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THE RWANDAN CONFLICT THROUGH THE LENS OF REALISM: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This study presents a systematic and in-depth analysis of the 1994 Rwandan conflict from the perspective of realist theory, a foundational approach in international relations scholarship. It seeks to explain the underlying causes of mass violence in Rwanda as well as the limited and delayed response of the international community by applying core realist concepts, including international anarchy, national interest, power politics, the security dilemma, weak statehood, and selective humanitarian intervention. By integrating insights from both classical realism and neorealism, the article evaluates the behavior of key international actors through a rational choice framework. Drawing on academic literature, the study situates its findings within the wider global academic discourse on conflict, genocide, and international responsibility.

Key words: realism, Rwandan conflict, genocide, national interests, security dilemma, international intervention, weak statehood.

Introduction. The termination of the Cold War marked a fundamental shift in the meaning and practice of security within the international relations system. With the erosion of the relatively stable balance of power sustained by bipolar rivalry, the incidence of large-scale interstate wars declined, while intrastate armed conflicts, ethnic violence, state collapse, and systematic human rights abuses increasingly occupied the center of the global security agenda (Brown, 1996; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). This transformation not only altered the empirical landscape of conflict but also subjected prevailing international relations theories to renewed scrutiny. In particular, liberal and normative approaches gained prominence in the post-Cold War era by foregrounding human rights, democracy, and humanitarian intervention as guiding principles of international politics. Yet the major humanitarian catastrophes of the 1990s-most notably Bosnia, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and later Darfur exposed a persistent gap between normative commitments and actual political behavior. These contradictions underscore the need to reassess the explanatory power of international relations theories, especially realism, in accounting for state behavior during humanitarian crises.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide stands as one of the most devastating humanitarian disasters of the post–Cold War period and, simultaneously, as a critical empirical case that reveals the structural constraints of the international system. Over the course of approximately one hundred days, more than 800,000 people were systematically killed despite the existence of early warning indicators, the presence of a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission, and widespread awareness of the escalating violence (Barnett, 2002; Power, 2002). Nevertheless, no effective international intervention was undertaken, and existing institutional mechanisms failed to generate a timely or decisive response. This outcome allows the Rwandan case to be interpreted not merely as a humanitarian tragedy, but as an analytical case that illuminates the underlying logic of international politics. In this sense, Rwanda vividly demonstrates the structural tension between normative aspirations and calculations of power and national interest, thereby offering a compelling empirical test for international relations theory.

This article argues that the Rwandan conflict and the 1994 genocide cannot be adequately explained either as the inevitable consequence of "ancient ethnic hatreds" or as a spontaneous and uncontrolled outbreak of mass violence. Instead, the genocide should be understood as the product of rational political strategies aimed at regime survival in a context of weak state institutions, combined with regime security imperatives and the anarchic structure of the international system. Within this framework,

ethnic identity did not constitute the primary cause of violence; rather, it functioned as an instrumental resource for political mobilization, legitimation, and the construction of existential threat narratives (Mamdani, 2001; Prunier, 1995).

Discussion. The existing literature on the Rwandan conflict generally falls into three broad analytical categories. The first emphasizes ethnic identity and historical antagonisms as the principal drivers of violence. The second, grounded in normative and humanitarian perspectives, interprets the failure of international intervention primarily as a moral or ethical failure. The third focuses on structural factors such as colonial legacies, socio-economic crises, and state weakness. While each of these approaches provides valuable insights, most struggle to integrate domestic political violence and international passivity within a single coherent theoretical framework (Barnett, 2002; Uvin, 1998). This article addresses this limitation by focusing on the interaction between weak state structures, regime security concerns, and international anarchy – an interaction that remains insufficiently theorized in existing research. In particular, systematic analyses that integrate classical realism and neorealism to explain both domestic and international dimensions of the Rwandan case remain limited.

