaders as well as the leaders of local armed groups.

The elite obstructing in South Sudan has been systematic and purposeful. Ceesay and Asmorowati (2510) make it clear that the unsuccessful implementation of the R-ARCSS was not a technical or logistical issue, but rather a calculated political decision on the behalf of the elites who had to gain by continuing to have the ethnic division. Kulang (2021) explains the self-reinforcing cycle whereby weak institutions make elite manipulation possible, and that the same manipulation makes institutions weaker and creates an environment of governance where it is easy and rational to obstruct. Abrahamsen (2020) puts this as the most critical analytical gap in the South Sudan literature: the vast majority of the scholarship revolves around the rivalry of the national elites, whereas the local and regional dynamics of obstruction in locales such as Jonglei are understudied.

The elite obstruction makes sure that no structural causes of conflict are ever solved, even in the presence of peace processes. The same actors that agreed to the R-ARCSS blocked Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, security sector reform, and transitional justice mechanisms, all of which were a requirement by the agreement. RJMEC (2026) confirms that all major provisions of the R-ARCSS were violated in terms of compliance at the end of 2025. Actual case: The many non-deployments of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF), which were needed to unite armed factions under the R-ARCSS, are a direct example of an elite obstruction. The leaders of each of the sides, even those who led ethnically organized armies in Jonglei, would not submit their forces to a central authority that would destroy their own bases of armed forces. Specifically, the failure of DDR programs in Jonglei is an example of how elite blockage is intertwined with cultural considerations of how the membership of armed groups has a profound social connotation among Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities, and therefore, demobilization is psychologically expensive, which can be easily manipulated by commanders.

4.14 CONCLUSION

In all three dimensions, the key element that continues to fuel armed conflict in Jonglei is not one but the combination of all nine factors mentioned above. The manipulation of political elites, ethnic patronage, and propaganda on the stage of ethnic identity mobilization makes the conditions under which armed groups can be organized and maintained based on ethnic recruitment, communal violence, and fragmented security. The existence of these formations then renders structurally unlikely the implementation of peace agreements, since the politics of spoilers, community exclusion, and elite blockade all systematically inhibit the realization

of the agreements on the local level, on which the actual conflict is being fought. The outcome, which has already been validated by UN News (2026) and OCHA (2026), and of which there are around 280,000 displaced civilians in Jonglei by early 2026, is a war that is being perpetuated and not due to a lack of diplomatic efforts, but because the politics of various actors on various levels have something to gain by this effort.

4.15 How Politicians Use Hard Power, Soft Power, and Political Influence on Communities to Increase Ethnic Politics

To comprehend the reasons why ethnic politics escalates in Jonglei State, it is necessary to transcend an analysis of what elites do and to ask how they do it. The instrumentalist literature determined that ethnicity is not the cause but the money of political contention, which is a resource that competitive actors use and not a primordial force that compels communities towards violence in an inexorable way (Abdalla and Yahya, 2021; Brass, 1991). However, the processes by which political players transform ethnic identity into a lasting mobilization weapon have been under-analyzed in the South Sudan literature. This section fills this gap by discussing three interlocking processes: the exercising of hard power in coercing ethnic obedience; the exercising of soft power in producing ethnic consent; and the exerting of political power on communities to instill ethnic politics at the root level. Combined, these processes are not only why ethnic conflict breaks out in Jonglei but also why it is structurally stubborn to the peace deals that have so far been negotiated on a national level.

4.16 Politicians using hard power

The classical definition of hard power is the ability of an actor to get the desired results by coercion, i.e., by force, threat, or the deprivation of security as well as material resources (Nye, 1990). In Jonglei, political leaders and militia leaders engage in the use of hard power not only to acquire victories in battles but also to create ethnic divisions on which their power is based. This is a significant critical analytical difference. Hard power in Jonglei is not the expression of ethnic hostilities that existed previously; it creates them.

Selective disarmament is the most direct means of hard power that is used to exacerbate ethnic politics. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) engaged in ethnically asymmetric disarmament operations in Jonglei, confiscating weapons of certain groups and leaving their neighbours

armed. It was this asymmetry specifically that led to the reformulation of the Lou Nuer White Army and what Posen (1993) would call a structural security dilemma: in a community in which it cannot rely on the state to offer it security, and in which it can neither disarm nor is it disarmed, the arming along ethnic lines becomes a logical survival strategy. The significant analytic note here is that the policy of disarmament was not a technically neutral exercise. It was an act of a political nature that was executed on ethnic lines and which influenced the salience of the ethnic lines in the minds of the concerned communities. Kulang (2021) claims that this is among the best examples of how weak and politically compromised institutions of the state facilitate the circumstances of ethnic mobilization instead of limiting them.

The violence in itself, when used strategically, is a hard-power instrument in the escalation of ethnic politics. In a report on armed violence in Greater Jonglei during the first half of 2020, published by the UNMISS and OHCHR (2021), thousands of Dinka, Nuer, and Murle fighters were documented to have carried out organized inter-village attacks and at least fifty traditional chiefs and political elites were identified as having actively or passively supported these militias, all despite the R- This trend is in line with the argument by Roach (2024) that in weak states, ethnic violence is a rational elite policy: violence maintains the division of people by ethnicity, blocking cross-ethnic alliances and ensuring that people remain reliant on ethnic defenders instead of the state. The coercive production of ethnic politics, which is an aspect of the governance of Jonglei, is no accident; it is a replacement of the latter.

The other hard-power mechanism is material deprivation. In a scenario of oil addiction, hyperinflation, and currency meltdown, the national economic crisis, as described by Bramston (2025), the resource denial along ethnic lines by the people in charge of resource allocation becomes a means of ethnic boundary-making. Communities are deprived of material resources not as an economic state but as an ethnic state of affairs when government employment, humanitarian aid, and access to grazing lands and water supplies are distributed via ethnic patronage networks. The political actors of distribution consciously blend the economic and the ethnic. This amalgamation elevates the emotional significance of ethnic identity and diminishes the barricade after which communities will assist ethnic armed mobilization. Hard power, which consists of the denial of resources and the use of coercive, ethnically differentiated disarmament, thereby establishes the material conditions under which ethnic politics is accentuated.

The rate at which coercive hard power brings about ethnic political escalation in Jonglei is what the current scholarship has failed to explicitly explore. The description of the mutually reinforcing cycle between weak institutions and ethnic mobilization offered by Kulang (2021) is more inclined to depict the dynamic as gradual. In Jonglei, though, the buildup has been repeatedly almost instant. Once a village is invaded and the state fails to intervene, the impacted community will perceive the lack of protection to be ethnic abandonment, withdraw its remaining trust in the state institutions, and in several days, they will marshal around the ethnic armed leadership. It is this speed, and not some sluggishness of accretion, which makes ethnically-targeted hard power so useful as an instrument of heating ethnic politics and so hard to disrupt by traditional peace processes.

4.17 Politicians using soft power

In the case that hard power is used to enforce compliance by ethnicity, soft power is used to produce ethnic consent. Soft power, as coined by Nye (2004), is the ability to entice, assimilate, and influence instead of commanding. Within the ethnic politics, soft power works by word, symbol, and identity - by creating a narrative concerning the identity of communities and their adversaries, as well as what is at stake in their existence. Jonglei and especially the political players have demonstrated great acumen in utilizing soft power to further ethnic politics, and have done so in forms that are usually invisible since they do not rely on open forms of coercion but draw on culturally appealing material.

The main soft-power tool by which ethnic politics is heightened is propaganda. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) consider propaganda to be one of three fundamental instruments of elite ethnic mobilization in South Sudan, yet the current analysis sees it as a support tool, a facilitating tool of recruitment and patronage. Instead, I would say, the mechanism that is the basis of the other two is propaganda, without which the other two will not run smoothly. Ethnic armed groups do not garner the allegiance of communities, nor do they recognize the legitimacy of ethnic patronage networks unless it is first made clear to the community that it is their continued existence as an ethnic group that is at risk. It is propaganda that does that persuading. In Jonglei, it has been implemented by issuing manipulated reports of actual incidents of violence, such as cattle raids, village burnings, and kidnappings, into a discourse of a systematic ethnic genocide. The violence is actual; what is added to it, the argument that it constitutes not an attempt at exterminating a particular ethnic group but a resource struggle or a localized criminality, is a political creation (OCHNA, 2026).

The use of cultural forms to promote ethnic politics in soft power should be noted with special interest. OCHA (2026) reports on the mobilization of revenge in the use of funeral ceremonies and mourning rituals in Jonglei following inter-communal attacks. This is complex soft power itself due to the fact that it does not sound political in any way. It poses itself as a cultural imperative - as the acting out of grieving and honouring of the dead - and thus it avoids the critical processes that societies can bring to bear on an obviously political speech. Instrumentalization of ritual as a form of ethnic mobilization implies that emotional economies of communities, their sense of grief, their rage, their sense of shared responsibility, are being made colonies of political forces, turned to the mobilization of arms. This is in line with what Brubaker (2004) explains to be the organizational and cognitive labor of ethnicity: it is not a natural process that communities will view violence through an ethnic prism, but political actors put substantial efforts into making sure that they do.

