



Why Nations and Individuals Start Wars: Western and Non-Western Perspectives: Guided by Peace, Committed to Justice, and Determined to Create Lasting Positive Change

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Expats & immigrants B.V.

Abstract: War is rarely the product of a single decision, leader or isolated event. This article examines why nations and individuals initiate, support or participate in warfare through a comparative analysis of Western and non-Western perspectives. It adopts a multilevel framework in which armed conflict emerges from interactions among individual psychology, group processes, state interests, international structures, historical grievances and cultural narratives. At the individual and group levels, fear, ambition, trauma, humiliation, conformity, dehumanisation and cognitive bias may facilitate violence. At the state and international levels, insecurity, territorial ambitions, competition for resources, regime survival, alliances, arms races and institutional failure contribute to escalation. Historical processes such as colonialism, dispossession, imposed borders and structural inequality may further create conditions in which violence is perceived as necessary or legitimate. The article compares major Western traditions—including realism, liberalism, Marxist and critical theory, constructivism and just-war theory—with postcolonial, African and Ubuntu, Chinese, Islamic and Indigenous perspectives. Rather than treating Western and non-Western approaches as opposing intellectual systems, it argues that they are complementary. Western theories contribute detailed analyses of state power, security dilemmas, institutions and strategic decision-making, while non-Western and postcolonial approaches draw attention to colonial domination, structural violence, land, relational responsibility, dignity and historical injustice. Contemporary conflicts involving Israel and Palestine, Israel and Iran, the United States, Russia and Ukraine, and India and Pakistan illustrate how these mechanisms operate in practice. The analysis also distinguishes state war leaders from warlords and emphasises that explanation must not be confused with moral or legal justification. Understanding the causes of violence does not legitimise attacks on civilians or remove obligations under international humanitarian law. The central argument is that no civilisation possesses a monopoly on either warfare or peace. Organised violence becomes more likely when insecurity, inequality, ambition and historical grievance are transformed into narratives in which war appears necessary, profitable, honourable or unavoidable. Sustainable peace therefore requires more than military victory or temporary ceasefires. It depends upon credible security, accountable political institutions, material justice, recognition of historical grievances, protection of civilians and the reconstruction of relationships capable of managing political conflict without organised violence.

Keywords: war, armed conflict, causes of war, political violence, Western perspectives, non-Western perspectives, realism, liberalism, constructivism, critical theory, postcolonial theory, Ubuntu, Islamic perspectives, Indigenous perspectives, security dilemma, structural violence, colonialism, collective trauma, nationalism, dehumanization, warlords, state war leaders, international humanitarian law, peacebuilding, reconciliation.

INTRODUCTION

War is rarely caused by a single event, one political leader or an inherently violent population. It usually develops through an accumulation of fear, political ambition, economic interests, unresolved injustice, collective trauma and failures of diplomacy. A

particular incident may ignite the fighting, but the combustible material has often been gathering for many years.

It is also important to distinguish between those who decide to initiate war and those who participate in it. Wars are generally started by political leaders (including warlords), governments, military organisations, armed movements or powerful coalitions—not by entire nations acting with a single mind. Ordinary individuals may subsequently support, resist, endure or become trapped in the conflict.

WHY NATIONS GO TO WAR

Security, Fear and the Security Dilemma

One of the most influential Western explanations comes from political realism. Realists regard the international system as an environment without a central authority capable of guaranteeing the security of every state. Nations consequently rely on their own political alliances and military capabilities for protection (Waltz, 1979).

This creates what is known as the security dilemma. When one country increases its military strength for defensive purposes, neighbouring countries may interpret this as preparation for aggression. They respond by strengthening their own armed forces. Each side may genuinely believe it is defending itself, yet the actions of both sides produce greater insecurity (Jervis, 1978).

Fear is therefore not necessarily the opposite of aggression; it can become one of its causes. A government may initiate a preventive war because it believes that an adversary will become more powerful in the future. Such decisions can be influenced by incomplete intelligence, exaggerated threat perceptions and deliberate political manipulation.

Power, Territory and Resources

States may also go to war to acquire or preserve territory, natural resources, markets, trade routes or regional influence. Colonial wars were frequently presented as civilising, developmental or religious missions, although commercial expansion, land acquisition and geopolitical competition were usually important underlying motives.

Resources alone do not inevitably cause war. They become particularly dangerous when combined with political exclusion, corruption, weak government and unequal distribution. Valuable resources may also provide armed movements with the income needed to continue fighting after the original purpose of the conflict has changed (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

Inequality and Political Exclusion

Civil wars frequently develop where particular communities experience persistent exclusion from political power, land, employment, education or public services. Absolute poverty is not in itself a sufficient explanation. Perceived injustice—especially inequality between ethnic, regional or religious groups—may be more politically explosive.

People compare their situation with that of other communities and with what they believe they are entitled to receive. When peaceful routes towards reform appear to be blocked, resistance movements may begin to regard armed struggle as legitimate or unavoidable.

Galtung (1969) describes inequalities that are built into political, economic and social systems as forms of structural violence. From this perspective, visible warfare may be preceded by a less visible form of violence in which people are systematically denied security, dignity, health or opportunities.

Nationalism and Collective Identity

Nations are partly held together by stories about common origins, heroic ancestors, sacred territory, historical suffering and national destiny. These narratives can create belonging and solidarity, but they may also divide humanity into “us” and “them”.

According to social identity theory, individuals tend to categorise themselves and others as members of groups. They may favour their own group and develop negative attitudes towards outsiders, particularly when identities become connected to competition, fear and unequal power (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

War becomes more likely when leaders portray another population as inferior, dangerous, treacherous or responsible for the nation’s difficulties. Propaganda simplifies complex conflicts into moral dramas in which one side represents innocence and the other absolute evil. Through processes of moral disengagement, violence that would normally be regarded as unacceptable can be redefined as necessary, heroic or morally justified (Bandura, 1999).

Collective humiliation can be especially influential. Political movements may promise to restore lost greatness, avenge historical defeat or recover allegedly stolen territory. The past is then not simply remembered; it is selectively reconstructed and mobilised for contemporary political purposes.

Domestic Political Interests

Political leaders may use international conflict to consolidate their domestic power. War can distract attention from economic decline, corruption or political opposition. It may unite a divided population, silence criticism and justify emergency powers.

This does not mean that every conflict is a calculated diversion. Leaders may become prisoners of their own rhetoric. After repeatedly describing another country as an existential enemy, they may find compromise politically humiliating.

Governments may also miscalculate the likely outcome of war. They may underestimate its costs, overestimate their own capabilities or assume that victory will be quick. Even when bargaining could theoretically prevent armed conflict, private information, distrust and incentives to misrepresent military strength can cause negotiations to fail (Fearon, 1995).

