Understanding conflicts as clouds: an exploration of Northern Irish conflict narratives

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ABSTRACT

While tragically disrupting the lives of people in specific locations, some armed conflicts have the capacity to become social, political, and cultural stakes elsewhere. Inspired by Appadurai’s conceptualization of ‘scapes’, this article goes beyond and proposes the metaphor of ‘conflict cloud’ in order to understand armed conflicts in the context of globalization. Focusing on the circulation and production of narratives, we develop and delineate the main contributive features, processes, and actors of conflict clouds, using the Northern Irish conflict as an illustrative example. We posit that conflict narratives can be uploaded, downloaded, and uploaded again into conflict clouds by different actors globally. These actors are not always directly or indirectly involved in the concerned conflicts but can transform, frame, and exploit different meanings and symbols related to these conflicts for their particular agendas, usually tailoring them for specific audiences.

KEYWORDS

Narratives; armed conflicts; Northern Ireland; globalized symbolic space

Introduction

Why do some conflicts draw interest and mobilization outside of their borders, and others not? And does this global interest in certain conflicts affect the dynamics in the concerned areas, but also in other ‘conflict zones’? There is no doubt that some conflicts draw more attention than others outside of their geographical borders. Narratives concerning these conflicts can be used globally as powerful mobilization instruments, often alongside other issues, and they can even be incorporated in the programme of political actors located elsewhere. For example, republicans and democrats in the US are growingly polarized in their attitudes toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, with about 79% of republicans sympathizing with the Israel side (Pew Research Center, 2018). Another example is the organization, by the Swedish Left party, of a number of large demonstrations against the Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria in 2019 (Vansterpartiet, 2019).

In many cases, the conflicts that seem to attract the most attention globally are those that are significant for the Global North (Hawkins, 2008). But other factors matter. Apart from economic, cultural, and geographical proximity, the story line of certain conflicts may also be more or less compelling for the media and political actors to cover. Usually, such narrativization of conflicts is specifically tailored to put the focus on the issues, values, and interests that seem the most relevant for those who are perceived to be listening, or whose attention is sought for. As a result, some conflicts become important stakes in political, social, and cultural arenas that are sometimes
located very far away from the territory in which the actual fighting is taking place. And as conflict narratives are appropriated and reformulated to fit these new spaces, they take on alternative meanings, involve other actors, appeal to different values, and so on.

Similarly to cloud technologies that allow storing information that can both be downloaded and uploaded independently of location and the machine in use, we propose to use the metaphor of a conflict cloud to describe these processes, where meanings, symbols, narratives, and interpretations of conflicts can be uploaded and downloaded by different actors globally. Through these multiple reciprocal and co-constructed processes, the imaginaries, ideologies, meanings, and narratives of the concerned conflicts are constantly updated and reimagined to be used in specific ways in new contexts. Moreover, conflicts clouds corresponding to different conflicts, some ongoing, some lingering as memories, overlap and inform each other, adding to the narratives of one conflict by feeding it with examples of another, depending on the needs and agenda as well as on the context in which the conflict narratives are disseminated and used.

So far, the ways in which conflict narratives are constructed, circulated, and evolved through space and time have not attracted much academic attention. Rather than paying attention to the elaboration, circulation, and use of these ideational elements, research has focused on the involvement of ‘external’ actors in conflicts, on remittances, on foreign fighters, and so on (Checkel, 2013; Salehyan, 2009). In parallel, scholars in diaspora studies have highlighted the ways in which conflicts in home countries can be transported to diasporic settings (Baser, 2015; Féron, 2017). This research has drawn attention to processes of conflict de-territorialization (Rabinowitz, 2000), entailing the expansion of the space in which the ‘core’ conflict is fought, and of conflict re-territorialization (Carter, 2005), whereby de-territorialized conflicts take root in different spaces by relying on different actors, and by developing dynamics of their own. Both strands of literature acknowledge that these processes have been largely shaped by the rapid development of communication technologies and different processes of globalization. Their findings, however, tend to overlook the fact that conflicts, and associated narratives, are not just produced by actors located in ‘conflict zones’ or in diaspora settings, but also by a multitude of actors located in other conflict areas, or elsewhere, and often without any material or cultural tie to the concerned ‘conflict zone’. And as such, in spite of being non-material objects, these narratives produce significant material effects well beyond the territories in which these conflicts take place, and outside of diaspora settings.