Another process by which ethnic politics aggravate in Jonglei is the soft-power formation of the ethnic enemy. The best example is the Murle community. According to Abrahamsen (2020), the asymmetry of the representation of the Murle as constant aggressors but not as a community being subjected to ethnic targeting is a gap in the current literature. The description of the Murle as a raid-prone folk, irredeemably violent and unable to live in a civilized society, is a propagandistic fiction that has been created and promoted by political forces with a vested interest in keeping Dinka and Nuer at war with the Murle. This story strengthens ethnic politics, on the one hand, by attempting to radicalize both Dinka and Nuer communities against the Murle, and, on the other hand, by pushing the Murle themselves towards armed self-defence, as they feel themselves besieged by communities that have been convinced to treat them as subhuman. This building of an ethnic enemy, via soft power, is thus not simply a communicative action; it is a structural intervention that restructures the security calculations of all the communities at work.

Another aspect of soft-power ethnic politics is the co-optation of traditional figures of authority. By enrolling traditional chiefs and community elders with cultural authority that can hardly be fabricated by armed group commanders on the ethnic political project, their authority is a vehicle through which ethnic political narratives can be disseminated with a credibility that the overtly political messages do not possess. In particular, the report published by the UNMISS and OHCHR (2021) specifies that in 2020, traditional chiefs were involved in the support of ethnic militias in Jonglei. The system of social organization of community reconciliation has struck a direct blow by the instrumentalization of traditional

authority in this manner, since the persons to whom the communities could otherwise have turned as imparts of neutrality have been absorbed into the ethnic political system. According to Nova Southeastern University (2020), the accruing deposits of unresolved grievances are one of the root causes of the lack of peace in South Sudan - a factor that has not been directly addressed within any agreement that was signed in Addis Ababa.

4.18 Political influence on communities

The difference between hard and soft power must not blur the third and analytically most important way in which politicians deepen ethnic politics: the wielding of sustained political influence over communities to internalize ethnicity as the key prism according to which social life, access to resources, security, and political identity are structured. It is not mere coercion or propaganda. It is the metamorphosis of communal life in a way that ethnic politics becomes a self-reproducing one, where it is necessary to have an intervention by an elite regularly to sustain the same, but also the community itself has internalized the logic of community, and thus there is no need to have the same.

The major institutional process by which political influence entraps ethnic politics in communities is ethnic patronage networks. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) indicate that such networks do not operate with formal institutions but through ethnic commanders and local political leaders who become the channel through which livelihoods, security, and resources are availed. This mediating position is especially strong in Jonglei, where the formal state is so weak. Kulang (2021) is correct in claiming that the lack of working state institutions results in a governance vacuum, yet the vacuum is not merely left vacant. It is occupied, intentionally, by politically structured, ethnically based structures replacing the state, but at the cost of ethnic loyalty. With all the spheres of life systematized, through ethnic networks, to organize employment, protection, cattle and grazing land, humanitarian aid, dispute resolution, etc., the desire to preserve and demonstrate ethnic identity becomes overwhelming. Ethnic identity is not just a cultural characteristic anymore; it is the main ticket to survival in society and material wealth.

This relationship is clearly demonstrated in the example of David Yau Yau and the Cobra Faction within the Murle people. Yau Yau established his insurgency not only by violence or propaganda but by establishing an ethnic political organization that positioned itself as the only institution that could protect the Murle political interests, allocating resources via Murle ethnic networks and providing the security and recognition that the national government had

deprived the Murle people. According to Roach (2024), the identical rational calculus that motivates national elites to maintain conflict applies to the local level: a leader who controls the distribution of cattle, uses force, and is regarded as an ethnic defender loses all of this when peace demobilizes his troops. The exercising of political power over the Murle community by Yau Yau did not feel like manipulation, but as a representation, and that is exactly what makes it so effective as a tool of intensification of the ethnic politics. It enthroned ethnic identity as more than a dormant cultural identity but an active political organization with material interests.

The social and cultural entrenchment of membership in armed groups among young men in Jonglei is another aspect of increased ethnic politics through political power over communities. The armed defense of the community is not felt in the Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities as a purely political or economic act. It has strong social and masculine connotations: it is the show of maturity, the evidence of bravery, the right to respect of the elders, and the right to marry. The political actors who create ethnic armed groupings are aware of that, and they actively shape armed membership as a political need, as well as a cultural and masculine duty. When a group is convinced that its young men are obliged to take up arms to protect the honour and existence of the ethnic group, the appeal to recruitment touches a logic that extends far beyond the political calculation. The reason why the DDR programs in Jonglei have never worked is that they deal with armed group membership as a political and economic issue, and provide material incentives to demobilize, but do not touch on the social meaning of that membership to the young men whose cultural identity is tied up with it (Admin, 2024; Abrahamsen, 2020).

The impact of long-term political impact on societies is that ethnic politics reproduces itself. When ethnic identity is established as the main distributor of security, resources, and social recognition, the communities start to reproduce ethnic political logic without the continuous guidance of the elite. The children of warriors are brought up in communities that are ethnic. The ethnic frames are the frames that the victims of violence make sense of their experience with, since that is what they have been provided with. The ethnic armed groups the young men join are partly the result of elite recruitment, but also the socially legitimate means of masculine adult status in their community. This self-reproduction is what the Small Arms Survey (2023) reflects in its description of the Jonglei situation as a pause, not a peace: the structural conditions that perpetuate ethnic politics exist even in the nominal ceasefires, as it

is embedded in community organization and social practice, and not merely in the decisions of elite actors.

Responses of international peacebuilding have not always addressed this embeddedness. The New Humanitarian (2023) observes that international funding is more inclined towards short-term dialogue events as opposed to the long-term and culturally grounded community-owned processes, which were exhibited to be effective in Jonglei in the 1999 Wunlit Conference. The organizational breakdown in this case is not diplomatic or financial per se, but is analytical. When the political force that has entrenched ethnic politics within Jonglei societies is perceived as merely a top-down manipulation (i.e., elites acting on communities acting passively), then peacebuilding can be perceived as one of substituting bad elite incentives with good ones. However, in case political power has actually reorganized the lives of communities such that ethnic politics now internally reproduce, then peacebuilding will entail a different and much more patient intervention: that which recreates the non-ethnic institutions, relationships, and social forms that offer communities alternative foundations of security, access to resources, and identity. According to Levi (2025), the lack of empirical consideration of these local processes is an important gap in the literature, and it is this gap that the given study fills with its attention to Jonglei State.

4.19 Summary

In this section, three processes by which politicians fuel ethnic politics in Jonglei State have been discussed. Hard power is gained with the help of selective disarmament, strategic violence, and ethnically differentiated denial of resources, which force separate ethnicities to comply and create the material conditions in which ethnic identity has become a resource of survival (Kulang, 2021; Roach, 2024; Bramston, 2025). The ethnic consent is produced by soft power through propaganda, instrumentalization of cultural ritual, the construction of the ethnic enemy, and the co-optation of traditional authority (Abdalla & Yahya, 2021; Abrahamsen, 2020; OCHA, 2026). Political influence of communities in the form of ethnic patronage networks, the socialization of armed group membership, and the gradual organization of all spheres of community life around ethnic categories make ethnic politics self-reproducible, not having to be constantly coerced or constantly propagandized to maintain itself (Kulang, 2021; Roach, 2024; Levi, 2025). These three processes are the reason why ethnic conflict in Jonglei is acute and structural resistance of that conflict to the peace processes that only deal with the national level of elite politics. Until the three mechanisms

are tackled - until coercive hard power is supplanted by effective provision of state security, until ethnic propaganda is challenged by community-owned reconciliation, until the social entrenchments of ethnic politics are ripped out by the rebuilding of non-ethnic institutions - the peace in Jonglei will always be, as the Small Arms Survey (2023) describes it, a ceasefire and not a solution.

4.20 OBJECTIVE ONE

4.21 Ethnic Identity as a Tool for Political Mobilization in South Sudan: The Case of Jonglei State

Ethnic identity, in itself, does not bring war. Any human society or community possesses an ethnic identity, a language, a history, common practices, and a sense of belonging. That is also natural and not dangerous. The threat sets in once political leaders intentionally assume such an identity and make it a cause of war. This has been occurring in South Sudan since December, 2013 and nowhere more in full view than in the Jonglei State. I discuss in this section the way ethnic identity has served as a political mobilization instrument in Jonglei basing on the existing scholarship as well as on the ground evidence. I carry out critical activity with available literature and determine areas that I concur, where I disagree, and where I consider the literature has failed to cover, which require further research in this study.

4.22 The Neutrality of Ethnicity and the Responsibility of Elites

The proper beginning of an honest treatment of ethnic conflict is an uncomplicated yet frequently forgotten truth; namely, ethnicity does not inherently have a violent nature. According to Abdalla and Yahya (2021), this is clear. They believe that ethnicity is a social category that is neutral and only harmful when it is played with by power-seeking people. I concur with this stand wholly. The fact of Jonglei State supports it. Before the current conflict, the Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities had existed in the same territory over a number of generations. They traded with each other. In certain locations, they intermarried. The enmity existing between them today is not the consequence of old hatred. It is the outcome of intentional designing by political forces who have been keen to separate them, as it was profitable to them.