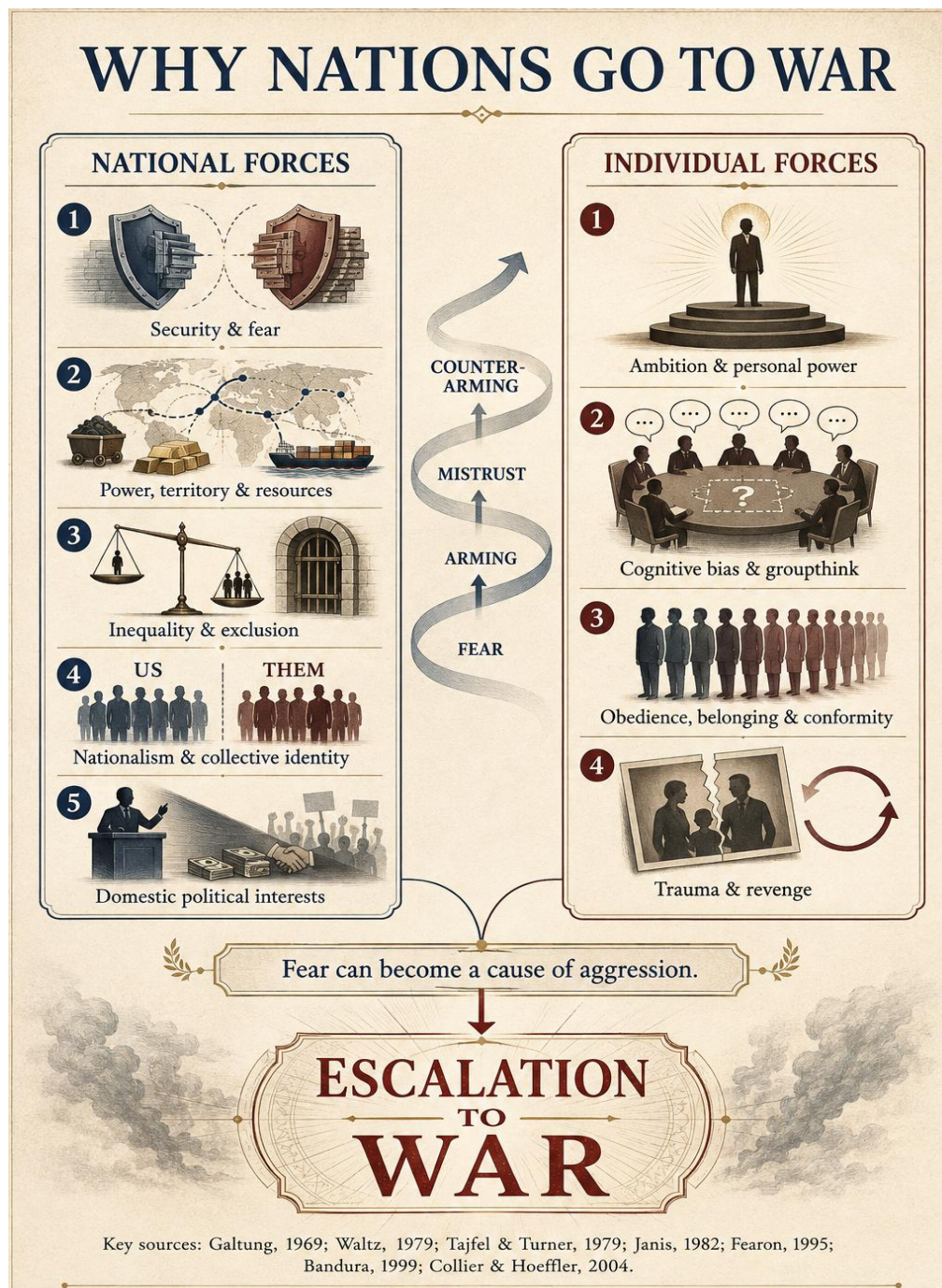


Figure 1: Why Nations go to War (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a8eaf33-98d0-83eb-92a0-b921e300dafa>)

WHY INDIVIDUALS INITIATE OR PARTICIPATE IN WARS

Ambition and Personal Power

Some political leaders initiate conflict because war offers opportunities for prestige, territorial expansion, economic enrichment or historical immortality. Narcissism, authoritarianism and an exaggerated belief in personal destiny may contribute to such decisions.

However, psychological diagnosis from a distance is problematic. Describing a leader as irrational or mentally ill can conceal the institutions, military organisations, corporations and political networks that make aggression possible. An individual leader's personality becomes especially dangerous when a political system allows personal impulses to be transformed into state policy without effective opposition.

Cognitive Bias and Groupthink

Decision-makers rarely possess complete or entirely reliable information. They interpret events through ideology, personal experience and cognitive biases. They may:

- overestimate an opponent's hostility;
- underestimate the human and economic costs of war;
- expect a rapid victory;
- reject information that contradicts their plans;
- assume that opponents think in the same way they do;
- continue an unsuccessful war because withdrawal would expose previous sacrifices as futile.

Groups of advisers may reinforce these errors through groupthink. In highly cohesive leadership circles, loyalty can become more valuable than independent judgement. Dissent is interpreted as weakness, while optimistic military predictions remain unchallenged (Janis, 1982).

Obedience, Belonging and Conformity

Most soldiers do not participate in war because they personally decided to initiate it. Individuals fight for many different reasons, including coercion, employment, patriotism, loyalty to comrades, protection of family, revenge, social status or fear of punishment.

Belonging is particularly powerful. Military units and armed movements can become substitute families, especially for people who have experienced poverty, exclusion, humiliation or displacement. Once admitted to the group, individuals may gradually adopt its values and moral boundaries.

Moral responsibility does not disappear, but wartime behaviour must be understood as the product of both individual choices and social conditions. Violence becomes easier when it is authorised by respected leaders, supported by peers and directed against people who have already been dehumanised (Bandura, 1999).

Trauma and Revenge

Violence reproduces itself through grief. The death of relatives, destruction of homes and humiliation of communities may generate demands for revenge. Each side remembers its own victims more clearly than the victims it has caused. Trauma does not inevitably produce aggression. Many survivors become activists, healers or peacebuilders. Nevertheless,

unresolved collective trauma can be politically exploited. Leaders may transform genuine suffering into a permanent justification for retaliation.

WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON WAR

There is no single Western explanation of warfare. Several major theoretical traditions coexist.