Against this backdrop, the metaphor of conflict clouds puts the stress on how conflict narratives can become synchronic as well as diachronic global sources of cultural capital, as they are (re-)invested with meaning, reinterpreted for local audiences, and simultaneously de- and re-territorialized. Thus, we propose to describe and conceptualize how such clouds can be progressively constituted by globalized synchronic and diachronic processes of upload and download. While not all conflicts are concerned to the same extent by these patterns, we explore, as an illustrative example, the case of Northern Ireland and focus our argument on why and how corresponding narratives are built, circulate, and evolve.

The principal contributions of this article are the following. First, it develops an original concept, that of the conflict cloud, to highlight how imaginaries, ideologies, meanings, and narratives related to conflicts are constantly downloaded, updated, and adapted to be used in specific ways in new contexts. Second, it contributes to the burgeoning literature on global and transnational dimensions of conflicts by putting the focus on the ideational aspect of these processes, which has been neglected in existing scholarly work. And third, it shows how the conflict cloud concept helps us to better understand contemporary conflicts, and their multiple diachronic and synchronic
entanglements. We start the paper with a brief overview of the literature discussing the links between globalization and armed conflicts, after which we focus on the well-known case of Northern Ireland, and on the characteristics of its conflict cloud. We present different narratives on the Northern Irish conflict that have been both de- and re-territorialized, uploaded and downloaded, and we discuss how different actors and events have in turn contributed to the cloud, and subsequently altered it. Finally, we propose a modelization of conflict clouds as contributing to an analysis of conflict de- and re-territorialization processes from a larger perspective.

Globalization and armed conflicts

The increasing interrelation and interdependence of economies as well as the rapid development of communication and information technologies have shaped the way space, territory, and distance are perceived (Faist, 1998; Giddens, 1991). Globalization processes have framed social relations, knowledge production, and society in general (Beck & Levy, 2013; Gille & Riain, 2002). A ‘world of flows’ has consequently emerged, as Appadurai (2001) famously stated, not only of people or goods but also ideologies, images, and discourses. The modern global cultural economy cannot be understood anymore as a relationship between centre and periphery, but as a disjunctive social order that according to Appadurai (2006) is characterized by a series of global flows: ethnoscapes (involving persons and groups ‘on the move’, such as migrants, refugees, guest workers), mediascapes (relating both to the practical capacity to globally spread information and images, and to the creation of certain worlds and images), technoscapes (involving informational and mechanical technology), financescapes (relating to markets, stock exchanges, and similar), and, finally ideoscapes (relating to images but also narratives, ideologies, counter ideologies, and movements). Characterizing these interrelated and disjunctive -scapes as imagined worlds, Appadurai emphasizes that they are fluid and constructed by individuals and groups globally. In other words, everyday practices, as well as global movements have the capacity to co-construct the globalized symbolic space.

Produced by multitudes of voices, ideoscapes such as narratives can become dominant or marginalized, created in local settings but fuelled and fuelling the global (Buurawy, 2000). Schaffer and Smith (2004) claim for example that after the end of the Cold War era, life narratives have become one of the most instrumental and potent ‘vehicles for human rights claims’ (p. 1). Narratives circulate and disperse across time and location through different modes, e.g. through the UN, international tribunals, TV shows, personal appearances, and so on. Often the main factor for the popular reception and ‘hearability’ of certain narratives is a condition of victimization (Gready, 2013). The concepts of de-territorialization and re-territorialization, first proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) relate to the capacity of meanings and symbols to be de-territorialized and disconnected from the space from which they originate, and then re-territorialized in different settings, and modified accordingly. In the case of the eruption of an armed conflict, for instance, it is rarely completely unknown or hidden from the ‘outside’. Thus entering the globalized symbolic space through different -scapes, the stories, experiences, and news about the armed conflict often coupled with different value sets or issues such as democracy or human rights, can be instrumentalized for different purposes by actors who do not necessarily have a direct connection to the location where the conflict is taking place or even to the conflict itself. Here it is important to highlight the role of emotions that can be instrumentalized through language to align some bodies with others, and that can ‘stick’ different signs, objects, and figures together. In that way, conflict narratives can become saturated, affected, and aligned with emotions through the power of language (Ahmed, 2014). In addition, the ways in which these narratives circulate, and the intensity of
their reception largely depend on their content, their framing, and above all the concerned audiences (Schaffer & Smith, 2004). Benford and Snow (2000) show for instance how the processes of framing allow individuals to make sense of the world and (co)create a system of meanings.