Abdalla and Yahya (2021) continue to elaborate that three primary strategies are employed by elites to employ ethnicity as a source of weapons, namely: they hire fighters in ethnic groups, they disseminate propaganda that fosters more fear and distrust among communities,

and they establish patronage networks that can be followed by rewarding loyalty within an ethnic group and punishing it. I prefer this framework as it is useful and accurate. Nonetheless, I believe that Abdalla and Yahya (2021) do not go that far in explaining how they apply these strategies at the local level. They remain rather general in their analysis. It does not inform us, say, how certain leaders in Jonglei have employed the rhetoric of cattle raiders to make a resource conflict seem an ethnic war, or how the Murle people themselves have been singled out in accounts of propaganda which depict them as an irreparably enmose population. It is this particularity that I feel this study should offer.

4.23 The Problem with the National Focus: What Scholars Have Missed

One of the great limitations of the current literature on South Sudan is that it is being immersed in national-level elite rivalry. The published literature on the conflict has focused a lot on the association between President Salva Kiir and his ex-vice president, Riek Machar. This is the gap that is specifically named by Abrahamsen (2020). She observes that the focus of scholarly interest has been on the pinnacle of the political system, whereas the local and regional interactions of ethnic mobilization have been seriously under-researched. I much concur with Abrahamsen (2020) in this aspect, and I believe it is one of the most crucial observations in the given literature.

But I take my argument further than that of Abrahamsen (2020) does. I will argue that the national focus is not merely a scholarly gap - it is an analytical fallacy that has had realizable consequences on peace-building. Peace negotiators and other international actors conceptualize the South Sudan conflict through Kiir-Machar's clear lenses and come up with solutions that fit these lenses: power-sharing ideas at the national level, ministerial allocations, and military ranking. It is these solutions that ARCSS (2015) and the R-ARCSS (2018) have been constructed upon. However, on the ground in Jonglei State, the ground troops will not be basically driven by the question of who is the president and who is the vice president. The death of a family member in a cattle raid, the burning of their village, and the ethnic identity discourse, which has been provided to them by local commanders, all drive them. Abrahamsen (2020) offers the identification of the gap; I suppose that the gap has immediate policy implications and has to be solved immediately.

Rolandsen (2015) provides a more place-based discussion of South Sudanese violence and reports that the armed conflict in such regions as Jonglei does not necessarily follow the logic of national politics, but follows its own logic. I consider this argument convincing, and it

coincides with my stand. Here, where I extend Rolandsen (2015), is in suggesting that the local logic of conflict in Jonglei is not passively independent, but it is actively defended and taken advantage of by political elites, awareness of the fact that local conflict ensures that communities remain divided, and in such a manner, the community can be controlled. The local and the national are interrelated, but the relation is made differently, as is the case portrayed in the dominant literature.

4.24 Weak Institutions as the Environment for Ethnic Mobilization

To mobilize using ethnic identity, a specific type of environment is required of the political elites. That is a climate where state institutions are so feeble as to leave them alone. Kulang (2021) presents such an argument directly, in such a way that it is more effective in cases when courts are not in operation, when security forces fail to ensure order, and when ruling institutions are unable to bring leaders to justice. I concur with Kulang (2021) on this fact. His argument can be used to show why Jonglei State has been particularly exposed. It has had a tradition of poor state presence in South Sudan. In most of Jonglei, governmental activities are meager or negligible. This gives a vacuum in governance that can be encroached by the armed group leaders with their own brand of authority that is nearly always organized along ethnic lines.

Kulang (2021) also notes that there is an ethnic mobilization and weak institutions cycle, where weak institutions enable the exploitation of ethnicity by the elites, and that the further the ethnicity is exploited, the weaker the institutions, since they replace national loyalty with ethnic loyalty. I concur that such a cycle is in existence. However, I would contend that the presentation of the cycle made by Kulang (2021) takes it as a process that evolves with time. This evidence can indicate that the cycle is incredibly quick in Jonglei. When an ethnic attack is launched on a community, the reaction is near instantaneous - communities lose faith in the state institutions that they no longer trust, they take up arms, and they rally around ethnic leaders ready to offer them security. It is this blistering development that renders the war in Jonglei so hard to halt by the time it starts. Roach (2024) backs this up because he states that strong states act swiftly, and otherwise they become powerless when elites in the weak states seek short-term power gains at the expense of long-term peace.

4.25 Economic Hardship as a Recruitment Tool in Jonglei

In a healthy economy, ethnic mobilization is not successful. The more people have an income, a job, and a future in the formal system, the less attractive the offer by an ethnic armed group. According to Bramston (2025), oil dependence, hyperinflation, and currency collapse are some of the economic forces that have contributed to political resentment in South Sudan. I agree with this argument. The cost of living reduces the opposition of the masses to ethnic recruitment. Jonglei is a region with a high illiteracy rate, and a young man who does not own land and does not earn an income has very few choices. Entering a military outfit may seem like arming, coming together, and even material compensation. This is something the political leaders favoring such armed groups are, and when they address the economically desperate, young men, they purposely aim with their ethnic discourses that assign a face to their hardship and an enemy to their plight.

The extension of the argument of Bramston (2025) is where I see it in the particular case of Jonglei. Bramston (2025) dwells upon the economic collapse on the national level. In Jonglei, however, there are fewer ethno-cultural mobilizing grievances and more personalized ones. The inter-ethnic tension has been decades-long and based on the cattle rivalry, which is the main form of wealth in the majority of communities living in Jonglei. Competition has also arisen between the Dinka, Nuer, and Murle due to access to grazing land, as well as water sources in the Nile (Kulang, 2021). White-collar criminals have excelled themselves in rebranding these banal resource wars as ethnic existential threats. They do not see cattle raiding as a criminal offense or an economic conflict, but rather as an ethnic attack that requires retaliation from an ethnic army. It is the engine of local ethnic mobilization in Jonglei and something that cannot be followed in the national economic perspective that Bramston (2025) provides.

4.26 Propaganda, Fear, and the Making of the Enemy in Jonglei

In addition to recruitment, a narrative is required for ethnic mobilization. The elites need to make people believe that the other group is a real and imminent danger to their existence. Prunier (2004) has extensively treated the mechanism by which armed groups in eastern Africa use the fear discourses to trap communities into an ethnic commitment, and his findings directly apply to Jonglei. The propaganda employed by armed commanders in Jonglei commonly serves the effect of embezzling actual cases of violence - a cattle raid, an assault on a village, the murder of civilians - to give the impression of an organized ethnic

genocide. This story is a strong one, as there is one grain of truth in it. The violence is real. But the meaning attached to it, the assertion that it is an intentional ethnic conspiracy, is a product of politics.

My case is that the South Sudan literature has not given due attention to how this narrative is constructed. One of the tools referred to by Abdalla and Yahya (2021) is propaganda, yet the researchers discuss it as the activity of supporting them instead of the focal tool. I would argue that the process of turning ethnic identity into a war machine does not primarily involve propaganda as an underpinning tool, but rather, it is the cornerstone of this process. The economic motives and the recruitment formations are not sufficient without the propaganda. The risks of becoming members of an armed group should be believed by people only after they are convinced that they are in danger. This has been carried out via community elders in Jonglei who have been co-opted by the leaders of armed groups, via messages of social media in the recent period, and data manipulation through the creation of mourning rituals (mourning rituals) to provoke revenge in the face of an attack (OCHA, 2026).

Another difference that I observe between the scholarship on the Murle community as a whole and that of the specific community is the gap. Most of the writings concerning the ethnic violence in Jonglei imply the Dinka-Nuer conflict as the implication of the national Kiir-Machar relationship. One will hear a lot about the Murle being perpetrators of raids, but will rarely explain the fact that they are also victims of other ethnic propaganda and mobilization efforts. Abrahamsen (2020) fails to mention this asymmetry. I would argue that any thorough discussion of ethnic mobilization in Jonglei should capture how all three major communities have been both targets and sources of ethnic politics manipulation in a way that the power and resources of the same have not been evenly distributed.

4.27 Why Peace Agreements Have Not Addressed Ethnic Mobilization in Jonglei

In 2026, the United Nations (UN News, 2026) indicated that there were about 280,000 displaced civilians in the Jonglei State. OCHA (2026) affirmed that armed violence and displacement continued into early 2026. These numbers are eloquent: despite two major peace agreements, ARCSS in 2015 and the R-ARCSS in 2018, the conflict in Jonglei has not ceased. I can say that this failure is directly related to the fact that the agreements did nothing to tackle the sub-national processes of ethnic mobilization that I have outlined in this section.

Admin (2024) also lists three primary causes of failure in peace agreements in South Sudan, which include poor implementation, lack of trust in each other, and a sense of community exclusion. I concur with this analysis as far as it is concerned. However, I maintain that these three factors themselves are the results of ethnic mobilization. The communities are not involved in the peace talks since the agreements are formulated at the national elite, where ethnic mobilization is not addressed at the community level. The lack of trust has been carefully built up over the decades of ethnic propaganda and violence. The poor implementation is indicative of the fact that the elites who sign the contracts are not always interested in breaking the ethnic networks in which they remain in power.

Levi (2025) refers to the lack of empirical interest in the local ethnic politics as one of the crucial gaps in the current literature on South Sudan. I agree. It is within that gap that this study is directly responding by studying Jonglei State as its main case. I would argue that until the particular local processes of mobilizing ethnic identity on a political agenda in Jonglei are clearly known, any peace process constructed on behalf of South Sudan will be shallow. The negotiators and policy makers will be working at the national level, and the real fuel of the conflict will be burning at the community level.