The research gap identified in this study lies in the underdevelopment of realist explanations that conceptualize internal political violence and international selective passivity as outcomes of the same structural logic. Although the empirical and normative literature on Rwanda is extensive, few studies explicitly demonstrate this linkage within a realist analytical framework. By integrating classical realism and neorealism, this article contends that the dynamics of violence in Rwanda were governed by a consistent realist logic at both the domestic level through regime security and political mobilization and the international level through national interests and the selectivity of intervention. In doing so, the study reinforces the continuing analytical relevance of realism for understanding humanitarian crises in the post – Cold War international system.

From a theoretical standpoint, the analysis draws on the two principal strands of realism. Classical realism offers conceptual tools for understanding political behavior in terms of power, interest, and the preservation of authority (Morgenthau, 1948), while neorealism explains state behavior through the anarchic structure and systemic constraints of the international system (Waltz, 1979). The integration of these approaches enables a unified analytical framework capable of capturing both domestic and international levels of analysis. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative case study design, employing historical-institutional analysis, the systematic linkage of theoretical concepts with empirical evidence, and the comparative use of multilingual academic literature. This methodological strategy allows the Rwandan conflict to be examined not merely as a regional phenomenon, but as an analytically generalizable case for international relations theory.

Main Approaches to Explaining the Rwandan Conflict. The academic literature on the Rwandan conflict and the 1994 genocide constitutes one of the most extensive and theoretically heterogeneous bodies of work in the field of conflict studies. Scholars have approached the causes and dynamics of violence from multiple analytical levels, including historical legacies, social structures, normative frameworks, and systemic constraints. While this plurality has significantly enriched empirical understanding, it has also produced fragmented explanatory models, each with distinct strengths and limitations. As a result, the construction of a unified and coherent conceptual framework remains challenging. This section systematically reviews the main approaches to explaining the Rwandan conflict and evaluates their analytical capacity from a realist perspective.

One of the earliest and most widespread approaches explains the Rwandan conflict through ethnic confrontation and narratives of "ancient hatred." According to this view, deep-rooted historical antagonism between Hutu and Tutsi communities inevitably culminated in genocide. Such interpretations gained particular prominence in popular discourse and media accounts, which frequently depicted the violence as a spontaneous eruption of ethnic animosity. Academic scholarship, however, has subjected this primordialist interpretation to extensive criticism. Historical research demonstrates

that prior to colonial rule, the Hutu–Tutsi distinction did not function as a rigid or immutable ethnic divide, but rather as a fluid system of social classification linked to status, patron–client relations, and economic activity (Newbury, 1988; Vansina, 2004). Furthermore, ethnic determinist explanations fail to account for the highly organized, planned, and political character of the violence. The speed, scale, and coordination of the killings point not to spontaneous hatred, but to deliberate elite-driven mobilization and the instrumental use of state and para-state institutions (Straus, 2006). From a realist standpoint, ethnic narratives may help explain how violence was socially legitimized at the mass level, yet they remain insufficient for explaining why genocide occurred at a specific political moment and why it unfolded with such extreme intensity.

A second major explanatory framework situates the Rwandan conflict within the context of colonial governance and postcolonial state formation. Scholars working within this tradition argue that the modern political salience of ethnicity in Rwanda was largely produced through European colonial administration. Belgian colonial rule, informed by racialized theories such as the "Hamitic hypothesis," institutionalized ethnic hierarchies by portraying Tutsis as a natural ruling elite and Hutus as a subordinate majority, thereby hardening identity categories and embedding them within state institutions (Prunier, 1995; Mamdani, 2001). In the postcolonial period, this legacy contributed to a form of state legitimacy grounded not in inclusive citizenship, but in ethnic majoritarianism. Mamdani (2001) conceptualizes the Rwandan genocide as a continuation of the "internal logic of the colonial state," emphasizing that mass violence was structurally linked to state power and administrative practices. While this approach offers substantial explanatory value by connecting violence to political institutions and state structures, it is less effective in explaining the international dimension of the conflict, particularly why external actors failed to intervene despite early warnings and available information.