Like any other, ideoscapes related to wars and conflicts can be de-territorialized and re-territorialized in other contexts and spaces, even when these have seemingly little to do with the original conflict. However, all conflicts do not attract the same level of global attention, and all are not de-territorialized and re-territorialized in the same way. In one of the few studies to focus on these issues, Virgil Hawkins (2008) shows that several factors matter in de-territorialization processes, such as the concerned conflict’s political, economic, and military significance for the West, its geographical and cultural proximity, the capacity of audiences to identify with it (which can be affected by religious, historical, and linguistic factors), but also its potential for offering a compelling story line with easily identifiable sides. Unfortunately, Hawkins (2008) does not pursue this discussion with an analysis of how these conflict narratives are reinterpreted and re-territorialized on a local level.

When it comes to the specific relationship between different armed conflicts and their relevance elsewhere, including in geographically and historically distant places, evidence has so far been scattered. Studies have portrayed the conflicts that become a focus in the global agenda as related either to the rapid development of technologies that allow ‘witnessing’ the wars from afar and participating in a so-called sofa warfare (Asmolov, 2021; Shapiro, 2011), to the existence of transnational organizations and movements like transnational rebel groups (Checkel, 2013), or to the supposedly diminishing relevance of territory under globalization processes (Newman, 2006). More precisely, existing research on global and transnational aspects of armed conflicts can be divided into two main categories: on the one hand studies trying to describe and explain how and why external actors get involved in some conflicts (Checkel, 2013), and on the other hand research focusing on how conflicts are transported and affect actors located elsewhere, in particular in diaspora settings. As representative of the first strand, Salehyan (2009) discusses transnational insurgencies, civil wars, and unrest in general as linked not only to the state or the area where the conflict is taking place, but also to the situation in the neighbouring states as well as globally. Similarly, Demmers (2002) discusses conflict delocalization as related to new patterns of conflict and the changing nature of war, boundaries, and mobility, including the rapid rise in the numbers of refugees and the development of informational technologies that increase diasporas’ capacity to receive news from home and get more involved in homeland politics.

On the other hand, studies of conflict transportation and diaspora involvement have analysed how homeland conflicts can trigger migrant and diasporic mobilization and diasporization at large. One of such theories is the concept of conflict autonomization developed by Féron (2013), showing that conflicts in the home country are not simply reproduced by diasporas in their places of residence, but take on a new shape depending on local contexts, both political and social, including the patterns of mobilization of other diasporic groups. Baser (2015) similarly shows that the mobilization of diasporic groups due to conflicts might be contagious where other groups mobilize as a response to others’ mobilization. Beauzamy and Féron (2009) further discuss transnational solidarity movements that are often based on customized repertoires of action transcending specific diasporic communities as well as the homeland/hostland nexus.

These broad theoretical strands have so far remained largely separate, and they tend to overlook the ideational dimensions of conflict de-territorialization or re-territorialization, as well as the role that the global circulation of narratives plays therein. Further, they tend to promote a bilateral or even trans-local understanding of these processes, overlooking other global, and maybe less visible,
ways in which conflict narratives are elaborated, circulated, and reinterpreted. While conflicts distort the lives of people in the directly concerned areas, they have a capacity to grow, both symbolically and materially, outside of these territories’ boundaries and situate themselves in the globalized symbolic space. Further, most existing research and theoretical conceptualizations do not consider how this global circulation of conflict narratives can in turn affect conflict processes on the ground. Not only can actors located all around the world pick up ideas and meanings attached to any conflict, but they also have the capacity to shape and update information, meanings, and even create new ones, thereby creating a sort of feedback loop. Thus, it is not a simple process of downloading information about the conflict and using it in the place where the actor is located, but also of uploading information and updating the meanings of the conflict in the concerned actor’s place, as well as where the conflict is actually taking place, and in the transnational space.

In this article, we argue that the impact of globalization on conflicts does not end with the circulation of weapons, funding, technology, or of combatants – to go back to Appadurai’s terminology, ethnoscapes, financescapes, and technoscapes. We posit that as conflict narratives (ideoscapes) circulate globally, notably thanks to mediascapes and ethnoscapes, they have an impact on conflicts taking place elsewhere, and vice versa. But while we were inspired by Appadurai’s -scapes, our metaphor of conflict clouds goes a step further, notably by unpacking the multiple horizontal and vertical, as well as diachronic and synchronic processes that define these exchanges. In the next section, we discuss the global production and circulation of narratives related to the Northern Irish conflict, which, we argue, showcases the multiplicity of processes, actors, and factors involved and related to conflict clouds. Focusing on a specific example also gives the opportunity to highlight the multitude of ways the concept of conflict cloud can be useful in furthering our understanding of armed conflicts in specific cases, but also in general.