4.28 OBJECTIVE TWO

4.29 The Relation between Ethnic Politics and Organizing Armed Groups in South Sudan: Jonglei State.

Military forces do not come together due to chance. They are built. They need some leadership, warriors, arms, and something that people are ready to sacrifice their lives. This is precisely the reason that ethnic politics has given in South Sudan, and specifically in the Jonglei State. Political elites have employed ethnic belonging as the organizing logic to the formation of armed groups - informing communities that they have to struggle to defend their people, their territory, and their identity. This part of the paper discusses the relationship relating to ethnic politics and the formation of armed groups in Jonglei based on the available evidence found in the literature and a critical consideration of opposing academic views. I demonstrate that armed groups in Jonglei are not spontaneous results of poverty and disorganization. They are politically constructed organizations where their formation, organization, and survival are greatly influenced by ethnic political calculations.

4.30 Ethnic Politics as the Prerequisite of the Recruitment of Armed Groups.

The closest relation between ethnic politics and the formation of armed groups lies in the recruiting process. According to Abdalla and Yahya (2021), the leaders of armed groups in South Sudan use ethnic loyalty to recruit fighters. Their way to young men is not based on them trying to get a job, but rather a part of an ethnic group that is being threatened. The message itself is straightforward and brutal: your people require you; otherwise, they will be destroyed if you do nothing. This message is effective since it is presented in the context of actual violence. In the case of Jonglei, when communities have been attacked, the loss of family members and the burning of houses become the facts that allow justifying the narrative of recruitment. I concur with Abdalla and Yahya (2021) that this is the main ethnic recruitment strategy in the formation of armed forces in South Sudan.

Nevertheless, I believe that Abdalla and Yahya (2021) do not accurately describe why such a strategy is as effective within Jonglei as in other regions of South Sudan. I would argue that this is the case because of Jonglei being a uniquely diverse ethnicity with an extremely high degree of poverty, a complete lack of state presence, and an extended history of unresolved inter-community violence. Living in a country where the government cannot secure your safety, where you have witnessed the murder of relatives in ethnic attacks, and where the organized protection is offered only by an ethnic armed force, it is not a rational decision to turn into a member of the latter. It is a survival response. The elites know this and they actively sustain the same conditions, such as perpetual violence, that make membership in the ethnic armed groups seem to be an essential need. Such is what renders armed groups' formation, in Jonglei, self-sustainable in a manner that the general framework provided by Abdalla and Yahya (2021) fails to comprehend.

4.31 The State Role, Weakness, Complicity and the Space of armed Groups.

The most important question in the study of the formation of armed groups is why the state has failed or refrained from stopping it. Kulang (2021) offers a significant component of the solution. To support his argument, he says that South Sudan has weak institutions within which armed groups are able to develop and thrive. In places where there is no court, where police are perceived to be ineffective, and where local government does not exist, military groups take over. They become the source that individuals would go to in order to receive protection, resolution of disputes, as well as even basic services. This is evident in the Jonglei. The informal institutions within the state have had very little substantial contact with

formal government organizations. The military, which is ethnically based, is a form of government that becomes the de facto government.

The argument is extended in an important manner by Roach (2024). He observes that in weak states such as South Sudan, the state is not unable to form armed groups: in fact, the state helps. The national government, which is controlled by the political elites, has at one time or another been supporting ethnic armed groups in Jonglei since these groups can benefit them politically. The national-level leaders keep some groups of people armed, and at war with one another, and in the process, this division does not allow these groups to rebel against the central government. It is a divide-and-rule thinking that has a long history in African post-colonial politics, and I would argue that it is applicable to Jonglei directly. I concur with Roach (2024) that state weakness and elite complicity are both warranted components of the explanation as to why ethnic armed groups have been capable of developing and surviving in Jonglei.

My own contribution is on the issue of the working of this elite complicity in practice. I would argue that the national government has not been consistent in its ties with armed groups in Jonglei. At other points between 2013 and 2025, the same formations of armed groups have been viewed as enemies to be defeated, allies to be armed, and threats that should be handled using peace deals. This changing relation demonstrates that armed groups in Jonglei do not just emerge out of state weakness. They are political tools, the constructions and sustenance of which are actively controlled by elites on different levels, local, regional, and national. According to Abrahamsen (2020), these multi-level dynamics have received insufficient attention in the scholarship on South Sudan, and I concur that this gap needs to be bridged in order to formulate the formation of armed group in Jonglei in a proper manner.

4.32 Cattle, Land, and the Material Basis of Ethnic Armed Groups

Military groups do not live by mere ideology and ethnic loyalty. They need resources. Cattle and land are the main material resources upon which ethnic armed groups have structured themselves in the Jonglei State. The primary type of wealth in the Dinka, Nuer, and Murle practices is cattle. The grazing land and water sources are controlled to define whether communities will be able to maintain their herds, hence their livelihoods. In Jonglei, Kulang (2021) identifies the following dimensions of the resources of conflict. He demonstrates that the struggle over cattle and land has always been an important element of inter-communal

tension, and political elites have always utilized these tensions to establish and sustain ethnically structured armed forces.

I concur with Kulang (2021) that the issue of resource competition is actual and significant in the creation of armed groups in Jonglei. However, I would caution against a certain stance that some scholars have because I think that this is an erroneous one. Some critics of African conflict - and in this instance, I will refer to a wider literature that transcends the South Sudan scholarship in particular - hold the view that resource struggles are the actual source of the formation of armed groups, and that ethnicity is little more than a cover story to enlist fighters in an underlying competition over material resources. Prunier (2004) tends to conform to this stand in part of his writing on the acquires western Africa conflicts. I do not agree with this reductionist argument. It does not mean that resources are inessential - it is clearly so. To indicate that ethnicity is merely a cover story is to misinterpret the level of mingling of identity and material interest in Jonglei. When a Murle family is deprived of cattle due to a raid, it does not feel the loss as an economic loss. They feel like it is an assault on their people, their identity, and their own dignity. It is the experience of ethnicity that is actually ethnic that renders ethnic political mobilization so effective. To make a material calculation is to lose the entire essence of what is going on.

Bramston (2025) enriches the above picture by revealing the national economic aspect of the country, as the oil-driven economy and currency crashing of South Sudan have represented one of the factors that increased poverty in regions such as Jonglei. I concur that national economic failure presents the context in which the conflicts over local resources become more violent and lethal. As the formal economy crashes, cattle become even more significant as a source of wealth, and it implies that raids get more dangerous and the motive to arm along those ethnic lines even more compelling. Bramston (2025) and Kulang (2021) jointly present the economic basis that assists in the understanding of why armed groups in Jonglei have become so persistent despite the number of peace attempts.

4.33 Young Men, Masculinity, and Ethnic Armed Group Social Structure.

The role of youth and the social meaning of the membership of an armed group to young men is one of the dimensions of armed group formation in Jonglei, which is discussed in the existing literature but not analyzed in depth. In an aside's comment, Abrahamsen (2020) observes that ethnic armed groups in South Sudan are disproportionately enlisted with young men. Youth unemployment is another structural factor that is mentioned by Levi (2025) in

the formation of armed groups. I do not disagree that young people and the lack of work are significant variables, but I would like to take the analysis a step further.

Engagement in armed protection of the community is not only a political and economic action in Dinka, Nuer, and Murle communities, but has strong social and cultural implications. In the case of young men, joining arms to defend the community is traditionally connected with becoming an adult and worthy person, with demonstrating their courage, and getting the right to marry and be taken seriously by older men. This aspect of culture is quite clear to political elites who create ethnic armed groups. They put the membership in armed groups not only in terms of a political necessity but also in terms of social and masculine obligation. When a society is informed that its young men have to fight to defend the honour and existence of the community, they are tapping into a cultural illogic that goes way beyond politics.

In my reasoning, this is one of the reasons why armed groups in Jonglei are particularly hard to eliminate even when the peace agreements are signed, and some fighters acknowledge the demobilization. The failure of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs in South Sudan in Jonglei has always been because the issues of the membership of armed groups are treated as purely political and economic issue. The latter provides cash bounties and training, yet they fail to tackle the social connotation of being an armed group member to the young men in these societies. According to Admin (2024), weak implementation of peace agreements is also one of the main failures, and I consider that this cultural blindness is one of the particular forms in which weak implementation is manifested in

4.34 Armed Group Formation: A Political Enterprise, Who Benefits?

In order to know in full, the correlation between ethnic politics and armed group formation, a simple question is to be asked, and that is: who are the beneficiaries of the existence of the ethnic armed groups in Jonglei? This question would be answered best by showing the political rationality of the formation of armed groups. According to Roach (2024), in weak states, conflict is an advantage for the elites since they receive power without providing governance. The communities are not likely to blame the state for its failures as long as they are occupied in the battle against each other. This logic of power-maintenance is actual and significant, and I agree with Roach (2024).

However, I would claim that national-level elites are not the only beneficiaries of ethnic armed groups in Jonglei. Formation of armed groups is also of great benefit to local commanders. A local commander of an ethnic armed group acquires power, resources, and political power, which he would not have enjoyed in a peaceful society. He owns the disbursement of stolen cows. He can reinstate his will by using violence. He turns into an obligatory interlocutor to any external actor - the government, the NGO, or the international organization, which is interested in working on his territory. In brief, the leadership of the armed groups is the local political power, and the local power is the power that relies on the persistence of the ethnic conflict. This implies that local commanders take a vested interest in ensuring that the ethnic tension does not subside, and they will take the initiative to sabotage peace processes that endanger their status.