Realism

Realism interprets war primarily in terms of power, insecurity and survival. Because no global authority can fully protect states, governments attempt to strengthen themselves. However, their attempts to become safer may threaten other countries and produce an arms race (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

Liberalism

Liberal theory emphasises democracy, trade, diplomacy, international law and multilateral institutions. From this perspective, war becomes more likely when governments lack accountability or when institutions cannot manage disputes peacefully.

Liberals generally argue that cooperation is possible when governments exchange reliable information, develop shared rules and become economically interdependent. Critics note, however, that institutions may reproduce global inequalities and may be dominated by powerful states.

Marxist and Critical Perspectives

Marxist and critical traditions focus on economic inequality, class interests, capitalism, imperialism and competition for markets and resources. War may benefit ruling elites, military industries or corporations even when it harms the wider population.

From this viewpoint, political language about national security can conceal material interests. However, economic explanations should not be treated as sufficient in every case, because identities, historical grievances, religion and security fears also influence warfare.

Constructivism

Constructivist theory argues that weapons and material power do not possess a single, self-evident political meaning. Historical narratives, identities and social norms determine whether another state is understood as a friend, rival or enemy.

A weapon held by an ally may be considered reassuring, while the same weapon held by a distrusted state may be interpreted as an existential threat. War is therefore influenced not only by what states possess but also by what they believe about one another.

Just-war Theory

Just-war theory asks not only why wars occur but under what conditions the use of force could be morally justified. Its main considerations include legitimate authority, just cause, last resort, proportionality, civilian protection and a reasonable probability of success (Walzer, 2015).

Its central difficulty is that nearly every belligerent claims to possess a just cause. Moral principles can restrict warfare, but they can also be selectively interpreted to legitimise it.



Figure 2: Western Perspectives on War (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON WAR

The term “non-Western” covers highly diverse intellectual and cultural traditions. African, Chinese, Islamic, Indigenous, Indian and Latin American perspectives cannot be combined into one worldview. Furthermore, Western and non-Western ideas have influenced one another for centuries.

Mainstream International Relations developed largely from European history and the experiences of powerful Western states. Global International Relations therefore seeks to include histories, concepts and political experiences that conventional theories have marginalised (Acharya & Buzan, 2019).

Postcolonial Perspectives

Postcolonial thinkers argue that contemporary wars cannot be understood without examining colonial conquest, slavery, imposed borders, racialised hierarchies and the extraction of land and resources. From a postcolonial perspective, war is not always an interruption of an otherwise peaceful political order. For colonised peoples, “peace” may already contain dispossession, cultural destruction, racialised domination/ oppression and structural violence. Armed resistance may therefore be understood as a response to an existing system of domination (Fanon, 2004).

Postcolonial analysis also asks who possesses the authority to define legitimate and illegitimate violence. Military interventions by powerful states may be described as security operations, whereas resistance by subordinated populations may quickly be classified as disorder or terrorism. Orientalist representations can further portray non-Western populations as irrational or inherently violent while obscuring the colonial and geopolitical circumstances surrounding a conflict (Said, 1978).

This does not mean that postcolonial theory approves every form of resistance. Rather, it requires the violence of governments and empires to be examined as critically as the violence of insurgent groups.

African and Ubuntu Perspectives

Ubuntu is often expressed through the principle that a person becomes a person through relationships with others. Human beings are understood as fundamentally relational rather than radically independent. From an Ubuntu perspective, war begins when relationships are destroyed: when people are expelled from the moral community, when power is no longer accountable and when competition overcomes reciprocity. Violence harms not only the victim but also the community and the humanity of the perpetrator.

Metz (2007) interprets Ubuntu ethics in terms of shared identity, goodwill and harmonious relationships. Peace consequently requires more than the cessation of hostilities. It requires the restoration of dignity, community and social responsibility. Tutu (1999) similarly connected Ubuntu to forgiveness, reconciliation and the reconstruction of relationships following political violence.

African political traditions should not be romanticised. African societies contain histories of warfare, hierarchy and domination as well as traditions of

mediation and restorative justice. Ubuntu is best regarded as a moral resource for evaluating violence, not as proof that African societies were historically free from conflict.

Chinese Traditions

Chinese philosophy contains several contrasting approaches to war and government. Confucian thought generally emphasises ethical leadership, social responsibility, appropriate relationships and harmony. A government that rules through virtue is considered more legitimate than one that depends entirely on coercion.

Mohist philosophy¹ criticised aggressive warfare and promoted impartial concern. Daoist traditions frequently warned against excessive intervention, domination and the unpredictable consequences of force. By contrast, the ancient fa tradition—frequently called Chinese Legalism—emphasised state strength, political discipline and military capacity. It demonstrates that strategic realism and power politics are not exclusively Western inventions (Pines, 2023). Chinese traditions therefore cannot be reduced to a philosophy of harmony. They contain both important restraints on warfare and sophisticated theories about building and defending a powerful state.

Islamic Perspectives

Islamic thought distinguishes between legitimate defence and prohibited aggression while placing moral restrictions on warfare. Justice, lawful authority, intention, proportionality and the protection of non-combatants have been important subjects of Islamic legal and ethical debate.

The term jihad means striving or struggle and is considerably broader than warfare. It may refer to moral, spiritual, intellectual and social effort. Reducing the concept to “holy war” misrepresents its linguistic and theological diversity (Afsaruddin, 2013²).

As in Christianity, Judaism and secular nationalism, religious ideas can be used to promote compassion and reconciliation or selectively interpreted to legitimise political violence. Religion usually interacts with political exclusion, territory, economic interests and historical grievances rather than acting as an isolated cause.

Indigenous Perspectives

Many Indigenous worldviews emphasise reciprocal relationships among people, ancestors, land, water, animals and future generations. Conflict is therefore not understood solely as a disagreement between sovereign states. It may also involve the destruction of relationships between communities and their territories.

From this perspective, land dispossession, ecological destruction and cultural suppression constitute forms of violence even when no formal war has been declared. Peace requires self-determination, cultural survival, restoration of land and genuine participation in political decision-making.

Coulthard (2014) argues that colonial domination cannot be overcome solely through symbolic recognition when the material structures of dispossession remain in place.

Reconciliation without changes in land, power and political relationships may leave the foundations of conflict untouched.



Figure 3: Non-Western Perspectives on War (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

BRINGING THE PERSPECTIVES TOGETHER

Western and non-Western traditions do not provide two completely opposing explanations. Their most useful insights are complementary.

Western theories offer detailed analyses of military competition, state power, international institutions and strategic decision-making. Postcolonial, African, Asian, Islamic and Indigenous perspectives expand the analysis by examining colonial history, relational responsibility, cultural dignity, land, structural violence and forms of domination that state-centred theories may overlook.