The Northern Irish conflict cloud

For more than 50 years now, the conflict in Northern Ireland has attracted considerable global academic, media, political, and popular attention. It has generated a staggering number of publications focusing on its origins, features, and actors, as well as on how peace could be built (for an overview see Tinnes, 2016). Since the Belfast/Good Friday Peace Agreement was signed in 1998, the path to a fragile and contested ‘peace’ between Catholic/Republican/Nationalist (CNR) and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) communities has been scrutinized with a sustained intensity in academic, media, and political circles. Over the past few years, this interest has been renewed by Brexit, notably because of the risks generated by the potential reintroduction of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, or of an Irish ‘sea border’ between the islands of Ireland and of Great Britain. Brexit debates have thus put Northern Ireland back at the centre of politics in the UK, EU, but also US, which is a guarantor of the 1998 Peace Agreement.

That a small territory of 14,130 km², which around 1.8 million people inhabit, might attract so much attention might sound surprising. What is even more striking is that many of those interested in the situation in Northern Ireland, especially in media and political circles, speak about the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ or ‘problem’ as if there was an agreed and universal understanding of what these terms mean. In fact, it is more accurate to consider the situation in Northern Ireland as a tangle of interrelated problems, which generate a multiplicity of contradicting and partly overlapping explanations, themselves giving birth to a ‘meta-conflict’, that is a ‘conflict about the conflict’, as famously coined by McGarry and O’Leary (1995). These various interpretations of, and narratives on the conflict in Northern Ireland are carried by multiple actors located both in the
province and elsewhere: for many, what lies at the conflict’s core is the constitutional and political question of whether Northern Ireland should stay within the UK, be reunited with the Republic of Ireland, or even become independent; for some, the conflict takes it roots in diverging cultural, national or ethnic identities, or in religious differences; others argue that Northern Ireland is a settler-colonial remnant of the British Empire, while another popular interpretation of the situation is through a socio-economic or even a Marxist lens, pointing at inequalities and exploitation as sources of strife both within and between the CNR and PUL communities.

What is particularly interesting in the way this meta-conflict has played out is that actors located outside of Northern Ireland use the Northern Irish conflict to defend and support diverging ideologies and standpoints, thereby downloading elements related to Northern Ireland for their own purposes. In parallel, these external actors have contributed to debates on, but also in Northern Ireland, thus participating in uploading their own opinions and views in the cloud. Numerous nationalist movements, in the Basque Country or in Corsica for instance, have expressed their solidarity with the ‘national liberation struggle’ undertaken by Irish republicans, against the UK ‘colonial power’. Kurdish militants have been inspired by the 1981 Northern Irish hunger strikes, and in return Irish republicans have supported Kurdish hunger strikes.1 The attitude of republican paramilitaries during the peace process has been scrutinized and presented as a successful model to adopt for other nationalist movements.2 Other devolved nations in the UK have drawn parallels between the situation in Northern Ireland and their own fight for further autonomy or even independence. Interestingly, expressions of solidarity between PUL communities, Afrikaners in South Africa, and Jews in Israel, or between CNR communities, Palestinians, and supporters of ANC in South Africa, notably through the display of flags, have also become common (Hill & White, 2008).

In most cases, these downloading and uploading processes do not happen spontaneously, but result from actions implemented by Northern Irish political actors in order to build global solidarity networks. Political parties and paramilitary groups on the CNR side in particular have developed strategies for appealing to international audiences, and this has facilitated the global circulation of narratives about the conflict. Irish Republicans have for instance organized active fundraising in the US especially among Irish-Americans,3 and built links with other like-minded nationalist movements located in Europe and beyond.4 More recently, they have initiated multiple discussions at the European level in order to raise attention to the risks related to the reintroduction of a hard border on the island. On the PUL side, establishing solidarities beyond the UK has proved more complicated. Since the 1980s, building on the work of authors like Adamson (1982, 1991) who have focused on Ulster Scot culture in Northern Ireland, PUL parties have tried to raise the interest of Americans with Irish protestant heritage. However, in spite of the fact that about half Irish Americans are protestants,5 very few actually mobilize in favour of PUL objectives. Multiple reasons have been brought forward in order to explain the absence of a coherent narrative from the Protestant diaspora, and the PUL’s lack of influence in the US. While some authors mention the Protestants’ earlier arrival in the US, as compared to Catholics, and ideological and political divisions between the US and the UK at the time of the partition of Ireland (Flewelling, 2018), others have pointed at the influence of local political, electoral, and economic contexts (Ireland, 2012).