Another influential strand of scholarship foregrounds socio-economic conditions and the unintended consequences of development and reform policies. From this perspective, land scarcity, high population density, widespread poverty, and the social dislocations generated by structural adjustment programs created fertile conditions for violence (Uvin, 1998). Some scholars argue that development initiatives, rather than strengthening state capacity, exacerbated inequality and intensified political competition over scarce resources. These explanations are valuable for understanding the social foundations and enabling conditions of violence. However, they are limited in explaining why violence was actively promoted and organized by political elites, and why state institutions became instruments of mass killing. Socio-economic hardship is a common feature in many societies, yet it does not inevitably result in genocide. This suggests that additional political and structural variables-particularly elite decision-making and regime survival strategies-must be incorporated into the analysis.

A substantial portion of the literature interprets the Rwandan genocide primarily as a normative failure of the international community. Within frameworks centered on human rights, international law, and the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect, the failure to prevent or halt the genocide is framed as a profound moral and ethical breakdown (Bellamy, 2010; Power, 2002). These studies powerfully document the moral costs and legal implications of international inaction. However, they provide limited analytical leverage for explaining why states failed to comply with their normative commitments. Liberal and normative approaches tend to evaluate international behavior in terms of what should have been done, rather than systematically analyzing why states, operating under conditions of uncertainty, risk, and competing interests, chose inaction.

Finally, a significant body of research focuses on the failure of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) and the selective conduct of major powers. Barnett (2002) emphasizes the dependence of international bureaucratic mechanisms on the political will of member states, arguing that the United Nations functions less as an autonomous actor than as a reflection of dominant state interests. Power (2002) highlights the reluctance of the United States and other major powers to employ the term "genocide," interpreting this avoidance as a strategic effort to evade legal and

political responsibility. While these analyses provide a detailed empirical account of international passivity, they require further theoretical integration-particularly with structural approaches such as realism-to explain why such patterns of selective inaction recur across cases of mass violence.

Taken together, these approaches illuminate important dimensions of the Rwandan conflict, yet none fully integrates domestic political violence and international passivity within a single explanatory framework. From a realist perspective, this gap underscores the need for an analysis that links weak state structures, regime security imperatives, and the anarchic nature of the international system. Such an approach enables the Rwandan genocide to be understood not merely as an anomaly or a moral failure, but as the outcome of rational political behavior operating within severe structural constraints.

The Distinctive Analytical Advantage of Realism. Each of the approaches reviewed above explains certain aspects of the Rwandan conflict; however, most of them fail to integrate internal political violence and international passivity within a single analytical logic. It is precisely at this point that realist theory offers a distinctive analytical advantage. Realism conceptualizes violence not as irrational hatred, but as a rational struggle for power, security, and interests (Morgenthau, 1948). Neorealism, in turn, links the behavior of international actors to the anarchic structure of the international system and the logic of self-help (Waltz, 1979). The integration of these two approaches makes it possible to demonstrate that both internal violence and international selective passivity in the Rwandan case were products of the same structural logic.

In this sense, realism does not reject ethnic or normative humanitarian explanations; rather, it systematizes the empirical insights they provide within a broader structural framework. This capacity enables the Rwandan conflict to be treated not merely as a unique tragedy, but as an analytically generalizable case for international relations theory.

Realism. The selection of realism as the primary theoretical framework for analyzing the Rwandan conflict in this article is deliberate rather than incidental. Realism offers a distinctive analytical capacity to explain both the logic of internal political violence and the selective, passive behavior of international actors within a single, coherent framework (Arı, 2014). By grounding its analysis in objective categories such as power, interest, and security rather than normative ideals realism is particularly effective in uncovering the structural drivers of severe humanitarian crises such as Rwanda.