Level	Possible causes of war
Individual	Fear, ambition, trauma, humiliation and cognitive bias
Group	Conformity, dehumanisation, revenge and identity politics
State	Security, territory, resources and regime survival
International	Arms competition, alliances and institutional failure
Historical	Colonialism, imposed borders, dispossession and unresolved injustice
Cultural and moral	Narratives of superiority, victimhood, sacred duty or lost greatness

EXAMPLES

A warlord is typically the leader of a personal militia or semi-autonomous armed organisation. The following individuals are considered state leaders at war and/or warlords: Benjamin Netanyahu, Ali Khamenei, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Narendra Modi. While a thorough examination of their military actions would undoubtedly be beneficial, it would be more appropriate to include them under a section on contemporary national leaders and interstate wars, rather than under the broader category of "warlords".



Figure 4: Political Leaders and Contemporary Armed Conflict
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Contemporary National Leaders Involved in Interstate Wars

State conflict	or	Principal leaders	Countries involved	Correct classification
Israel-Iran conflict		Benjamin Netanyahu; Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and successive Iranian presidents and military commanders	Israel, Iran and, through regional escalation, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Gulf states; the United States has also become directly involved	Interstate and regional war directed by state leaders

United States' military interventions	Donald Trump in the current Iran conflict; earlier presidents including George W. Bush in Afghanistan and Iraq	United States, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and other countries, depending on the period	State warfare, military intervention and geopolitical power projection
Russia-Ukraine war	Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy	Primarily Russia and Ukraine, with Belarus and NATO countries indirectly involved through territory, weapons, training, intelligence or other assistance	Interstate war following Russia's invasion of Ukraine
India-Pakistan confrontation	Narendra Modi and Pakistan's civilian and military leadership	India and Pakistan, particularly Kashmir and cross-border military targets	Interstate military confrontation, terrorism-related escalation and territorial conflict
Former Soviet military interventions	Soviet leaders such as Leonid Brezhnev; not contemporary Russia or Ukraine	Afghanistan, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other territories, depending on the historical period	Historical state intervention by the Soviet Union

Israel, Iran and the United States

Israel has presented military action against Iran as necessary to prevent an existential security threat, especially one connected to Iran's nuclear programme and missile capacity. Israeli leaders also regard Iran's support for Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Houthis as part of a wider regional threat.

Iran, conversely, presents its military position as deterrence and resistance against Israeli and American domination. Iranian leaders argue that Israel's nuclear capabilities, Israeli attacks on Iranian personnel and facilities, American military bases and long-standing sanctions threaten Iran's sovereignty and survival.

This creates a classic security dilemma: Israel interprets Iranian missiles, uranium enrichment and allied armed groups as preparations for aggression. Iran interprets Israeli military superiority, nuclear opacity and American support as evidence that it must strengthen its deterrence. The defensive measures claimed by one side are perceived as offensive preparations by the other (Jervis, 1978).

The conflict escalated into direct Israeli and Iranian attacks in June 2025. The United States subsequently attacked Iranian nuclear facilities. Later developments turned the confrontation into a wider and more prolonged war. These decisions were made by governments commanding regular armed forces; Netanyahu, Khamenei and Trump are therefore better described as national war leaders than as warlords.

A balanced analysis should not merely repeat each government's justification. It should separately examine:

- who initiated each particular escalation;
- whether an armed attack was imminent;

- whether force was necessary and proportionate;
- whether civilian and nuclear facilities were adequately protected;
- whether diplomatic alternatives had genuinely been exhausted;
- how earlier covert attacks, sanctions and proxy warfare contributed to escalation;
- whether the stated security objectives corresponded with the actual conduct of the war.

The moral and legal evaluation may differ for each military operation. It would be misleading either to assign equal responsibility automatically or to assume that one side's security narrative settles the question.

Israel, Palestine and the United States

The conflict between Israel and Palestine must be included in any serious analysis of why nations and individuals engage in war. It is not simply a religious conflict or a confrontation that began on 7 October 2023. It is a protracted political conflict involving two national movements, competing claims to land, the displacement of populations, occupation, settlements, security fears, armed resistance, terrorism, regional intervention and unequal military power.

The United States must be included because it is Israel's principal international military and diplomatic supporter and has repeatedly influenced both warfare and peace negotiations. At the same time, Palestinians are not a unified political or military actor. The Palestinian Authority administers parts of the occupied West Bank, Hamas has exercised de facto control in Gaza, and Palestinian civilians should not be equated with either organisation.

Principal Actors and their Status

Actor	Principal leadership	Territory or countries involved	Classification
Israel	Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli government and Israel Defense Forces	Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iran	Recognised state and national military
State of Palestine	President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority	Parts of the occupied West Bank; limited international diplomatic representation	Partially recognised state with restricted territorial authority
Hamas	Political and military leadership, including its armed wing, the al-Qassam Brigades	Primarily Gaza and Israel; regional relationships with Iran and other armed organisations	Palestinian Islamist political and armed organisation; designated a terrorist organisation by, among others, the United States and European Union

Other Palestinian armed groups	Palestinian Islamic Jihad and smaller factions	Gaza, the West Bank and Israel	Non-state armed organisations
Israeli settlers and settler organisations	Decentralised organisations and local leaders; protected or regulated to varying degrees by Israeli state institutions	Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem	Civilian settler movement, elements of which have engaged in organised violence
United States	President Donald Trump in the present period; previously Joe Biden and other administrations	United States, Israel, Palestine and the wider Middle East	External state power, military supporter, diplomatic protector and intermittent mediator

Historical Origins

The contemporary conflict developed from competing Jewish and Palestinian Arab national movements during the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods. Jewish Zionism sought national self-determination and security in Palestine, particularly in response to European antisemitism and persecution. Palestinian Arabs opposed the loss of political control, land and demographic position in the country in which they constituted the majority.

In 1947, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 proposed dividing Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state, with Jerusalem placed under a special international regime. Jewish representatives accepted the plan in principle, while Palestinian Arab and surrounding Arab leadership rejected it as unjust because it allocated substantial territory to the proposed Jewish state despite the demographic and landownership situation at that time (United Nations General Assembly, 1947).

The establishment of Israel in 1948 was followed by war with neighbouring Arab states. For Jewish Israelis, this became the War of Independence and the creation of a refuge following centuries of persecution and the Holocaust. For Palestinians, it was the Nakba, or catastrophe: approximately 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled, hundreds of communities were depopulated or destroyed, and most refugees were prevented from returning (Morris, 2004; Pappé, 2006).

These narratives are not interchangeable, but both continue to shape collective identity. Israeli political culture is strongly influenced by histories of antisemitism, pogroms, the Holocaust and repeated wars. Palestinian identity is deeply influenced by the Nakba, exile, statelessness, occupation, settlement expansion and the continuing refugee condition.