In these multiple interpretations and narratives about the Northern Irish conflict, some specific events carry a particular weight, such as the 1972 Bloody Sunday, the 1981 republican hunger strikes, or the 1998 Peace Agreement. These events convey different meanings for various national and international audiences and are therefore more likely to be downloaded, whereas others, like the policy of internment without trial, introduced by the British Army in 1971, are important symbols in Northern Ireland but not well-known outside of Ireland and the UK. Globalized narratives
about the conflict are also supported by multiple symbols or commemorations, some directly connected to the conflict, others linked more generally to Irish or Northern Irish history and culture, such as commemorations on St Patrick’s Day and of the 1916 Easter Rising on the CNR side, or of the 1916 Battle of the Somme on the PUL side. These various commemorations and anniversaries hold considerable value for multiple actors located on the island or elsewhere, allowing them to legitimize their own actions, ostracize others, and/or apportion blame.

The way in which the conflict in Northern Ireland has served as a receptacle of, and been associated to, global narratives has been particularly obvious in the context of European integration, and then of Brexit. The de-escalation of the conflict in Northern Ireland had, in the past, often been presented as enabled by the process of European construction, which had brought together the UK and the Republic of Ireland, and helped them to let go of the colonial past (Hayward, 2006). It is in this context that recent narratives about the risks posed by Brexit in terms of a potential reescalation of the conflict have to be understood. Multiple actors on the island of Ireland and beyond, in particular in the US, have backed EU narratives about the need to preserve peace in Northern Ireland, and how this overarching goal justified a special status for the province – the (in)famous ‘backstop’. By becoming a contentious and dividing issue in the EU or in the US, the Brexit/Northern Ireland nexus has thus ushered new patterns of re-territorialization for the Northern Irish conflict. Interestingly, Brexit also saw the reemergence of a colonial frame of analysis in the Republic of Ireland, where hostile discourses towards the ‘English’ borrowed references from the colonial period, like the terms ‘Castle Catholic’ and ‘West Brit’.6

Referring back to Hawkins (2008), it is easy to understand why the conflict in Northern Ireland attracts so much attention: on the one hand, and although the situation on the ground is extremely complex, it can be simplified and exported by providing straightforward and compelling narratives, of opposing CNR and PUL communities, of lives of innocent civilians lost at the hand of sectarian paramilitary/terrorist groups, or of an island divided by colonialism. The Northern Irish ‘meta-conflict’ provides multiple layers of interpretations that echo global ideological and paradigmatic divides, resonating with a great variety of situations elsewhere, and therefore likely to be downloaded: it can be simultaneously seen as a conflict rooted in religious divisions, in socio-economic disparities, in political and constitutional differences (e.g. republican vs. monarchist), and it can also be read through a post-colonial or a ‘national liberation struggle’ prism. In that sense, it can speak to the universal, it can transcend categories and specific locations because of its ability to represent global struggles, values, and/or cleavages. However, all narratives related to this conflict do not have the same capacity to travel, to be downloaded and relayed, and then reused through space and time. In particular, the narratives favoured by PUL communities have been less audible globally. Their discourses, grounded in specific cultural and religious values, and referring to histories of colonization are less likely to attract sympathy (Goldring, 1994). This suggests that not all conflict actors or narratives are equal in their capacity to be de- and re-territorialized, or to be downloaded and uploaded, because of their differing echo with the paradigms and ideologies that are dominant at a certain moment in time, and in certain spaces. This also applies to the narratives of national liberation struggle on the republican side, which lost most of what remained of their popular support in the wake of 9/11 and of a general outcry against violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups.

