

Interview - Tanisha Fazal

Written by E-International Relations

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Tanisha Fazal is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the Department of Political Science. She is also Co-Director of the Notre Dame International Security Program, a Faculty Fellow at The Center for Civil & Human Rights, and Co-Director of the Civil War Initiation and Termination project. Her book *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* won the Best Book Award from the Conflict Processes section of the American Political Science Association in 2008. Her book explains the puzzle of why “of all the states on the map of the world in 1816, nearly half no longer exist today.” Prior to joining the faculty at Notre Dame, Professor Fazal taught at Columbia University, and held fellowships at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University and the John M. Olin Institute for Security Studies at Harvard University.

Professor Fazal discusses her research on state death, breakthroughs in the study of civil war initiation and termination, and changing norms of humanitarian intervention.

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?

I like research that mixes things up by, for example, studying civil and interstate wars together, or using individual-level data to build up theories around organizations employing political violence. I think there's a lot of interesting work going on at each level of analysis right now, but what's needed is work that connects the levels of analysis.

What are the most important/interesting areas of IR theory that are underdeveloped today or understudied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?

There are so many actors on the world stage today whose politics have a real impact on people's lives – multinational corporations, rebel groups (many of which govern territory fairly effectively), NGOs. These actors have started to engage in their own versions of not-quite-international relations that we don't have a handle on yet. For example, Google deals with governments around the world on a daily basis and in a way that has serious consequences for individual internet users – see the recent European Union Court of Justice ruling on the “right to be forgotten.” Secessionist regions like Somaliland sometimes exert greater sovereignty over the territory they claim than the governments from which they seek to secede. Breaking out of the state-based notion of IR will be important if we don't want to miss these critical developments in how the world works.

Does the existence of the various discrete theoretical paradigms in IR (realism, liberalism, etc.) help explain international politics today, or do they, as some argue, largely talk past one another and therefore obscure more than they illuminate?

I think the paradigms can be useful insofar as they give us a place to start – they also help make us aware of our assumptions about the world. But I also think they can be a hindrance when they steer research in particular directions that bypasses interesting and important questions.

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Your book *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* argues that buffer states – those that lie between two rival states – are the most vulnerable to conquest, but that changing norms of conquest since 1945 have led to a dramatic decline in “state death.” What implications does this research have for the crisis in Crimea and eastern Ukraine? Does this crisis represent a subversion of these changing norms, or is it the exception that proves the post-1945 rule?

In some ways, we could think of Ukraine as a buffer state caught between NATO to the west and Russia to the east. And certainly, the protests last year appear to have been precipitated by a question of whether Ukraine would be economically allied with Russia or with the west. So I'm not surprised that Russia has reacted by nibbling at parts of Ukraine. In taking the Crimea and also making threatening moves in eastern Ukraine, Russia is certainly chipping away at the norm against taking other states' territory. But part of what's fascinating about this case is that Russia has been investing in a façade that it is compliant with international law in the process. The “little green men” are evidence of this attempt. While I wouldn't say that Russia is putting a lot of resources into creating the appearance of complying with international law, the insignia did not magically fall off all those uniforms; in other words, it does take resources to be able to create the legal fiction (in this case) of compliance. Whether this leads to a subversion of the norm against territorial conquest is an open question. As I argue in my book, I don't necessarily see the norm as one that will be around forever. I do think, though, that violations at the edges of the norm, such as this one – where Russia is invoking the principle of self-determination as it violates the norm of territorial integrity – are extremely risky for the future of the norm. My guess is that the response from the west would have been much stronger had Russia tried to take over all of Ukraine, and such a response would have shored up the norm against conquest.

You are Co-Director, along with Page Fortna, of the Civil War Initiation and Termination project, a major ongoing effort to collect data on civil wars. What are the most interesting or surprising findings from this project so far? What direction(s) do you think the study of civil wars is moving in?

Our work is still in progress, but what we have so far justifies one of our goals, which is to be able to analyze civil wars for a longer time period than is typically included today. Most quantitative analyses of civil war begin either after World War II or after the Cold War. What concerns us is that these are fairly unique eras in international history. To the extent that we want to derive policy implications from our research, this may be a case where past is not necessarily prologue. While our results are very preliminary, we are finding that some prior research that only looks at the post-'45 period may look quite different when you examine a longer time span. For example, guerrilla warfare is commonly thought to have become a predominant mode of fighting after 1945, but our data suggest that it gained dominance just prior to the turn of the 20th century. We also find that both factionalization within warring parties and the number of civil wars concluded with formal peace treaties have increased over time, an observation that is in tension with previous scholarship that suggests that civil wars with more factions will be less likely to end with formal peace agreements.

In a recent article, you find that states have stopped declaring war because of the increasing costs of complying with the international laws of war. What are the implications of this change? What does this finding say about the use of drones and other covert forms of violence employed recently by the United States?

The proliferation of codified international humanitarian law is a fascinating story. There are so many laws of war today that it's extremely difficult for even the best-resourced militaries – such as the U.S. – to comply. And that does give states an incentive to fly under the radar (so to speak) by using tactics and materiel that fall short of war, such as drones and cyberattacks.

How are changing norms of intervention, such as R2P, as well as practices, including the NATO intervention in Libya and the supply of arms and other assistance to rebel groups in Syria, changing the role of state sovereignty in international affairs? Is sovereignty changing and, if so, how is this reflected in international law (if at all)?

As scholars like Steve Krasner have pointed out, intervention has always been a fact of international politics. There

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have certainly been fluctuations in which types of interventions have been approved explicitly by the powers-that-be. And today we do seem to be moving toward a doctrine favoring humanitarian intervention. But there are, at the same time, a number of forces holding back the development of such a doctrine. In short, I'm not sure that sovereignty is changing – at least not for this reason. I think it's important to take the long view and realize that sovereignty has never been absolute. That said, and to respond to your question about international law, international lawyers have certainly argued for the sanctity of state sovereignty. My sense is that this is a case where the law will trail the politics – we haven't really seen, for example, a formal treaty or even a report by the International Law Commission on R2P.

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

I don't know that I have advice that specific to young scholars of IR. What I would say to anyone thinking about applying to Ph.D. programs in Political Science/IR is that they should only consider entering the academy unless they can't imagine doing anything else. For those who do decide to stay in the academy, follow your nose – and not the latest fad – in deciding what to study next. When you're considering research topics, start with a question, and not with an answer – if you are beginning your project with an answer in mind, and that answer is wrong, then you're likely to lose interest in the project. But if you're genuinely intrigued by the question, you're much more likely to get somewhere, and in a more intellectually honest way. Finally, be sure you can answer the “so what?” question from the outset. Knowing the answer to your question should matter to world outside academia.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is a Director of E-IR's editorial board. She is a PhD student in International Relations at Georgetown University.