The Occupation and Settlement System

During the June 1967 war, Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and other Arab territories. Although Israel withdrew its permanent settlements and ground forces from inside Gaza in 2005, it continued to exercise substantial control over Gaza's airspace, maritime access, population registry and most external movement. Israel

and Egypt imposed extensive restrictions on Gaza, particularly after Hamas took control in 2007.

Israel has also continued to establish and expand settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. The International Court of Justice concluded in its 2024 advisory opinion that Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful and that Israel must cease new settlement activity. An advisory opinion is authoritative but differs procedurally from a binding judgment between two consenting states (International Court of Justice, 2024).

The occupation affects land ownership, movement, housing, water, policing and access to employment, education and healthcare. Palestinians in the West Bank live under a combination of Israeli military rule and restricted Palestinian self-administration, while Israeli settlers generally fall under Israeli civil law.

From a postcolonial perspective, this situation can be analysed as settler colonialism: a process in which an incoming population seeks permanent territorial control and displaces, confines or politically subordinates an Indigenous population (Wolfe, 2006). Some scholars dispute the applicability or completeness of this framework, pointing to Jewish historical connections to the land and the experience of Jewish refugees. The framework is therefore analytically influential but politically contested.

Hamas's Attack of 7 October 2023

On 7 October 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups attacked southern Israel. Fighters killed approximately 1,200 people, including hundreds of civilians, and abducted more than 250 people into Gaza. Victims included children, older people and foreign nationals. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry found evidence of deliberate attacks against civilians, hostage-taking and other serious violations of international law (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

Nothing in the history of occupation or Palestinian dispossession makes the deliberate killing of civilians or hostage-taking legally or morally permissible. Civilians cannot lawfully be targeted as representatives of their government or national group.

The attacks reflected several interconnected factors:

- Hamas's ideological rejection of Israel;
- opposition to occupation and the blockade of Gaza;
- failure of the peace process;
- conflict concerning Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque;
- Palestinian prisoner issues;
- Hamas's rivalry with the Palestinian Authority;
- Iranian support for anti-Israel armed organisations;
- an attempt to disrupt Israeli normalisation with Arab states;
- the belief that spectacular violence would return Palestine to the international agenda.

Explaining these factors does not excuse the attacks. Explanation identifies how violence developed; justification concerns whether the violence was morally and legally acceptable.

Israel's War in Gaza

Israel responded by declaring war against Hamas and launching extensive aerial bombardment and ground operations in Gaza. Israel stated that its objectives were to dismantle Hamas, recover the hostages and prevent another attack.

Israel possesses a right to protect its population, but that right is constrained by international humanitarian law. The principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution continue to apply even when an adversary commits grave crimes or operates from densely populated areas.

Israeli operations caused enormous Palestinian civilian loss, displacement and destruction of housing, hospitals, schools and essential infrastructure. Restrictions on food, water, fuel and humanitarian assistance intensified the crisis. By 2026, most of Gaza's approximately 2.1 million inhabitants remained displaced and lacked adequate access to basic services (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2026).

Hamas's presence in civilian areas complicates military operations, but it does not remove Israel's obligations towards civilians. Equally, the conduct of the Israeli government cannot justify antisemitism or violence against Jewish people elsewhere. Hamas's actions cannot justify anti-Palestinian racism, collective punishment or treating Gaza's entire population as an enemy.

The West Bank and Settler Violence

The conflict is not confined to Gaza. In the occupied West Bank, Israeli military operations, settlement expansion, home demolitions, movement restrictions, Palestinian armed attacks and settler violence have continued.

United Nations reporting documented increasing displacement connected to demolitions, access restrictions and settler attacks during 2026. This is important because a ceasefire in Gaza would not by itself resolve the larger conflict. The status of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, settlements, Palestinian refugees and Palestinian sovereignty would remain unresolved.

Some Israeli settlers have attacked Palestinian civilians and property. Israeli civilians have also been killed in Palestinian attacks. These acts should be attributed to their perpetrators and political organisations rather than collectively to all Israelis or Palestinians.

The Role of Benjamin Netanyahu

Netanyahu is a state genocidal leader, and possibly a warlord. Nevertheless, his leadership belongs in an analysis of individual responsibility for war.

His decisions can be examined through several perspectives:

- a genuine Israeli security imperative following the 7 October attacks;
- an ideological commitment to retaining Israeli control over occupied territory;
- reliance on far-right coalition partners;
- resistance to the establishment of a fully sovereign Palestinian state;
- domestic pressure arising from responsibility for the security failure of 7 October;
- political incentives to maintain a wartime government;
- the strategic objective of weakening Iran and its allied organisations.

The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants in November 2024 for Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. The warrants concern alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. An arrest warrant is not a conviction: the defendants remain legally presumed innocent unless guilt is established at trial (International Criminal Court, 2024).

A warrant was also issued for Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif concerning alleged crimes committed during the 7 October attacks. This illustrates a fundamental legal principle: alleged crimes by one party do not cancel the criminal responsibility of the other.



Figure 5: Israël, Iran and the United States: A Concrete Picture
 Picture (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The United States is not a neutral observer. It has supplied Israel with weapons, military technology, intelligence cooperation, financial support and diplomatic protection.

This assistance has strengthened Israel's capacity to defend itself, but it has also enabled Israeli military operations and created questions about American responsibility for how supplied weapons are used. American involvement has several dimensions.

Military Support

The United States regards Israel as a strategic ally. Support is connected to regional military cooperation, intelligence, technological development, domestic political alliances and the protection of Israel following the long history of antisemitic persecution.

However, when American weapons are used in operations causing extensive civilian harm, the United States cannot present itself solely as an outside mediator. Arms suppliers have an obligation to assess whether their assistance creates a clear risk of serious violations of international law.

Diplomatic Protection

Successive American administrations have frequently protected Israel from diplomatic pressure, including through vetoes or threatened vetoes in the United Nations Security Council. This has contributed to Palestinian perceptions that negotiations take place within a profoundly unequal system.

American mediation has therefore contained a structural contradiction: the United States attempts to serve simultaneously as Israel's principal military supporter and as an impartial broker between Israel and the Palestinians.

Regional Strategy

American policy is also influenced by Iran, oil and shipping routes, military bases, relations with Arab governments and competition with Russia and China. Support for Israel cannot be understood independently of this wider geopolitical structure.

Domestic Politics

Support for Israel is shaped by several American constituencies, including pro-Israel organisations, Christian Zionist movements, Jewish communities with diverse political views, defence interests, human-rights organisations, Palestinian and Arab American communities, and generational differences within both major political parties.

The United States should therefore be classified as an external state participant and enabling power—not as a warlord and not merely as a peace mediator.