On the other hand, the conflict in Northern Ireland is obviously highly significant for the West, politically but also because of its location and cultural characteristics. It is intimately related to important events in European history, like the religious wars that accompanied and followed Reformation, the First World War, as well as the European integration process and Brexit. It involves not
only the UK, one of the major world powers, but also the EU, and it is taking place in the English speaking world, thereby easing the diffusion of information and of narratives. This circulation of narratives also depends on practical matters, and in particular on the capacity of the concerned groups to build transnational links with other like-minded organizations, and to rely upon groups, such as diasporas, that will act as echo chambers. The role played by the Irish diaspora in these processes cannot be overstated. Large and nowadays politically influential, the Irish diaspora is mostly settled in countries like the US and Great Britain, which dominate the international news agenda, and which play a major role in political agenda setting. Interestingly the Irish diaspora, especially in the US, hasn’t been a passive recipient of narratives elaborated in Northern Ireland, but has on the contrary played a major role in uploading processes, and in framing the ‘Irish problem’ for the rest of the world. Although it is by no means united, the attitude of the majority of its members can be said to have evolved from a support to nationalist and even republican agendas, to a support for negotiation and dialogue, which has been instrumental in the success of the peace process during the 1990s (Cochrane, 2010). In this example, narratives reframed by actors located outside of Northern Ireland have therefore had a major impact on events occurring within the province, thus illustrating a major feedback effect. These narratives have been transmitted and amplified through traditional media, through political representatives and lobbies like the Irish National Caucus or the Ancient Order of Hibernians, but also through various internet forums and websites. Interestingly, support and solidarity networks have been maintained between Irish Americans and CNR political actors in Northern Ireland in spite of sometimes wide differences in interpretation, notably relating to how the conflict in Northern Ireland should be understood and resolved (Cochrane, 2010, pp. 68–69). In other words, the above mentioned meta-conflict structures discourses and political struggles in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the world, but it also characterizes the relations between actors located in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

**General discussion**

What can we learn from the Northern Irish case about the global production and circulation of conflict narratives, what we have called ‘conflict clouds’? Many other conflicts have attracted significant attention and engagement from an international audience, like the cases of Rwanda, South Africa, ex-Yugoslavia, and especially Israel-Palestine, which has been described as a ‘globalized conflict’ (Smith, 2008). Like Northern Ireland, these conflicts have generated multiple conflicting narratives, conveyed by actors located both in the concerned territory, and elsewhere.

On the basis of these examples, it appears that conflict clouds can be characterized by six main processes or features, relating respectively to the clouds’ (1) content, (2) functions, (3) material effects, (4) involved actors, (5) evolution over time, and (6) centrifugal/centripetal processes. First, and in spite of these conflicts’ contextual specificities, in all these cases narratives that circulate globally are often significantly different than those promoted by conflict actors within the concerned regions. In other words, the content of conflict-related ideoscapes is intrinsically changing and unstable. This can be explained by three main different but sometimes converging processes: first, the attempt by conflict actors themselves to raise awareness and to attract solidarity and support by appealing to values shared by the targeted international audiences, pushing them to adopt slightly different discourses when addressing international, rather than national, audiences (see, in the case of the Kurds, Berkowitz & Mügge, 2014). Second, conflict narratives can be appropriated by activists and conflict actors located elsewhere, drawing parallels, finding justifications for their own struggles, but also reframing ‘initial’ narratives according to their own cultural and historical
references, as we have seen in the case of references made by Kurds to Northern Irish republican hunger strikes. And third, foreign media and political actors need to provide simple enough explanations for the conflict to their own national and local audiences, a ‘compelling story’ which does not necessarily reflect on-the-ground patterns. In all these three processes, a dual movement of frame bridging and frame extension is at play, whereby frame bridging refers to ‘the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem’ (Snow et al., 1986, p. 467), and frame extension to an inclusion of issues and concerns of interest to the broader audience that is targeted (Benford & Snow, 2000). Diasporas have long been known to use frame bridging and frame extension in order to raise awareness on, and sympathy towards, the situation in their homeland (Ho & McConnell, 2019). What the metaphor of conflict cloud shows, however, is that beyond diasporas, conflict actors located both in the concerned region and elsewhere, as well as interested media and political actors, reframe conflict narratives for their own purposes too.

Second main characteristic of the clouds, the multiplicity of functions that this narrative reframing fulfils, like facilitating the identification with one side, associating a conflict side to a more global cause (e.g. the Palestinian cause often equated with an anti-imperialist struggle), drawing parallels with another conflict situation, making sense of one’s own struggle or everyday life, coming up with a cautionary tale (regarding for instance the role played by ‘ethnicity’ in Bosnia–Herzegovina or Rwanda), legitimizing a course of action, undertaking fundraising, and so on. This diversity explains that depending on the locutor, the intended effect, and the targeted audience, different symbols, events, interpretations, or ideologies, are foregrounded, and that the reframed narratives can be used for both internal and/or external purposes. Therefore, only certain of these elements are de-territorialized, and then re-territorialized in another context, taking on a different meaning, like Palestinian flags displayed in Black Lives Matter protests in Europe.8