At the ontological level, realism is founded on the assumption that the international system is anarchic. Anarchy signifies the absence of a central authority, compelling states to rely on their own capabilities to ensure survival and security (Waltz, 1979). This core assumption explains the persistence of power competition, balancing behavior, and mutual distrust in international politics. Epistemologically, realism approaches international affairs not from the standpoint of normative idealism what should happen but through observable behavior and structural constraints. The actions of states and political actors are understood primarily in terms of interest preservation and risk minimization rather than ethical intent (Morgenthau, 1948). This perspective is especially relevant for the Rwandan case, where the conduct of the international community was shaped less by humanitarian norms than by concrete political calculations.

Classical realism links both domestic and international politics to the human drive for power and the pursuit of interests. For Hans Morgenthau, political behavior is determined by objective national interests defined in terms of power (Morgenthau, 1948). This framework conceptualizes states and ruling elites as rational actors. In the Rwandan context, classical realism provides a powerful lens for explaining internal political violence. For governing elites, the primary concern is often not the abstract welfare of the state, but the survival of the regime itself. In the early 1990s, the increasing risk of power loss, military pressure from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), and the erosion of domestic legitimacy transformed violence from a last resort option into a preventive political strategy. From this perspective, mass violence appears not as an irrational emotional eruption, but as a rational choice aimed at preserving authority. Within this framework, ethnic identity functions not as

an ideological end, but as an instrumental means for political mobilization and the construction of an enemy. Classical realism facilitates an understanding of this instrumentalization by treating identity discourses as subordinate to political interests.

Neorealism. Neorealism, or structural realism, complements the state-centered and human-nature-based explanations of classical realism by emphasizing the constraining role of the international system's structure. According to Kenneth Waltz, the primary determinant of state behavior is not domestic political arrangements, but the position of states within an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, the behavior of international actors is shaped less by individual intentions than by systemic pressures and constraints.

The Rwandan case provides strong empirical support for neorealist logic. For major powers such as the United States and France, Rwanda did not represent a significant strategic or economic interest. As a result, humanitarian intervention was perceived as a high-cost and low-return endeavor (Mearsheimer, 2001; Power, 2002). In this context, international inaction emerges not as moral indifference, but as a rational outcome of interest prioritization within an anarchic system.

Neorealism also sheds light on the limited effectiveness of international institutions. Organizations such as the United Nations lack centralized authority, and their capacity to act is contingent upon the political will and resource commitments of member states. The weak mandate and limited resources of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) clearly demonstrated these structural constraints (Barnett, 2002).

A central analytical concept within realism-the security dilemma-helps explain how measures taken by one actor to enhance its security are interpreted as threats by others, thereby generating cycles of mutual distrust and escalating insecurity. This mechanism is particularly useful for understanding both the domestic and regional dimensions of the Rwandan conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Domestically, the military organization and battlefield successes of the RPF were perceived by the Hutu ruling elite as existential threats, accelerating radicalization and the normalization of violence. Actions taken to secure regime survival-including the formation of militias, the intensification of propaganda, and the expansion of repression-were interpreted by opposing groups as further threats, deepening the spiral of violence. At the regional level, the political and military mobilization of refugee communities in Uganda and neighboring states intensified mutual suspicion, transforming the Rwandan crisis into a broader regional security issue.

The theoretical framework outlined above generates several testable analytical expectations for empirical analysis. First, the intensity of violence in Rwanda should increase during periods of intensified internal political competition and heightened threats to regime security. Second, the likelihood of international intervention should be directly correlated with the national interests of major powers. Third, the effectiveness of international institutions should be constrained by political will and resource allocation. These expectations provide a basis for systematically examining the Rwandan case through a realist lens in the empirical analysis that follows.

The United Nations and UNAMIR. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) empirically reveals the structural limitations of international institutions. Owing to its restricted mandate, insufficient resources, and the absence of sustained political support, the mission proved incapable of preventing the escalation of violence (Barnett, 2002). From a realist perspective, this failure reflects not so much the institutional weakness of the United Nations itself as the lack of political will among major powers. The decision not to expand UNAMIR or to strengthen its mandate confirms that international institutions are not autonomous decision-making actors, but mechanisms dependent on the interests and preferences of their member states.