WESTERN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST WARS

A Western realist interpretation emphasises Israel's security environment, Iran's regional influence, armed Palestinian organisations and the absence of a trusted authority capable of guaranteeing Israeli or Palestinian security. Each party strengthens itself because it distrusts the other, thereby increasing the other's fear.

Liberal theory emphasises the failure of negotiations, international institutions and legal agreements. The Oslo peace process created limited Palestinian self-government but did not resolve borders, Jerusalem, settlements, refugees or sovereignty (Khalidi, 2020).

Just-war theory asks whether each use of force has a just cause, legitimate authority, proportional means and adequate protection for civilians. It distinguishes Israel's right to defend its population from the legality of particular methods. It likewise distinguishes the Palestinian right to self-determination from attacks deliberately directed against Israeli civilians.

PALESTINIAN, ARAB AND POSTCOLONIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST WARS

Palestinian and postcolonial perspectives begin not on 7 October 2023 but with displacement, statelessness and decades of occupation. They emphasise the vast imbalance between an advanced military state and a population living under occupation, blockade or exile. From this perspective, "peace" without freedom and equality can institutionalise structural violence. A ceasefire is indispensable, but it is not equivalent to justice if occupation, settlement expansion and dispossession continue.

Palestinian resistance is not a single phenomenon. It includes diplomacy, protest, civil disobedience, documentation, legal action, cultural preservation and armed struggle. Recognising a right to resist domination does not create a right to attack civilians.

Arab and Islamic perspectives frequently emphasise Palestinian self-determination, the religious and historical importance of Jerusalem and opposition to Western double standards. However, Arab governments have not always prioritised Palestinian rights consistently. Some have used the Palestinian cause rhetorically while pursuing their own security and economic interests.

Trauma, Victimhood and Dehumanisation

The conflict demonstrates how collective trauma can contribute to further violence. For many Israelis, 7 October activated memories of pogroms, persecution and the Holocaust. The conviction that Jewish people can ultimately rely only on themselves strengthens support for overwhelming military protection. For Palestinians, the destruction and displacement in Gaza evoke the Nakba and the fear that displacement will again become permanent. Decades of occupation reinforce the belief that international law protects Palestinians in principle but rarely in practice. Both traumas are real, but trauma cannot function as a permanent licence to harm others. Competitive victimhood becomes dangerous when recognition of one population's suffering is considered a denial of the other's. The Holocaust does not nullify the Nakba, and the Nakba does not justify the killing of Israeli civilians.

Who is Responsible?

Responsibility should be differentiated rather than distributed vaguely among entire populations.

Actor	Principal responsibilities
Hamas and participating armed groups	Deliberate attacks on civilians, hostage-taking and indiscriminate rocket attacks
Israeli government and military commanders	Conduct of military operations, protection of civilians, humanitarian access, occupation and settlement policies
Violent Israeli settlers	Attacks on Palestinians, destruction of property and coercive displacement
Palestinian Authority	Governance, political repression, corruption allegations and failure to develop legitimate representative institutions
United States	Consequences of military assistance, diplomatic protection and failure to condition support effectively
Iran and regional armed organisations	Weapons, training, proxy warfare and regional escalation
Other international actors	Selective enforcement of international law, unsuccessful mediation and inadequate protection of civilians

This approach avoids two errors: pretending that all parties possess equal military power, and pretending that the crimes of one party eliminate the legal obligations of another.

Israel-Palestine demonstrates that wars arise from both immediate decisions and accumulated history. The attacks of 7 October require direct condemnation, but they did not emerge in a historical vacuum. Israel's security concerns are real, but they do not legalise collective punishment, permanent occupation or unlimited warfare. Palestinian self-determination is a legitimate right, but it does not justify killing or abducting civilians.

The United States has exceptional influence because it supplies Israel with military and diplomatic support. It therefore carries responsibilities that go beyond offering negotiations after violence has already occurred.

A sustainable peace requires more than removing one armed organisation or signing another temporary ceasefire. It requires:

- Israeli and Palestinian civilian security;
- release of hostages and lawful treatment of prisoners;
- an end to attacks against civilians;
- an end to unlawful occupation and settlement expansion;
- meaningful Palestinian self-determination;
- accountability for crimes committed by all parties;
- recognition of both Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian historical trauma;
- political institutions capable of replacing armed domination;
- an international mediator that applies law consistently.

Neither Israelis nor Palestinians will obtain durable safety through the permanent insecurity of the other. Military superiority may control territory, and armed resistance may keep a cause visible, but neither by itself produces a just peace.

THE UNITED STATES AS A GLOBAL MILITARY ACTOR

The United States is a country. Donald Trump is a president and possibly a warlord. American presidents and institutions must be included because the United States has repeatedly initiated, directed or joined international wars.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq is an especially important example. The Bush administration argued that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and represented a threat to international security. The expected weapons stockpiles were not found. The war demonstrates how threat inflation, unreliable intelligence, ideological certainty and optimistic predictions can contribute to disastrous military decisions (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004).

American warfare cannot be explained only through the personality of a president. Decisions are shaped by the executive branch, Congress, intelligence agencies, the military, allies, defence industries, public opinion and dominant national narratives. Ideas about American exceptionalism can present military intervention as the defence of freedom even when geopolitical and economic interests are also involved.

A postcolonial interpretation additionally asks why powerful Western states are often described as conducting “interventions”, “operations” or “stabilisation missions”, while comparable violence by less powerful actors is more readily called aggression, terrorism or warlordism. The legal and moral standard should be based on conduct rather than the status of the perpetrator.

RUSSIA, THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND UKRAINE

The Soviet Union and the Russian Federation must not be treated as identical states. Russia inherited much of the Soviet Union’s military power and its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, but the Soviet Union formally ended in 1991. Ukraine was itself one of the Soviet republics and became an independent state that year.

The present Russia-Ukraine war should therefore be described as a conflict between the Russian Federation and independent Ukraine. Russia occupied and annexed Crimea in 2014, supported armed separatists in eastern Ukraine and launched a large-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. The United Nations General Assembly characterised Russia’s actions as aggression against Ukraine and demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

Vladimir Putin is a state leader and a warlord. However, his government exhibits several mechanisms discussed in the article:

- the use of historical narratives to question Ukrainian nationhood;
- fear of NATO enlargement;
- the pursuit of regional power and strategic territory;
- authoritarian concentration of decision-making;
- representations of Russia as a historically humiliated power;
- claims that military action was preventive and defensive;

- suppression of domestic opposition and independent information.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy is also a national war leader, but his position is not equivalent regarding the war's initiation. Ukraine's government is directing its country's armed defence against an invasion. Ukrainian military actions remain subject to international humanitarian law, but acknowledging that obligation does not erase the distinction between aggression and self-defence.