In that sense, and this is the third main characteristic of conflict clouds, the circulation and reframing of non-material items such as narratives can have very concrete material effects, such as the recruitment of foreign fighters, fundraising, changes in policies, and so on. In other words, conflict ideoscapes, financescapes, and ethnoscapes are intimately connected. In some cases, an international ‘merchandizing’ of the concerned conflict can even be observed, with the global circulation of political posters, biographies, as well as objects like mugs, flags, or t-shirts. The global attention and interest demonstrated towards the conflict is thus turned into a highly profitable cultural capital, as shown in the case of Che Guevara (Memou, 2013) or of the IRA (Bowman-Grieve & Herron, 2020). In parallel, the diffusion of narratives is also related to the diffusion of practices, like in the case of the IRA training during the 1970s in camps located in Algeria, Libya, or Lebanon (Jackson, 2006). Interestingly, this can also lead to processes of inter-territorial transfer of peace initiatives, as already mentioned with regards to Northern Ireland, but also exemplified in the case of the Åland islands, whose peacebuilding model has been contextualized and incorporated to a different degree in 25 conflicts between 1990 and 2019 (Simolin, 2020). In that sense, conflict clouds are produced in both physical and virtual spaces, through multiple translation processes, for instance converting the materiality of violence into images that serve for mobilization purposes (Axel, 2001).

Fourth, multiple actors (related to ethnoscapes but also mediascapes), from conflict actors themselves, to diasporas and migrants, media and politicians, international organizations and states, and to ordinary citizens regardless of their location, can contribute to downloading and uploading processes. ‘Horizontal’ exchanges, for instance between conflict actors located in different parts of the world, as well as ‘vertical’ interactions, between individuals, groups, states, and international
organizations shape conflict clouds through multiple, contradicting, and overlapping processes of upload and download. Over the past two decades, the expansion of internet and of social media platforms has facilitated the global production and circulation of news, symbols, and narratives, by activists as well as by concerned citizens who engage in ‘cultural brokerage’ (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). This can lead to the creation of networks of solidarity, for instance through organizations specifically focusing on the distribution of humanitarian aid, or through informal networks in which people share the same attitude towards the concerned conflict. Expanding on the ‘cloud’ image, we can say that conflict narratives are produced, altered, and disseminated through multiple synchronous and asynchronous processes of upload and download, where some actors are simple users of information, while others are also active producers.

Fifth, conflict clouds are not just polymorphous synchronically; they also display dramatic diachronic evolutions, and develop different relations to time and memory, notably visible in their many historical layers. Over time, different conflict interpretations become popular, fade, and sometimes reappear decades or longer afterwards, as we have seen with the colonial narrative in Ireland. Past historical events, such as the Armenian genocide, are used, reused, and re-interpreted for new purposes, and under a new light (Azarian-Ceccato, 2010). In that sense, conflict clouds are deeply influenced by the passing of generations, by the plurality of memories constructed over time, and by successive dominant paradigms and ideologies (see, in the case of the PKK, Keskin, 2018). Depending on the actor, some temporalities and events are more or less important, some interpretations dominate, some connections are privileged, and so on. Conflict clouds may never entirely disappear since memories are passed on from one generation to another, but they transform on an ongoing basis and can be reduced to a limited number of symbols or events, or fuse with other clouds, for instance following a redrawing of physical borders. Importantly, the memory of past conflicts deeply influences how contemporary conflicts are understood and reacted to, thereby linking ‘old’ and ‘new’ conflict clouds (Paez & Liu, 2011).

Finally, conflict clouds are not necessarily dominated by centrifugal processes, in which ‘local’ conflict actors would have more power and initiative than others. As the case of Northern Ireland demonstrates, and as shown by the extensive literature on diaspora mobilization around homeland issues, diasporas can sometimes be the most influential actor in the conflict cloud, largely determining political processes at the global level, but also ‘back home’ (see, in the case of the Armenian diaspora, Cavoukian, 2013). In other instances, major global actors like the UN or the US take a leading role in determining the content of conflict narratives, and their patterns of circulation. Depending on time and place, some actors are more or less powerful in these processes, sometimes inspiring or initiating changes elsewhere, and at others standing at their receiving end. In that sense, conflict clouds produce numerous feedback loops, whereby narratives elaborated outside ‘conflict zones’ deeply influence not only narratives and framings, but also practices within ‘conflict zones’, and from one ‘conflict zone’ to another.