This argument expands the scope of Abdalla and Yahya (2021) in a significant way. They dwell on the attempts of the elites at the summit to use the issue of ethnicity to their advantage politically. I would like to state that the manipulation is on several levels simultaneously in Jonglei, among national elites, regional politicians, and local commanders, as a variety of interests contribute to the legitimacy and sustainability of ethnic armed groups, and all of them are interested in preserving the situation. I believe that it is this multi-level model of interest that has been the key aspect that makes armed groups in Jonglei continue to be alive, no matter the peace agreement made between 2015 and 2025. Both the uncertainty and the fiction are verified that armed violence and displacement in Jonglei went on to 2026. The best evidence that can be advanced to dismantle armed groups is that the current methods of dealing with armed groups have not been effective (United Nations (UN News, 2026) and OCHA (2026)).

4.35 What the Literature Does Not Get Right or Fall Short of.

It is necessary to take stock of the scholarship on hand, and I want to be specific on what I find compelling as well as what I consider to be inadequate. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) are right that in South Sudan, the main process of forming armed groups is ethnic recruitment, and their 3-part model of recruitment, propaganda, and patronage represents a good point of departure. Kulang (2021) is right that the weak institutions facilitate the existence of ethnic armed groups, and the presence of weak institutions and ethnic mobilization is a feedback loop. Roach (2024) is right that there is a reason through the elite interests in keeping the power balance, which keeps the armed groups going. It is right that Bramston (2025) argues

that economic meltdown exacerbates the circumstances that result in the attractiveness of armed group membership. Abrahamsen (2020) is right in stating that the current scholarship has not given enough consideration to sub-national dynamics.

The weakness of the literature is where I think this study has done its most significant service, namely, its inability to examine how all these factors interact and come together within the Jonglei State. None of the above scholars has added a more detailed and empirical-based analysis of how ethnic politics and the building of armed groups have worked in Jonglei, between 2013 and 2025. This is the empirical gap that Levi (2025) specifically outlines. I would say that sealing this gap is not about an academic exercise. Analytical implications and policymaking that have not been rooted in a sufficient perspective on the dynamics in Jonglei, such as the displacement of 280,000 civilians in Jonglei (UN News, 2026), the persistence of armed violence into 2026 (OCHA, 2026) and the recurring failure of peace agreements (Admin, 2024) to work, have all led to the outcomes of the analysis and policymaking. This paper is guided towards bringing that knowledge.

4.36 OBJECTIVE THREE

4.37 Effects of Ethnic Politics in the Peace Agreement and Reconciliation of the country in South Sudan, the Jonglei state.

South Sudan has straddled more peace accords than the majority of African nations. In the year 2015, the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) was signed. This was followed by the Revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS) in 2018. she is under the mediation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations, which united the leaders of the nations. Nevertheless, all this has not really diminished the fighting. In Jonglei State, armed violence persisted as late as 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2026, with the United Nations (UN News, 2026) and OCHA (2026) both acknowledging that no cessation of displacement and conflict was observed in the state. This part evaluates the impacts of ethnic politics on the realization of these peace agreements and the future of national reconciliation, especially in Jonglei State. I facilitate myself with prior research, concur where the evidence reinforces them, where I have differing opinions, where I feel the evidence has gaps of significance, and provide my personal evaluation of what the evidence entails.

4.38 Peace Pacts as Fancy Bargains, Disregarding Community Realities.

The ultimate, first, and greatest cause of the failure of peace agreements to work in South Sudan is the fact that peace agreements were developed as a trade between mighty individuals, rather than as answers to the ethnic political issues that were indeed fueling the struggle on the ground. This argument is clearly presented in the peer-reviewed article by Cessey and Asmorowati (2025), which is devoted to R-ARCSS. They bring in the idea of elite-controlled fragmentation, that is, the ruling elites having institutional weakness and ethnic fragmentation, which they intentionally perpetuate to hold onto their personal power. They discover that the R-ARCSS, even with its statement of an inclusive agreement, did not apply to the structural issues of ethnic division and institutional weakness that were central to the conflict. I concur with Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025) on the same. This evidence is directly backed by their analysis of the Jonglei State, where the R-ARCSS stipulations concerning security sector reform, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), and transitional justice were not implemented or implemented only partially, with ethnic armed group leaders going on with their business (OCHA, 2026).

This diagnosis is supported by the literature at large on African peace processes. According to Josi (2025), the implementation of the R-ARCSS was studied through the Peace Accords Matrix approach and found that the major provisions of the agreement, such as military unification and electioneering preparations, were subject to frequent extensions and procrastinations. He writes that since 2018, the transitional phase has been prolonged four times, lastly to December 2026, and has not solved the underlying ethnic political conflicts that the deal was meant to solve. I concur with Joshi (2025) that the extension in the absence of implementation is not a kind of peace but rather a management of a crisis in such a manner that serves the interests of the people who are in power, whilst the communities of Jonglei still remain tormented.

This elite bargaining logic has been disastrous in Jonglei in particular. There was a documented situation by Lacey (2013) of how the past government led peace processes in Jonglei, such as early-reconciliation processes between Dinka and Nuer communities and Murle communities, failed to be established since national political interests assumed first place on the agenda as opposed to the needs of local communities. I hold the same view as Lacey (2013), that early peacebuilding activities in Jonglei did not go in vain; however, they failed to achieve their intended goals because that was the same trend that undercut the

ARCSS and the R-ARCSS, where the concerns of the elite political interests are incompatible with the interests of communities at the lower levels.

4.39 The Politics of Ethnicity and the Ruining of Trust.

In order to have any peace agreement implemented, there must be some degree of trust between the parties involved to be able to make the hard steps that the implementation entails. The trust has been systematically destroyed in South Sudan by ethnic politics. Admin (2024) mentions mutual distrust as one of the three main reasons that have led to failures of peace agreements, the rest being weak implementation and community exclusion. I agree with Admin's (2024) analysis. I would argue, however, that Admin (2024) does little to provide an answer to the question of the source of the distrust. The mistrust between South Sudan is not a coincidence. It has been crafted purposefully in ethnic propaganda, exploitation of violence, and decades of political messaging to communities that the other cannot be trusted.

In research published by the Peace and Conflict Studies journal, it was discovered that the roots of estranged political relationships in South Sudan, and the foundation of such relationships on fear, bitterness, and revenge, are the result of unresolved historical conflicts (Nova Southeastern University, 2020). Personally, I believe this argument is valid and can be applied directly to Jonglei. In the state, communities have built up deposits of unresolved grievances, including cattle raids, kidnappings of children, village burnings, and mass killing, which no peace deal signed in a conference room in Addis Ababa has ever dealt with directly. In the absence of a resolution of these grievances that have been piling up, there will be no mutual trust, and peace agreements will simply be documents on paper as opposed to a reality on the ground.

The evidence of how ethnic political manipulations have eroded trust in the area is harsh, as the report of the UNMISS and OHCHR (2021) about the violence in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area shows between January and August 2020. The report observed that thousands of fighters belonging to Dinka, Nuer, and Murle formed militias and engaged in organized attacks against each other's villages, and at least fifty traditional chiefs and political elites were directly or indirectly behind said militias. This observation carries with it two implications. Firstly, it demonstrates that political elites were aggressively stoking ethnic violence at a time when the R-ARCSS was clearly in place nominally. Second, it demonstrates that even the traditional leaders who seemed to be the peacebuilders in other

terms had also been used as the tools of the ethnic politics system. I believe that when the traditional authority is undermined in this manner, the social bases of community reconciliation are gravely harmed since communities no longer have the familiar neutral personnel to guide the reconciliation processes.

4.40 The Exclusion of Communities and the Failure of Grassroots Reconciliation

Reconciliation cannot be achieved by peace agreements where ordinary communities are left out in the process of their design and implementation. According to Admin (2024), community exclusion is one of the primary failures of the South Sudan peace process. The Horn Review (2025) also observes that the R-ARCSS was based on elite agreements at the expense of civil society, women's organizations, and traditional authorities that minimized the validity and relevance of the accord. I concur with the two evaluations. This exclusion in Jonglei has taken quite a specific and destructive form. The communities that have suffered the greatest burden of the war, such as displaced families, bereaved parents, kidnapped children have not participated in the peace processes that were supposed to be healing their trauma.

It is known that community-based peace initiatives have been successful in some cases, especially in Jonglei, where the initiatives were not imposed but were established at the bottom level of the community. The New Humanitarian (2023) states that the 1999 Wunlit Conference, which aimed at reconciling the Dinka and Nuer peoples with the help of dialogue and ritual mediated by the church community, is still referred to as the most successful example of peace-building in South Sudan in the new millennium. The people of those communities claim that they require a new Wunlit, a procedure of uniting genuine individuals to discuss genuine concerns over a certain duration of time. I believe that this is a persuasive piece of evidence. It demonstrates that community reconciliation in Jonglei is possible, though only when it is founded on the concrete cultural background of the involved communities, organized by the individuals those communities trust, and maintained over a period of time instead of being a single event.