The Soviet Union belongs in a historical section. For example, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, authorised under Leonid Brezhnev, can be analysed through geopolitical rivalry, fear of losing a neighbouring allied government and the dynamics of the Cold War. It was an interstate intervention by a superpower, not the campaign of a private warlord (Braithwaite, 2011).

NARENDRA MODI, INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Narendra Modi should also be included as a contemporary state leader involved in decisions about military force. India and Pakistan have a long history of conflict concerning Kashmir, cross-border militancy, national identity and the unresolved consequences of the 1947 partition.

Following the terrorist attack near Pahalgam on 22 April 2025, in which civilians were killed, the Modi government authorised Operation Sindoor. India conducted strikes against targets in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir on 6-7 May 2025. Pakistan responded militarily, producing a dangerous confrontation between two nuclear-armed states. Modi stated that the Indian armed forces had received operational freedom to determine the timing and method of the response (Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, 2025).

Modi is not a warlord because he did not command a personal militia. He acted as the elected head of the Indian government through the country's formal military institutions. Nevertheless, his decision should be examined through the same critical questions applied to other leaders:

- Was military force necessary?
- Was the evidence identifying the targets independently verified?
- Were the strikes proportionate?
- Were civilians adequately protected?
- Did nationalism and domestic political pressure encourage escalation?
- Did the operation increase or reduce the long-term risk of terrorism?
- What mechanisms prevented escalation into nuclear war?

Pakistan's role must also be scrutinised, including the actions of its civilian government, armed forces and alleged relationships between state institutions and militant organisations. A balanced analysis does not mean assuming identical responsibility. It means applying comparable standards of evidence, civilian protection and international law to all parties.

WARLORDS AND STATE WAR LEADERS: AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

Warlords	State war leaders
Exercise personalised authority over militias or semi-autonomous forces	Command formally constituted national armed forces
Frequently operate where the state is weak or fragmented	Act through governmental and military institutions
May control territory without broad international recognition	Represent internationally recognised states
Finance forces through personal taxation, smuggling or resource extraction	Use state taxation, budgets and defence institutions
Examples: Hemedti, Makenga, Chérizier and Prigozhin	Examples: Netanyahu, Khamenei, Trump, Putin, Zelenskyy and Modi

The distinction is analytical, not moral. State leaders can cause far more destruction than warlords because they control larger armies, air forces, missile systems and, in some cases, nuclear weapons. Calling them state leaders does not excuse their conduct. It identifies the political structure through which they exercise violence.

A complete account of contemporary warfare must examine both warlords and national leaders. Warlords demonstrate how personal armies emerge from institutional collapse. Leaders such as Netanyahu, Khamenei, Trump, Putin, Zelenskyy and Modi demonstrate how recognised governments transform security fears, historical narratives, domestic pressures and geopolitical interests into state military action.

The central question is not merely whether a leader wears a militia uniform or sits in a presidential office. It is whether power is sufficiently accountable, whether threat claims are supported by evidence, whether diplomatic alternatives have been exhausted and whether civilian life is treated as a genuine moral limit.

The same ethical and legal standards should apply to Western and non-Western actors. A missile does not become more humane because it carries a national flag.

Nations and individuals start wars when organised violence comes to appear necessary, profitable, honourable or unavoidable. This perception may arise from genuine insecurity, but it can also be created and reinforced by propaganda, political institutions, economic interests and historical narratives.

No civilisation possesses a monopoly on either violence or peace. Western societies have produced colonialism, militarism and total war, but also international law, human-rights movements and theories intended to restrict violence. Non-Western societies likewise contain traditions that support state power and armed resistance alongside rich philosophies of reconciliation, restraint and relational responsibility. The central question is therefore not whether war originates in the West or the non-Western world. It is how fear, inequality, ambition and historical grievance are transformed into organised violence—and how societies can interrupt that process.

Sustainable peace requires more than defeating an enemy. It requires credible security, accountable government, material justice, historical recognition and the restoration of social relationships. Without these foundations, a peace agreement may end the immediate fighting while leaving the causes of the next war intact.

FINAL CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that war cannot adequately be explained by a single theory, culture, political system or type of leader. Armed conflict emerges through the interaction of processes operating at several levels: individual fear and ambition; group identity, conformity and dehumanisation; state interests concerning security, territory, resources and political survival; international alliances and security dilemmas; and historical structures shaped by colonialism, dispossession and unresolved injustice. Cultural narratives of victimhood, superiority, sacred obligation and lost greatness can connect these levels by transforming political disputes into existential struggles.

This multilevel approach also challenges any simple opposition between Western and non-Western explanations of warfare. Western traditions such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, critical theory and just-war theory illuminate security competition, institutional failure, material interests, identity construction and the ethical limits of force. Non-Western Postcolonial, African, Chinese, Islamic and Indigenous traditions broaden the analytical field by directing attention towards colonial domination, structural violence, relational responsibility, land, dignity, community and historical injustice. These perspectives are best regarded not as mutually exclusive theories but as different analytical lenses that reveal dimensions of conflict that other approaches may overlook.

A central finding is therefore that neither the West nor the non-Western world possesses a monopoly on violence—or on traditions of peace. Political communities across different historical and cultural settings have developed institutions and ideologies capable of legitimising conquest, coercion and armed resistance, while also producing ethical traditions concerned with restraint, reconciliation, justice and peaceful coexistence. The more productive question is consequently not whether warfare is intrinsically Western or non-Western, but how insecurity, inequality, political ambition, historical grievance and collective identity are transformed into organised violence.

The distinction between explanation and justification is equally fundamental. Understanding why an individual, government or armed movement resorts to violence does not imply that its actions are morally or legally justified. Historical dispossession may help explain resistance without legitimising attacks on civilians; genuine security threats may explain military responses without removing obligations of distinction, proportionality and civilian protection. The crimes committed by one party cannot extinguish the legal and moral responsibilities of another. This principle is particularly important because conflicts frequently generate competing narratives in which each side remembers its own suffering while interpreting its own violence as defensive and the violence of its opponent as evidence of inherent aggression.

The contemporary cases considered in this article reinforce the importance of distinguishing warlords from state war leaders. Political leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu, Ali Khamenei, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Narendra Modi exercise power primarily through states and formal military institutions and therefore should not automatically be classified as warlords. The distinction is analytical rather than moral: leaders of recognised states may command vastly greater destructive capacities than leaders of militias. Contemporary conflicts involving Israel and Iran, the United States, Russia and Ukraine, and India and Pakistan demonstrate how decisions taken by national

leaders interact with military institutions, alliances, historical narratives and wider geopolitical structures.

