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Interview - Nazih Richani

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Nazih Richani is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of Latin American Studies at Kean University. He is the author of *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* (2nd Edition, 2013), and *Dilemmas of Democracy and Political Parties in Sectarian Societies: The Case of the Progressive Socialist Party of Lebanon 1949-1996* (1998). Associate Professor Richani is currently working on a book long manuscript on the *Transformations of the Rural Political Economy in Colombia*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think the most important debate is on the deconstruction of walls dividing disciplines, allowing more fluid and stimulating approaches attempting to devise new theories combining different levels of analysis. In my work on the political economy of violence, for example, I employed different levels of analysis where agencies and social class structures are analyzed drawing on historical-comparative analysis, political economy, and IR theories.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I started my career studying the socio-economic functions of violence. This was motivated by my experience in Lebanon during its fifteen year long civil war. Then, I studied at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and the American University of Beirut (AUB) respectively. My initial interest was exploring the role of violence in human history, mainly in state-making processes, conquests, colonization, imperialism, and capital accumulation. Born and raised in Latin America, and living in Lebanon in a period of turmoil, triggered my interests in comparative politics. This interest was sharpened by my training in theories of IR and political economy, which led me to retool and focus on the study of civil wars with a very specific research question of why some civil wars protract while others—fortunately—are short lived.

What factors contribute to the formation of a 'war system', and how does this impact on our understanding of protracted conflicts?

In my studies of asymmetrical protracted civil wars I developed the "war system" model, which could help in explaining their protraction. Three interdependent conditions were identified and validated in a number of cases, such as Lebanon, Colombia, Angola, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. These conditions are:

(1) the failure of state institutions to mitigate, arbitrate, or mediate the social conflicts that polarize the polity; (2) the escalation of social conflict into violent confrontation, followed by a correlation of forces that produces no decisive winners; and (3) the emergence of a political economy that can sustain the war creating a '*comfortable impasse*'. Under this *comfortable impasse*, belligerent actors perceive that the costs of war are less than the possible costs of peace.

The war system theoretical model helps in unpacking the core components of the political economy that fuels civil wars. It uncovers the warring actors' interlacing systemic relationship, their respective agencies, miscalculations, structural constraints, dynamics, and political environment at the local, regional and international levels.

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What conditions give rise to warring actors reaching a 'comfortable impasse' in civil war, and what are the consequences for the exertion of state authority?

As mentioned above, the *comfortable impasse* is a core underlying condition for the development of a war system. Under a comfortable impasse the warring actors adjust to a low-intensity war characterized by long-lasting lulls in fighting occasionally punctuated by flare ups.

Consequently, rebels as well as the state-dominant classes nexus, develop uneasy coexistence predicated on a stalemated balance of forces based on the calculation that the costs of war are less than the possible costs of peace. Keep in mind that usually rebels are struggling for political and socioeconomic change, which are unacceptable to the dominant classes and elites. As a result, the state-dominant classes nexus attempts at a minimum cost to contain the insurgency in peripheral areas in order to mitigate the negative impact on capital accumulation, economic growth, investments, saving rates, and inflation. The comfortable impasse would also allow rebels some gains such as controlling territory and people, economic resources, hence acquiring authority and recognition. Case in point is Colombia, a typical example of a comfortable impasse during which, for the most part of its fifty-one years history, rebels, the state and its private militias shared territorial sovereignty or authority.

But, today the world is witnessing a rise of cases where war systems are developing and consolidating with political economies of comfortable impasse. This analysis applies, to among others, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Maoist rebels in India, and the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. I am fearing that this may have become a permanent feature of the current international political economy.

You have recently written a new article on the nature of the Syrian civil war. How are the four main warring actors—ISIS, Al-Nusra Front, the Kurds and the Syrian state—involved in a condition of 'complex interdependence'?

Syria has developed its own war system and the model explains its dynamics lasting for more than five years with no end in sight. But in my study of Syria's war system I found an aspect to which I paid little attention in my previous research, a factor that contributed to the consolidation and entrenchment of the comfortable impasse. Namely, the web of complex interdependency between the state and its armed opponents. In this respect, it is important to note that I benefited from the insights of research on Sri Lanka where the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese-dominated state developed complex interdependencies over the course of the 1983-2009 civil war. I think paying attention to complex interdependencies could further sharpen the war system model and its 'comfortable impasse' component.

Complex interdependency is defined as a set of implicit and tacit relationships dictated by the balance of forces compelling warring forces to collaborate within a conflict strategy. Such practices include support for the transfer of goods, services, fuel, food, and people's movement across areas controlled by the state and its armed opponents. It also includes the continuity of government services in areas controlled by insurgents such as public schooling, public health services, sanitation, and garbage collection to operate. In Syria, as in Colombia's fifty-one years old civil war, the services of government continued and the insurgents tapped into the states' resources to support their war-making machine while basic services are provided to citizens living under their control. Another example of complex interdependency is Syria's public employees living in rebel controlled areas (about 250,000 individuals), who continue to receive their salaries and pensions. In total there are approximately 2 million people that depend on government salaries and pensions, and many more millions depend on government subsidies. In explaining the motivation of the state one can think of its interest in retaining some control and influence, despite having lost its military control. By paying salaries, the government maintains leverage in a situation of power contestation.

The rebels, on the other hand, are not capable of assuming all the burdens of governance, including delivery of public services, due to their limited resources and organizational capacities.

How has ISIS specifically been able to consolidate a war system?