Nevertheless, such an approach to peacebuilding in Jonglei by international bodies has a severe issue that The New Humanitarian (2023) also mentions. The nature of funding through NGOs and donors is in short-term, one-off dialogue conferences instead of long-term processes. They are preoccupied with covering even the visible actions to funders instead of the slow and patient process of true reconciliation. I agree with this critique. It identifies a

structural issue in the way that international peacebuilding is being funded and measured, having a direct negative impact on the reconciliation process in Jonglei. This has been affirmed in The Small Arms Survey (2023) in its analysis of Jonglei, named A Pause Not a Peace, which revealed that the intervention measures put in place by the government and NGOs have failed severely to deal with the underlying causes of conflict in Jonglei, such as the long-running economic and humanitarian crisis that keeps the ethnic mobilization going. I fully support this finding. It is impossible to achieve long-term peace by resolving short-term interventions, which do not deal with the causes of the issue.

4.41 Weak implementation driven by ethnic political interests

As is well known, this is marked by weak implementation based on ethnic political interests.

Even the few things offered by the ARCSS and R-ARCSS that applied to Jonglei have not been implemented accordingly. According to Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025), this does not happen by chance, but it is intentional and represents the decisions of the elites who gain as a result of ethnic fragmentation and institutionalized weakness. Roach (2024) justifies this by providing evidence to demonstrate that in weak states such as South Sudan, the elites are trying to attain momentary gains in power instead of attaining long-term peace objectives. Weak implementation is one of the three core failures of the peace process that have been identified by Admin (2024). I concur with each of these three scholars. Poor execution in South Sudan is not so much a technical or logistical issue. It is an ethnic interest issue of a political nature.

Global Centre to the responsibility to protect (2025) reported that as of 2025, none of the transitional justice mechanisms included in the R-ARCSS, such as the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, was in place or operational, despite the Commission of Truth, Reconciliation and Healing Act being signed into law in 2024. This is caused directly by ethnic politics. The same leaders who dictate the R-ARCSS implementation are the same political leaders who would be investigated and eventually prosecuted by a working Hybrid Court. They are not interested in establishing an institution that would hold them accountable. Until ethnic political power regulating the distribution of protection and prosecution comes to dominate the spectrum, transitional justice shall always be a promise never fulfilled.

The commission in charge of monitoring the implementation of the R-ARCSS control, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), reported at the end of

2025 that compliance was in fact being systematically violated by all significant joint bodies that are significant (Amani Africa, 2026). RJMEC also said that the planned elections in December 2026 would prove to be very challenging due to the implementation halt. I rely on this fact to make my case that the R-ARCSS has not collapsed due to the inability of other nations to support it or even to be diplomatic. It has not succeeded as the ethnic political interests of the ruling parties are more superior to their determination to the agreement that they signed. Joshi (2025) establishes the fact that implementation has been delayed and extended severely without being resolved, which is in line with the deliberate non-compliance pattern, outlined by Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025).

The Special Effect on Jonglei: Impunity, Marginalization and the Ongoing Violence.

In Jonglei, ethnic politics have especially played a brutal role in the implementation of peace agreements due to the particular division of political marginalization in the state. As stated by research by Humanitarian Practice Network (2013), other sources reveal that the Lou Nuer, as well as the Murle communities, are politically and economically marginalized by the politically superpower Bor Dinka. The Murle in the selection are specifically very poorly represented in the Jonglei State government. Such political marginalization translates to less inclination of those communities to believe in any peace agreement negotiated by those in power and more of those armed self-defense by the help of ethnic groups as all they can do to protect themselves.

Based on the conclusions of the UNMISS and OHCHR (2021) report, it is clear that the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPF) did not prevent the ethnic militia violence in Jonglei in 2020 and did not even bother to bring the perpetrators to justice. This impunity directly relates to ethnic politics. By having individuals who commit ethnic violence get away with it due to ethnic or political ties, the victims get to know that the government is not protecting them, and society gets to know that it is more efficient to join an ethnic military group than it is to expect the government to protect them. Kulang (2021) takes this argument to its logical conclusion when dismissing the weak institutions as the common school and ethnic mobilization as the weak institutions, stating that the two variables depend on each other in a vicious cycle. I support Kulang (2021), and the Jonglei evidence that happened in 2020 and 2021 will be specifically the type of evidence that illustrates how a cycle works in reality.

There is one way that I wish to mention how I find the literature somewhat disagreeing. Some observers of the South Sudan crisis, especially those that target the national level, argue that the way out of the implementation crisis is to reinforce the R-ARCSS and urge the parties to adhere more to its terms (Joshi, 2025; IPI Global Observatory, 2025). I do not disapprove of the fact that the commitment to the R-ARCSS is important. I would say, though, that this is not the sole step that needs to be strengthened in the eyes of Jonglei. Jonglei conflict has a local aspect of it consisting of particular community grievances, interests of local surrogates, and inter-ethnic ties between Dinka, Nuer, and Murle, which the R-ARCSS does not deal with at all. An increased national consensus, which, nonetheless, disregards these regional interactions, will not work in Jonglei either. A similar process of community-level response, long-term reconciliation, and local political responsibility at the state level, addressing the particular processes of ethnic conflict, is what is required.

4.42 Summary

This chapter has examined the ways in which ethnic politics has sustained armed conflict in Jonglei State in three interlinked ways. First, ethnic identities have been manipulated by elite leaders, ethnic networks, and propaganda, to create the political environment in which armed groups operate. In the second dimension, these armed groups have been perpetuated through ethnic recruitment, community violence and defections that have resulted in security sector fragmentation, all of which are reproduced by local politics and are inaccessible to the national peace agreements without local implementation. In the third dimension, the implementation of peace agreements has been hindered through spoiler politics, community exclusion, and elite opposition to the measures - especially post-war transitions, security sector reform and transitional justice measures - that weaken elite power. The insights into hard power, soft power and continued community influence show that Jonglei's ethnic politics is not something that is only elite-driven. It has become institutionalized, even self-perpetuating, at the community level. This is why peace agreements that focus solely on elite incentives fail: they do not target the social, material and institutional reproduction of ethnic politics at the community level. This analysis confirms UN News (2026) and OCHA (2026) figures that by early 2026, there were 280,000 IDPs in Jonglei, not because there were no peace agreements, but because the political conditions for conflict remain in all three of the dimensions examined in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the study's findings through a discussion of the findings across the three different research questions, followed by a reflective conclusion and recommendations. The study set out to examine the role of ethnic politics in perpetuating war in South Sudan from 2013 to 2025, focusing on Jonglei State. As discussed in the preceding chapters - drawing on a constructivist-instrumentalist theoretical framework - ethnic identity in Jonglei is not an organic by-product of poverty and institutional collapse. It is a carefully crafted and maintained political construct in the interests of national, local and regional elites for power and wealth. This chapter examines the implications of these findings, their theoretical and policy ramifications, and the recommendations that stem from this study's identified shortcomings and analyses, rather than broad-based recommendations for post-war contexts.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The Use of Ethnicity for Political Mobilisation: Jonglei Case Study

The goal of this research was to investigate the political mobilisation of ethnic identity in Jonglei, South Sudan. The studies reviewed in Chapters Two and Four demonstrate, with substantive evidence, that in Jonglei, "ethnicity is not the cause but the weapon of war". This runs against the grain of the primordialist perspectives that implicitly underpin our public and some academic understanding of the South Sudan war. Abdalla and Yahya (2021) are correct to identify elite manipulation, with its three-pronged approach of ethnic mobilisation, fear-mongering and patronage. But as Chapter Four illustrates, these strategies are not used throughout Jonglei, but are embedded in the ecology of resources, history and non-institutionalism here.

The constructivist framework adopted in this book is important here. The Dinka, Nuer and Murle ethnic categories are not natural; they have been hardened into politically relevant categories by decades of colonial bureaucratisation, SPLA ethnic militarism and post-independence conflict. The instrumentalist caveat to this approach, inspired by Brass (1991) and Bates (1983), explains when ethnic mobilisations take place: elites do not use ethnic appeals all the time, but when the benefits outweigh the costs - in times of political

emergency, resource pressures or institutional vacuum. The most obvious example is the December 2013 crisis: a political struggle between elites (Kiir and Machar) within the SPLM party was rapidly ethnicised because ethnic appeals were the best way to mobilise soldiers at a time when state institutions were failing.

The book also advances beyond the field in terms of an empirical contribution: under-representation of the Murle community in politics and scholarship (Chapter Four). The Murle have been persistently constructed in propaganda to the Dinka and Nuer as the belligerent Other, which Abrahamsen (2020) notes is a gap, but which she does not empirically examine. This study argues that analysis of the Murle case is not incidental, but central to the research, because it provides the test case for the most extreme manifestation of the constructivist argument: a community has been politically constituted as an enemy through soft-power propaganda practices, and this constitution has structural implications for inter-communal trust, peace agreement credibility, and armed group formation that cannot be resolved through elite-level diplomacy.

5.2 Ethnic Politics and Armed Group Formation

An Initiative from the Bottom Up The second research question asked about the relationship between ethnic politics and armed group formation in Jonglei. The findings reveal that armed groups in Jonglei are neither an expression of spontaneous ethnic hatred, nor rational responses to material interests as greed theories would predict. They are political artefacts whose formation, cohesion and sustainability are ethnic political processes at the national, regional and local level.