**Conclusion and avenues for future research**

In this article, we have presented and developed the concept of conflict clouds, which appears especially useful for studying global and transnational dimensions of conflicts in ways that highlight their diachronic and synchronic complexities. Exploring conflict clouds entails paying attention to extremely complex, multi-levelled, and multi-faceted processes playing out along multiple and overlapping temporalities and spaces, and connecting an array of previously related as well as unrelated actors in intricate ways. This exploration cannot be done without taking into account on the
one hand how globalization facilitates and affects the involvement of a multitude of actors in a conflict taking place elsewhere, and on the other hand how conflicts can be initiated from, sustained by, and transported to actors and places located very far away from the main battlefield. Besides documenting an observation that has long been made – conflicts are never fully contained to so-called conflict zones – the conflict cloud concept draws our attention to the sheer diversity of actors, many of which belong neither to the political nor to the military realms, who play a role in these processes. Everyday and seemingly trivial acts such as sharing or retweeting a video or a statement, commenting on a news article, participating in a street demonstration, signing a petition, or buying the biography of a militant, can play a role in the construction and circulation of cultural items related to a specific conflict, complementary to that of armed groups, national governments, international criminal tribunals, and so on.

While building on and contributing to Appadurai’s notion of -scapes, the conflict cloud metaphor significantly expands it, not just because it operationalizes it in the context of violent conflicts, but also because it highlights some previously overlooked processes and features, three of which stand out: first, the sheer diversity of concerned actors, in terms of location, status, and influence, underscoring the simultaneous ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ nature of exchanges constituting conflict clouds; second, the diachronically and synchronically polymorphous nature of conflict-related ideoscapes, deeply entangling past and current conflicts; and third, the time- and space-dependent ability of narratives to circulate, appeal, and be reframed.

All this raises important questions in terms of causality and of conflict cycles, for instance when thinking about what sustains conflicts, and perhaps even more importantly, when trying to support peace initiatives and conflict transformation. As we have seen, not all conflicts or narratives are born equal in these processes, and depending on space and time factors, some attract more attention than others. In particular, patterns of conflict re-territorialization depend upon patterns of conflict de-territorialization, as the content of narratives that are produced and circulated by conflict actors influence whether and how they are re-territorialized. And vice versa, since conflict actors also adapt their narratives not just so that they can be heard globally, but also in function of how they have been previously received. While the narratives that seem to be the most appealing to global audiences are structured along larger fracture lines, such as those related to colonialism and democracy, it is important to underscore that they are always interpreted, understood, and re-used in specific local contexts and temporalities, thus underlining the mutual global-local co-constitution processes.

This study opens up multiple avenues for further research relating to conflict clouds, beyond the exploration of conflict narratives. Analysing how conflict re-territorialization can affect actors and strategies in ‘conflict zones’, and consequently sustain a feedback loop, would for instance prove fascinating, as would a study of how conflict clouds evolve over the course or even after the end of a conflict. More specific research could build on existing studies of social media as echo chambers in the case of ‘globalized’ conflict narratives. In short, conceptualizing conflicts as clouds helps to uncover processes, factors, and actors that are often overlooked in peace and conflict studies. Thus, the conflict cloud concept expands our understanding of contemporary conflicts, and contributes to the study of peace and conflict in the context of globalization.

Notes
1. See for instance https://anenglishmobile.com/news/comrade-of-bobby-sands-the-silence-is-shameful-34239.
2. It was notably the case of Herri Batasuna, a political party close to ETA in the Basque Country, and many have argued that the Basque peace process was a direct effect of the Northern Irish one (for a comprehensive analysis of how the Irish peace process inspired a de-escalation of the situation in the Basque Country, see Darby, 2008).

3. According to the American Census Bureau, in 2019 about 32 million Americans – 9.7% of the US population – identified as being Irish. https://www.census.gov/newsroomfacts-for-features/2021/irish-american-heritage.html.

4. Over the course of its existence, the IRA has built links with ETA in the Basque Country, PLO in Palestine, Polisario in Western Sahara, FLNC in Corsica, Sandinistas in Nicaragua, FMLN in El Salvador, and many others (see McKinley, 1991).

5. See https://www.irishcentral.com/news/irish-americans-are-more-protestant-than-catholic.

6. Trending on Twitter in December 2020, the term ‘Castle Catholic’ refers to Dublin Castle, the place from which Ireland was administered under British rule, while ‘West Brit’ is a reference to the geographical position of Ireland in the British colonial empire. These terms had disappeared from public discourses over the past century.

7. Manifested in the popularity, between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s, of diaspora organizations like Noraid (Irish Northern Aid Committee).

8. For instance during protests held Place de la République in Paris in June 2020. See Al-Sharif (2020).

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