ISIS, founded in Iraq by remnants of the security establishment of the Saddam Hussein regime, exploited the turmoil

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in Syria and expanded its radius of influence through tribal networks that exist in both Iraq and Syria. These constituted its initial popular base and went unnoticed until its occupation of Raqqa in 2013. The Syrian state, as well as regional/international players each influenced by their own strategic interest, thought that this new actor could serve their long-term interest. Implicitly and tacitly, the Gulf States' donors and Turkey helped ISIS grow and develop while the Syrian state was under increasing pressure to redeploy its forces in defense of strategic territory. The interplay of these factors allowed ISIS to consolidate its power and the war system.

Your book *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* focuses on the nature of Colombia's civil war. How was 'rent extraction' used to further the 'political influence' of the guerrillas and paramilitaries vis-à-vis the Colombian state?

All wars require cash flow to secure their continuity in an attempt to achieve their objectives. Colombia's Marxist rebels, that is, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC) and the National Liberation Army (the ELN), launched their armed struggle in 1964 and since then the conflict has been passing through different phases and changes in its political economy. Both groups relied on 'protection rent extraction' or 'war tax' mostly from ransom-kidnapping of wealthy peasant, cattle ranches, taxing multinational corporations that operate in their areas of influence, tapping the state's local budgets, subcontracting, acquiring legal businesses, mining, and taxing narco-traffickers' *'gramaje'* i.e., charging per gram of coca paste. These have been the main sources that sustained the costs of the insurgency, allowing them to grow and dispute the state's authority in many regions of the country, which led to a 'fragmented sovereignty' condition.

The paramilitaries were a more complex beast. While they were supported by the state, they also acquired their own independent funding through narco-trafficking, taxing multinational corporations (examples Chiquita and BP), illegal/legal mining, large cattle ranches and agribusinesses. They became a 20,000-30,000 strong army working for the state alongside local elites. The advent of this private army compounded the 'fragmentation of the state's sovereignty'.

It appears likely that the Colombian government and the FARC will achieve a final peace settlement. What changes within the war system have contributed to this potentially positive-sum outcome?

The costs of the war increased significantly after the collapse of the 1998-2002 negotiation between Pastrana's government and the FARC. Two main factors led to the escalation of conflict: the emergence of the paramilitaries as a unified group operating nationally (as of 1997-1998) and the escalation of US intervention through its military aid, advisers, intelligence services and military personnel. Between 2002 and 2015, the US spent more than \$10 billion mostly on military hardware and training of Colombia's military. The Colombian state spent more than \$120 billion during the same period, averaging/year between 3.3% and 5% of the country's GDP, almost doubling what it spent in 1989 (1.73%). These were very significant increases in the amount of resources invested in the war.

These factors combined destabilized the war system, changing its dynamics and leading to incremental erosion in the comfortable impasse. The state, dominant classes, peasants and guerrillas all invariably started 'hurting' by feeling the negative effects of the war approximating the 'mutually hurting' condition, coined by Zartman. Case in point by 2008, a new calculus started emerging among important sectors of the dominant classes and urban bourgeois elite represented by President Santos (2008-present) and his faction in the Liberal Party. The new calculus was that the conflict reached the tipping point where the peace has become more profitable or less costly than the continuation of an escalating conflict with a limited possibility of winning. This new thinking was facilitated by a changing regional environment and a shift of priorities in Washington DC. The role of Hugo Chavez, for example, was pivotal in mediating between the Santos government and the FARC prior to the formal inauguration of the talks in Cuba in 2013. The US on its part pressed by its economic crises, budget cuts and the emergence of other volatile hot conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere decided to decrease its military aid to Colombia.

The FARC reached this same conclusion that this war has reached its limits and hence the time has come to cash in on its fifty-one years struggle for socio-economic and political change. Chavez played a significant role according to various sources that I have consulted in convincing the FARC to engage in peace talks. The advent of leftist

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governments in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Uruguay convinced the FARC that the possibility of social change may be possible via ballots.

Here, it is noteworthy to underscore that an understanding of the alignment among local, regional and international conditions is pivotal to predict the trajectories of civil wars. Fortunately for Colombia, finally after 51 years the local, regional, and international conditions were aligned favoring a settlement.

What factors can lead to the breakdown of a war system, and where have we seen this?

When the war system becomes too costly to sustain and the possibilities of decisively winning the war is low, then actors could opt out by negotiating peace. Keeping in mind the following equation is useful: 'when the costs of war (such as increasing trends in military expenditures, rising inflation rates, loss of income, slower economic growth, rebels' disruption of economic activities including the extraction of natural resources, and declining investments) become more than the expected costs of peace (such as political reform, access to political power, redistribution of land, wealth and income)', the deconstruction of the war system becomes a possibility. In this vein, the role of dominant elites is crucial in determining a peace path or a perpetual war system. If the main faction of the elite that is presiding over the state believes they can sustain the war system, then the low intensity conflict and its comfortable impasse continues. This may explain why only 26.8% of civil wars recorded between 1960 and 2009 ended in negotiated settlement, while 36.6% protracted and only 8.5% ended by a decisive military victory.

Nepal, Lebanon, and El Salvador all deconstructed their war systems and their respective political economy by negotiated settlements when the warring actors reached the conclusion that they can neither sustain the costs of an escalating war nor can they win it. Colombia is following this path.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My main advice is to develop a more integrative approach to IR theory incorporating different levels of analysis and conceptual frameworks. State-centric approaches or those centered on the international system are inadequate to explain the growing complexities of the global system, its sub-state manifestations and how these local phenomena are in turn affecting global trends.

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This interview was conducted by Alexandra Phelan. Alexandra is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.