The ethnic security dilemma model developed by Posen (1993) and furthered by Lake and Rothchild (1996) provides the structural basis for why ethnic armed group formation is self-perpetuating in Jonglei. Selective disarmament of the Lou Nuer in the post-CPA 2005 years offered the conditions specified by Posen: weapon inequality led to fear, which led to rational incentives to arm oneself along ethnic lines. However, this research goes beyond the structuralism of the security dilemma model to demonstrate, as Kindersley and Rolandsen (2019) do, that the security dilemma in Jonglei is not only reactively constructed, but actively. Armed group leaders in Greater Jonglei have deliberately ignited inter-communal warfare to trigger retaliation cycles which allow them to strengthen their political position and their power base. The security dilemma is both a structural and political factor.

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5.3 Ethnic Politics and Armed Group Formation: A Multi-Level Political Enterprise

The third research question assessed ethnic politics' influence on the implementation of peace agreements and national reconciliation. These findings are the most policy relevant and theoretically nuanced. It demonstrates that the failure of the ARCSS (2015) and R-ARCSS (2018) in Jonglei is not primarily due to the incompetence of the diplomats or the absence of international pressure. It is a consequence of the design of peace processes around elite power sharing arrangements that preserve the three ways of ethnic politics' continuation of the conflict at the community level: spoiler politics, community exclusion, and elite obstruction.

One of the most useful theories of this study is elite-controlled fragmentation by Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025). Their findings that elites in power deliberately maintain ethnic division and weak institutions in order to maintain power is consistent in Jonglei with failure to establish the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, the ongoing extension of the transition, and evidence of traditional chiefs and political elites' support for the ethnic militias during implementation of the R-ARCSS (UNMISS and OHCHR, 2021). Joshi's (2025) Peace Accords Matrix confirms that all key provisions of the R-ARCSS have been delayed and not implemented, which is characteristic of elite control and resistance, rather than technical competence.

The research concludes that the 1999 Wunlit Conference is the best documented case of peace-building in Jonglei as it was locally initiated, culturally relevant, mediated by local trusted leaders rather than international diplomats, and allowed for the time to heal grievances rather than just elite signatures to peace. Wunlit versus the R-ARCSS is revealing. It is the structural difference between peacebuilding that is aimed at healing relationships and

identities (Lederach, 1997) and peacebuilding that is aimed at managing elite relations without changing the local community context, which enables ethnic politics. For example, the Small Arms Survey (2023) characterisation of Jonglei as being in a pause, not peace, is precisely to the point.

5.4 Ethnic Politics and Peace Agreement Failure: Mechanisms at the Sub-National Level

This research has maintained that the following five theories - realism, social constructivism, instrumentalism, the ethnic security dilemma and liberal peacebuilding theory - described in Chapter Two are not mutually exclusive. The eclectic framework applied to Jonglei demonstrates that it is necessary to combine several theories to explain it. Realism explains elite power politics that led to the December 2013 crisis. Constructivism explains the historical organisation of ethnic identities into political groups. Instrumentalism explains the political timing and methods of ethnic appeals by entrepreneurs. The ethnic security dilemma explains the circumstances that make community-level rearmament rational. Critical liberal peacebuilding explains why internationally negotiated peace deals do not address the local conditions for conflict.

The most significant theoretical innovation of this study is to insist on the sub-national level of analysis as analytically distinct from the national level. The gap that Abrahamsen (2020) identified and Levi (2025) named is not empirical, a lack of information about Jonglei. It is theoretical: the analytical tools at our disposal have been developed to explain the role of national elites and have not been adjusted to consider the community- and armed-group-level processes through which ethnic politics reproduce in Jonglei, in the absence of elite directives. The recognition that Jonglei's ethnic politics has become institutionalised and self-organising at the community level in the form of patron-client relations, cultural socialisation of armed group memberships, and institutionalisation of ethnic identity as the means of access to security and resources, is an advancement on the state-of-the-art.

5.5 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to answer the question of why armed conflict has persisted in South Sudan between 2013 and 2025, in the sub-national case of Jonglei State in which the official peace process appears to have made little progress. The research shows that the persistence of conflict in Jonglei is not unintentional, nor based on an intractable primordial

conflict between Dinka, Nuer and Murle. It is the intended and systemic consequence of a political economy in which multiple actors from national political elites to local armed group leaders are enabled, empowered and legitimate in the persistence of ethnic conflict, rather than its settlement.

A comprehensive theoretical and empirical approach has been taken to address the three research questions. Jonglei ethnic identities are not pre-ordained cultural identities but produced through elite manipulation, propaganda and patronage. Armed groups are politically organised groups whose constitution is determined by ethnic politics at multiple levels, and whose persistence is explained not only by material insecurity but by the social reproduction of young men's identities as masculine adults through membership in armed groups, among Dinka, Nuer and Murle youth. The failure of peace accords are not the failure of diplomacy but the creation of elite-level power-sharing arrangements that maintain the sub-national conditions for the reproduction of ethnic politics: spoiler groups, community exclusion and the blocking of transitional justice and security sector reform by elites whose power is founded on ethnic division.

This study confirms that the state of affairs in Jonglei in early 2016, with some 280,000 internally displaced persons (UN News, 2016), and continuing armed conflict (OCHA, 2016) is not the failure of the peace process to bring peace to Jonglei. It is the success of the ethnic political system to reproduce itself. Unless the three mechanisms outlined in this study - elite manipulation of ethnic identity, the formation of ethnically based armed groups, and elites' resistance to the implementation of the peace process - are addressed in a simultaneous and appropriate manner, Jonglei will not implement a peace process.

The study has limitations. The exclusive reliance on secondary sources, although analytical in that it is not possible to draw on sources from local communities in a conflict zone due to security and access concerns, does mean that the representation of local communities must be done through academic and institutional sources. Research that is able to conduct primary fieldwork with Dinka, Nuer and Murle communities in Jonglei will further the empirical evidence in this work. Moreover, the analysis has a cut-off of early 2026, and therefore cannot speak to developments since then. The December 2026 elections and current transition period are critical junctures that will reveal the insights of this study.

5.6 Recommendations

In this section, recommendations are drawn from the analytical and empirical gaps and contributions of this study. They are not general post-war recommendations but focused measures to address some of the dynamics of ethnic politics and armed conflict in Jonglei. Therefore, they are directed at triple targets: regional and international peace negotiators, the Government of South Sudan and the transitional political institutions established by the R-ARCSS, and the academic and research community.

5.7 Reorient Peace Architecture from Elite Bargaining to Sub-National Conflict Transformation

The main thrust of this study is that the international community, especially Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), African Union, United Nations and other international actors should re-orient the architecture of peace mediation in South Sudan by incorporating a sub-national peace track for Jonglei State. The R-ARCSS is a national elite power-sharing agreement without a track to address specific sub-national dynamics of Jonglei's ethnic politics, which this study has demonstrated to be more analytically relevant. This addresses the first two of the identified gaps in the literature - a sub-national framework and the separation of conflict and political science. The next peace framework should have a Jonglei-specific track to address inter-communal grievance, political marginalisation of the Nuer and Murle communities, and the armed group politics of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), the Akobo counties and Bor as separate political entities and not as localised manifestations of the Kiir-Machar conflict.

5.8 Address the Asymmetric Representation of the Murle Community

This study has identified the political and academic marginalisation of the Murle community as a particular weakness in research and in the peace process. There are two recommendations here. The first is that, if there is a successor to the peace agreement, or if the implementation plan for the R-ARCSS is revised, it must explicitly include proportional representation of the Murle community in the Jonglei State governance system, including the state parliament, security forces and the local administration of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area. The current imbalance is compounding the armed insurgency model of the Cobra Faction because it is affirming for the Murle community that there is no protection or resources from the formal political system. Second, it is time for the research community

to undertake primary field studies which include the voice of the Murle community regarding the reasons for war, peace and reconciliation. The preference of the literature to focus on the Murle as cattle raiders, rather than as an ethnic group that is to be marginalized by political elites, is an analytical weakness that this study has noted but cannot correct without primary data.

5.9 Reform DDR Programs to Address the Cultural Dimension of Armed Group Membership

The persistence of failed Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs in Jonglei is not a budgetary issue. This study has demonstrated that it is the result of a structural analysis failure: DDR programs treat armed group participation as an economic and political decision that can be solved by offering material incentives, while the cultural integration of armed group participation in Dinka, Nuer and Murle young men's masculinities is overlooked. The response is that the design of DDR activities in Jonglei needs to involve culturally specific rituals of social transition that facilitate young men's disengagement from armed groups without their feeling their ethnic identity is undermined by their demobilization, and their social identity undermined by their demobilization. This means working with traditional and cultural leaders in the design of DDR, not as legitimating and authorizing figures for external interventions, but as the primary actors of transition processes and mechanisms, based on the norms of social reproduction of local communities. This addresses the fourth gap in the literature noted above, the lack of theorisation of the feedback loop of elite policies and community responses, and the particular implementation failure noted in the analysis of the third research question.