Empirical analysis further demonstrates that the intensity and scale of violence in the Rwandan conflict correspond closely with the predictions of the realist theoretical framework. At the domestic level, regime security concerns and rational-choice calculations stimulated violence, while at the

international level, the anarchic structure of the system and the prioritization of national interests effectively precluded intervention. In this sense, the Rwandan case empirically illustrates that realism possesses explanatory power not only for interstate wars, but also for intrastate armed conflicts and humanitarian crises.

The empirical and theoretical analysis conducted in this article demonstrates the high analytical value of interpreting the Rwandan conflict through the lens of realist theory. The findings both empirically reinforce the core assumptions of realism and demonstrate the continued relevance of this approach for explaining intrastate conflicts and humanitarian crises in the post–Cold War era. At the same time, the discussion acknowledges the limitations of realism and considers its potential complementarities with alternative theoretical perspectives.

One of the most significant findings is that realism enables internal political violence and international selective passivity in the Rwandan conflict to be explained within a single structural logic. While classical realism facilitates an understanding of ruling elites' behavior at the domestic level in terms of power, interests, and regime security, neorealism links international actors' avoidance of intervention to the anarchic structure of the international system and the primacy of national interests.

This integrative reading demonstrates that violence in Rwanda was neither merely an internal pathology nor the accidental outcome of international indifference. Rather, patterns of behavior observed at both levels represent different manifestations of the same realist logic. This finding weakens the common critique that realism can explain only interstate wars and empirically shows that it can also be applied to intrastate conflicts.

Comparison with Ethnic and Normative Approaches. The findings of this article further expose the limitations of ethnic and primordialist explanations. Empirical analysis shows that Hutu-Tutsi identity was not the cause of violence, but rather a political resource instrumentalized to implement it. This undermines the analytical validity of approaches that treat ethnic hatred as an independent variable. While ethnic explanations may partially account for how violence was socially legitimized, they are insufficient for explaining why it occurred at a specific political moment and on such a scale.

By contrast, normative humanitarian approaches tend to frame the Rwandan case as an ethical failure of the international community. While this perspective raises important normative questions, it struggles to explain at a structural level why states chose not to intervene. As demonstrated in this article, international passivity did not represent a rejection of normative values per se, but rather the prioritization of national interests and risk calculations. At this point, realism does not dismiss normative approaches, but instead provides a more fundamental structural framework for explaining their empirical outcomes.

An important dimension of the discussion concerns the relationship between realism and weak-state approaches. In weak states, institutions often function not as neutral mechanisms of governance, but as instruments in struggles for power a dynamic clearly observable in the Rwandan case. This article demonstrates that state weakness does not constitute an alternative to realism; rather, it represents a contextual condition that facilitates the empirical operation of realist logic.

In other words, weak state environments render the realist emphasis on power, interests, and survival instincts more visible. This perspective challenges the claim that realism applies only to strong states and shows that it also possesses substantial explanatory power in weak state contexts.

The failure of UNAMIR empirically supports neorealist critiques of international institutions. The findings indicate that, lacking central authority, international institutions cannot operate as independent actors and remain dependent on the political will of major powers. This challenges liberal institutionalist claims regarding the autonomous causal influence of international institutions. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to conclude that international institutions are entirely ineffective. Although UNAMIR failed to prevent genocide, debates surrounding its mandate and performance subsequently contributed to the development of international normative frameworks, most nota-

bly the discourse on the Responsibility to Protect. This, in turn, highlights a limitation of realism in explaining normative change.

While emphasizing the explanatory power of realism, this article also explicitly acknowledges its limitations. Although realism offers a robust framework for explaining the causes of the Rwandan conflict and international passivity, it tends to marginalize questions of ethical responsibility, normative obligations, and the role of international law. In cases such as genocide, an exclusive focus on structural logic risks obscuring issues of human rights and individual accountability. For this reason, a comprehensive understanding of complex humanitarian crises such as Rwanda requires realism to be complemented by constructivist, normative, and international legal approaches.

