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# A theory of regional conflict complexes

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## Abstract

Civil conflicts spill over into neighboring countries. This paper proposes a theory of the contagion of civil wars. Weak territorial control facilitates the emergence of a regional market for war inputs in the “porous frontier.” The contagion effect is nonlinear and creates multiple equilibrium situations of regional complexes of civil conflicts. This helps explain the observed patterns of regional clustering of conflict and institutional quality, and raises identification issues in the measurement of the contagion effect. We also derive a positive spillover of civil wars: governments are sometimes in a position to avoid contagion by improving their institutions. Finally, we explore the policy implications for military intervention, and military and institutional cooperation.

**Keywords:** civil war, contagion, porous frontier, institutions, military intervention, institutional cooperation

**JEL classification:** D74, N40, P48

## 1 Introduction

On January 16, 2012, The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an organization fighting to make Azawad in Northern Mali an independent homeland for the Tuareg people, started a rebellion against the Malian government. Taking advantage of an internal political crisis in the country (the ousting of the incumbent President Amadou Toumani Touré), the MNLA quickly overran the three largest northern cities—Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, and on April

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