5.10 Operationalize Transitional Justice Mechanisms Without Further Delay

The failure to operationalise the Hybrid Court for South Sudan and the Commission on Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, mandated by the R-ARCSS, and the latter made law in 2024, is the most institutionalized form of elite resistance identified in this study. The recommendation is that the international community, in particular the African Union and the United Nations Security Council, needs to introduce a form of conditionality to its political and financial support to the transitional process in South Sudan, so that the operationalization of transitional justice mechanisms becomes a precondition for engagement, rather than a goal for the foreseeable future. This research has identified that impunity for ethnic violence is a structural predictor of the formation of armed groups in Jonglei: communities that perceive

perpetrators of ethnic attacks enjoy impunity, and that ethnic self-defence is more effective than state protection, will also form armed groups. The operationalization of accountability mechanisms is thus not only a human rights imperative but a conflict prevention measure that has implications for the dynamics discussed in relation to each of the three study objectives.

5.11 Fund Long-Term, Community-Owned Reconciliation Processes Modelled on the Wunlit Approach

The 1999 Wunlit Conference is the most evidence-based model of peacebuilding in Jonglei, but international donors have been unable to create the conditions for replication. The recommendation is for international donors, including the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, bilateral donors in South Sudan and international NGOs in Jonglei, to refashion their strategies of international funding models for peacebuilding in Jonglei. Event-based dialogue conferences must be replaced by multi-year funding for community-owned reconciliation processes that are co-designed by traditional and cultural authorities, address specific historical grievances (such as histories of cattle rustling, child abduction and community destruction), are run for the amount of time required to build trust rather than record agreements, and are evaluated by community-based indicators of reconciliation rather than the funder-friendly output-based key performance indicators. This is a direct recommendation for filling the third gap in the literature, the post-2018 time period, and for the community-exclusion mechanism identified as a reason for the failure of peace agreements.

5.12 Invest in Empirically Grounded Sub-National Research on Jonglei

This study has demonstrated that the lack of sub-national level analysis identified by Abrahamsen (2020) and Levi (2025) has policy implications. Peace-building should not continue in Jonglei without first understanding the local ethnic complexities in the context of the state. The policy implication is that international funding bodies, such as the Social Science Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council and African research institutions should provide funding for primary research in Jonglei State. This should study local perceptions about the peace process, internal political economies of ethnic armed groups in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area and the Akobo counties and conditions under which inter-ethnic alliances have been forged in Jonglei and failed. The research community also needs to address the problem of the Murle in conflict studies as a methodological issue to ensure that future studies undertake an examination of all three major

groups, rather than the Dinka-Nuer dichotomy imported from the national level (Kiir-Machar).

5.13 Address Economic Drivers of Ethnic Mobilization Through Targeted Livelihoods Programming

This research has reconfirmed Bramston's (2025) research that the state's economic crisis, specifically oil dependency, hyperinflation and the collapse of the Sudanese pound, has compounded the opportunities that the ethnic armed groups provide for young men in Jonglei. The implication here is that humanitarian and development actors in Jonglei should move beyond response to structured livelihoods programming in order to offer young men from the Dinka, Nuer and Murle clans opportunities not to join ethnic armed groups. Critically, these opportunities should not be offered through ethnic patronage: if livelihood opportunities are offered through ethnic patronage networks, or are seen to favour one group over another, they will sustain the ethnic political economy described in this study. Programming needs to be designed in such a way that the process includes participation from both sides; conditions must involve inter-communal co-operation in order to create the material conditions for the relational transformation that Lederach (1997) describes as central to conflict transformation.

5.14 Final Reflections

This study began with a question that had not been asked with sufficient analytic rigour: why don't peace agreements bring an end to armed conflict in South Sudan, and in Jonglei State specifically? The answer to this question offered by this study is one of structural and political conditions. It is structural because the state, economy and institutions of Jonglei have been weak, destroyed or dysfunctional, creating the space for ethnic identity to be the most available political resource for ruling elites to mobilize support, control access to wealth, and dominate political processes. It is political because, although these structural conditions are a necessary condition for ethnic conflict, they are not a sufficient condition; they are sufficient only when political actors at different levels decide to mobilize ethnic identity rather than build the inter-ethnic institutional and political alliances that minimize their dependence on ethnic-based patron-client politics.

The Dinka, Nuer and Murle people of Jonglei are not to blame for their own conflict. They are the primary victims and in the absence of other political institutions, also actors. This is

an analytical as well as moral question. A peace process that is premised on collective blame for conflict being assigned to communities rather than the elite groups who have politically mobilized conflict in Jonglei State in the last 15 years will not only be misdirected, it will perpetuate the discourse of ethnic mobilization that has been so prevalent in Jonglei for so long. The path to sustainable peace in Jonglei State is, above all, a political project that seeks to remove the structures that make war more profitable than peace for the elites that control the political economy of the state. This study has identified these structures as best as can be done using secondary data. Their dismantling is the job of the political actors, international partners and communities in South Sudan.

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APPENDICES.

APPENDIX I, KEY TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN JONGLEI STATE 2013-2025

YEARS	EVENTS	SIGNICANCE
December **2013**	Civil war eruption after SPLM political turmoil; war between Kiir and Machar factions.	The process of ethnic mobilization begins; Jonglei becomes one of the initial areas of violence.
2014	Lou NuerMurle intercommunal violence; cattle raids on a large scale in Akobo and Pibor.	There is lack of evidence that connects the national conflict with the local ethnic relations.
2015	ARCSS was signed in Addis Ababa in IGAD mediation.	First major peace project; little realization Jonglei.
2016	Recall of Machar to Juba; new violence; government of national unity disintegrates.	The process of R-ARCSS is undermined; Jonglei violence is exacerbated.
2017	Cobra Faction, led by David Yau Yau, signs agreement with government; GPAA set up.	Murle political accommodation; partial decrease in Murle insurgency.
September **2018**	R-ARCSS was signed at Addis Ababa	Main peace framework effective 20182025; small-scale community-level implementation in Jonglei.
2019-2020	In Jonglei and GPAA, intercommunal violence intensifies; organized militia attacks on the communities of Dinka, Nuer, and Murle.	Problems of traditional elites and politicians complicity are documented by UNMISS/OHCHR (2021).
2021	Further displacement; according to RJMEC, there has been continued non-compliance with R-ARCSS.	Period of transition was extended; politics of the spoiler were founded.
2022-2023	Floods and humanitarian disasters	Competition intensifies over resources

	exacerbated by armed violence; Small Arms Survey refers to Jonglei as a pause, not a peace.	due to climate shocks; ethnic mobilisation continues.
2024	The Truth, Reconciliation and Healing Act signed into law; Hybrid Court yet to be established. OCHA estimates around 280,000 IDPs in the province of Jonglei; armed violence prevails in the Ayod County.	Formal transitional justice framework does exist, but is yet to be operationalized.
	OCHA reports ~280,000 IDPs in Jonglei; armed violence continues in Ayod County	Establishes continuity of ethnic conflict in the wake of R-ARCSS; substantiates the main thesis of the study.

Sources: Abdalla and Yahya (2021); Kulang (2021); UNMISS and OHCHR (2021); OCHA (2026); Small Arms Survey (2023); UN News (2026); Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2025).

APPENDIX II, KEY PEACE AGREEMENTS AND THEIR PROVISIONS

Agreement		Key Provisions	Status in Jonglei
CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement)?		Power-sharing; Southern independence referendum; DDR; reform of security sector.	Lou Nuer has selective disarmed; security dilemma aggravated; Murle is not an object of any considerable provision.
ARCSS (Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan)		Government of National Unity; cease fire; IGAD verification; transitional justice.	In principle implemented to a large extent; failed to work in the fighting in 2016.
R-ARCSS (Revitalized ARCSS)		Unified government; Hybrid Court; RJMEC control; integration of security; election.	It was further extended four times: not established: Hybrid Court; Jonglei was still a victim of militia violence.

Sources: Abdalla and Yahya (2021); Joshi (2025); Ceesay and Asmorowati (2025); RJMEC (2026).

APPENDIX III, KEY ARMED GROUPS IN JONGLEI STATE 2013-2025

Group	Ethnic Base	Period Active	
Lou Nuer White Army	Lou Nuer	2009–present	Community-based militia; recreated after post-CPA selective disarmament; correlated with security dilemma processes.
Cobra Faction	Murle	2010–2017; splinters post-2017	Under the leadership of David Yau Yau; it is framed around Murle political marginalization; the establishment of the GPAA was partially co-optive as a result of leadership.
Dinka Bor Militias	Bor Dinka	2013–present	Several groups; connected with the national SPLA/SSPDF networks; are in service with the government.
The Nuer forces were brought into Nuer (multiple sub-groups)line by SPLM-IO.	Nuer (multiple sub-groups)	2013–present	Opposition forces allied to Machar; ethnically structured; and operating in Jonglei as a part of national political struggle.
Murle cattle-raiding militias (after 2017)	Murle	2018–present	Splinter elements not incorporated in GPAA structure; proceed with raiding cycles; hard to trace to single command.

Sources: Kulang (2021); Kindersley and Rolandsen (2019); UNMISS and OHCHR (2021); Small Arms Survey (2023).

APPENDIX IV, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DIAGRAM

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	MODERATING VARIABLE	DEPENDENT VARIABLE
Ethnic Politics Elite manipulation Ethnic patronage networks Propaganda & identity framing Ethnic recruitment Communal violence Spoiler politics Community exclusion	Political Influence Hard power (coercion, military control) Soft power (convincing, message) Community-level political influence	Armed Conflict Persistence (2013–2025) Continued inter-ethnic violence Civilian displacement Failed peace implementation Weak state institutions Humanitarian crisis