In conclusion, this article extends the empirical application of realist theory and strengthens its analytical potential for explaining intrastate armed conflicts. The Rwandan case demonstrates that preventing humanitarian catastrophes requires more than normative appeals alone; without addressing structural constraints and political interests, effective international responses remain unlikely. This conclusion carries important theoretical and practical implications. At the theoretical level, it reaffirms the continued relevance of realism in the post-Cold War era. At the practical level, it underscores the necessity of structural and political reforms within the international security architecture to enable more effective responses to humanitarian crises.

Conclusion. The analysis advanced in this article demonstrates that the 1994 Rwandan conflict represents a critical empirical case for evaluating-and reinforcing-the explanatory scope of realist theory in the study of violence and humanitarian catastrophe within international relations. The genocide in Rwanda cannot be satisfactorily explained either as the inevitable consequence of long-standing ethnic antagonisms or as a spontaneous and uncontrolled outbreak of mass violence. Instead, it must be understood as the outcome of the interaction between rational political strategies aimed at regime survival in a weak state environment, the dynamics of the security dilemma, and the structural constraints imposed by an anarchic international system.

One of the article's key findings is that the violence in Rwanda was not the result of internal political irrationality, but rather of calculated decisions taken under conditions of limited alternatives. For ruling elites, the overriding threat was the loss of political power and the attendant risk of physical elimination. Within this context, ethnic identity operated not as an ideological objective in itself, but as an instrumental resource for political mobilization and the legitimation of violence. This conclusion empirically substantiates core realist propositions concerning the primacy of interests and survival imperatives, extending their relevance to the analysis of intrastate conflict.

At the international level, the study shows that the behavior of the international community and major powers during the Rwandan crisis is more convincingly explained through a structural and interest-based logic than through interpretations focused exclusively on moral or ethical failure. In an anarchic international system, humanitarian intervention was pursued only when it coincided with the strategic or political interests of powerful states. Rwanda's marginal strategic and economic significance rendered large-scale intervention a high-cost and low-benefit option, thereby exposing the deep structural disjunction between normative rhetoric and political practice in international relations.

The failure of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) further illustrates the constrained autonomy of international institutions. The mission's limited mandate and inadequate resources reveal that the effectiveness of international organizations remains fundamentally dependent on the political will of member states. This outcome provides empirical support for neorealist critiques of international institutions and highlights the contextual limitations of liberal institutionalist claims regarding institutional independence.

The principal theoretical contribution of this article lies in its integrative application of classical realism and neorealism to demonstrate the structural linkage between internal political violence and international selective passivity. This integrative framework shows that realism is not confined

to explaining interstate war, but also offers substantial analytical leverage in the study of intrastate conflicts and humanitarian crises. In doing so, the article confirms the continued analytical relevance of realism in the post-Cold War era. At the same time, the analysis acknowledges the limitations inherent in realist theory. While realism provides a powerful account of structural causes and international inaction, it tends to marginalize considerations of ethical responsibility, normative obligation, and individual criminal accountability. A comprehensive understanding of complex humanitarian crises such as Rwanda therefore requires realism to be complemented by constructivist, normative, and international legal approaches.

From a practical perspective, the Rwandan experience demonstrates that normative appeals alone are insufficient to ensure effective responses to humanitarian emergencies.Without addressing structural constraints, political interests, and decision-making incentives, international interventions are unlikely to be timely or effective. This insight carries significant implications for the future design and reform of international security and intervention mechanisms.

In conclusion, the Rwandan case opens several avenues for future research. Applying realist theory to other cases of intrastate conflict and genocide may further enhance its generalizability. Examining the interaction between realism and normative approaches can help clarify the structural limits of humanitarian intervention discourse. Comparative studies of the relationship between regime security and mass violence in weak states may also generate valuable empirical and theoretical insights. Ultimately, the Rwandan conflict stands as a tragic yet analytically significant case, illustrating with particular clarity the predominance of power, interest, and security logics over humanitarian values in the contemporary international system.

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