The Israel-Palestine conflict illustrates especially clearly why causal responsibility cannot be reduced to a single moment or actor. Immediate acts of violence occur within longer histories of displacement, occupation, security fears, political exclusion, armed resistance and unequal power. At the same time, historical explanation cannot become an unlimited moral defence of contemporary violence. The article therefore rejects both the assumption that all actors possess equivalent power and the opposite assumption that wrongdoing by one party removes the obligations of another. Responsibility must instead be attributed to particular governments, military commanders, armed organisations and external powers according to their decisions, capabilities and conduct.

The role of powerful external states is especially significant. The United States, for example, cannot be understood solely as an observer or mediator where its weapons, intelligence cooperation, financial assistance and diplomatic protection materially influence the capabilities and choices of belligerents. More generally, the analysis of war must extend beyond the actors who fire weapons to the political, economic and international systems that finance, arm, legitimise, constrain or enable them.

The implications for peacebuilding are substantial. If wars are multicausal, peace cannot simply mean the military defeat of an adversary or the temporary cessation of fighting. Sustainable peace requires credible security for threatened populations, accountable political institutions, meaningful political participation, material justice, respect for international law, recognition of historical grievances and mechanisms through which competing communities can coexist without domination. Where dispossession, humiliation, exclusion and insecurity remain intact, a ceasefire may terminate a battle while preserving the social and political conditions from which another war can emerge. This is why the article's analysis ultimately shifts the question from "Why do people go to war?" towards the equally important question "What prevents societies from transforming conflict into war?"

The answer lies partly in institutions, but also in relationships. Diplomacy must remain credible before violence begins; political leaders must be accountable for threat claims and military decisions; international law must be applied consistently rather than selectively; civilians must remain outside the logic of collective punishment; historical trauma must be acknowledged without being converted into permanent entitlement to retaliation; and political systems must provide meaningful alternatives to armed struggle. Peace therefore requires not the disappearance of conflict—which is an enduring feature of human societies—but institutions and cultures capable of managing conflict without systematically converting fear, grievance and difference into organised violence.

Ultimately, wars begin when enough political and social conditions converge for organised violence to appear necessary, legitimate, profitable, honourable or unavoidable. Preventing war consequently requires intervening before this perception becomes politically dominant. The most important lesson emerging from both Western and non-Western perspectives is that war is neither culturally predetermined nor historically inevitable. Human beings construct the institutions, identities and narratives through which violence becomes possible; they can also construct institutions, relationships and moral

frameworks through which violence becomes less necessary. A durable peace is therefore not simply the absence of war. It is the presence of security without domination, justice without revenge, political disagreement without dehumanisation, and collective memory without the perpetual reproduction of violence.

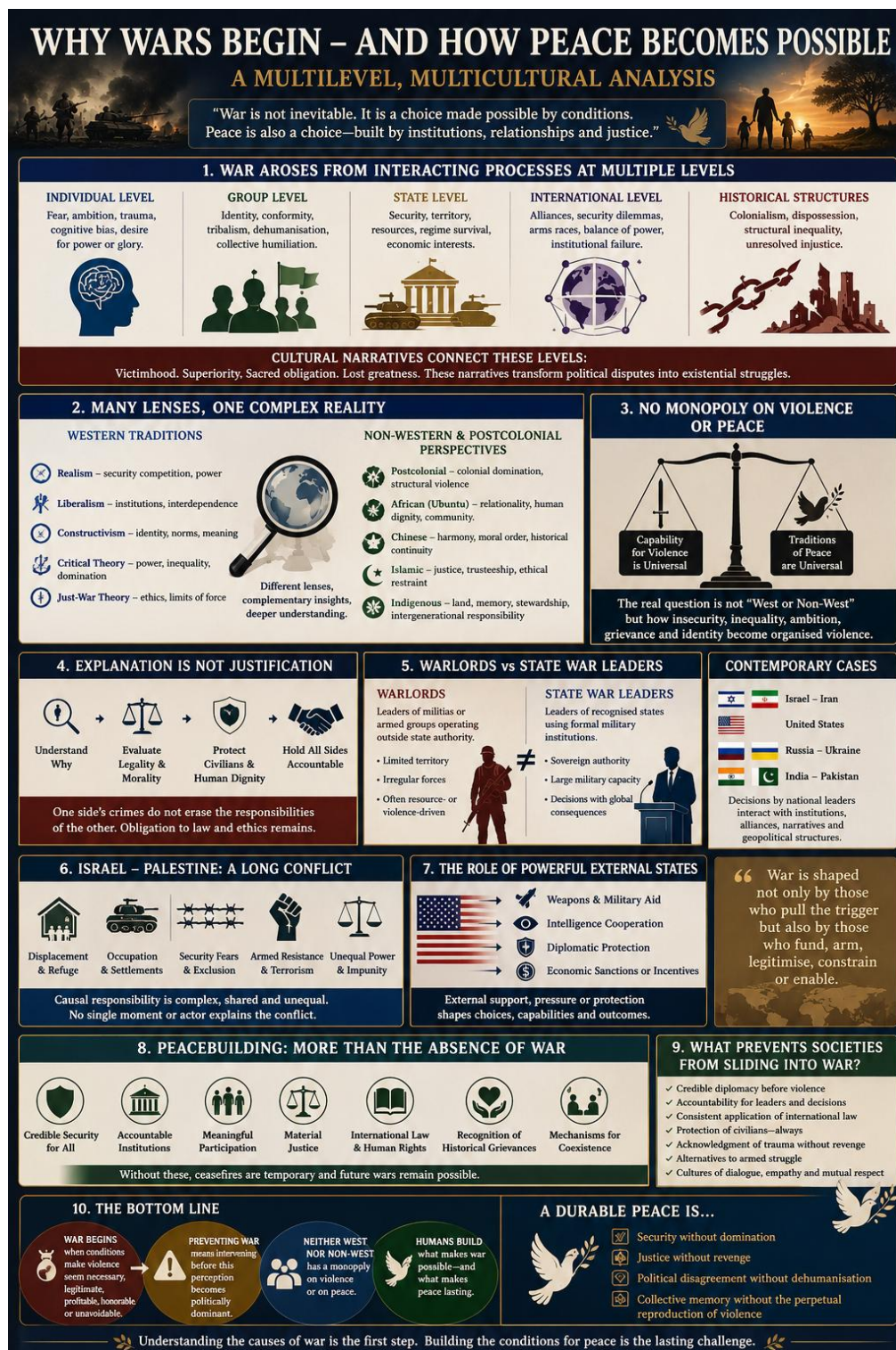


Figure 6: Why Wars begin - and How Peace Becomes Possible
Possible (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

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