Why Are Civil Wars so Protracted and Difficult to End?
Written by Arij Elshelmani

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Why Have Civil Wars, as a General Rule, Proven to Be More Protracted and Difficult to Bring to an End Compared with Interstate Wars?

As interstate war has become less common, academic attention has shifted to the plethora of armed conflicts occurring within the boundaries of states. These civil wars have proven to be more protracted and difficult to terminate for numerous reasons that vary according to their unique socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. Hence, providing a perfect general theory is problematic. Nevertheless, a number of critical factors that affect the duration of civil wars and their inability to be resolved relative to interstate wars can be distinguished.

Firstly, unlike interstate wars, which occur between clearly-defined armies and are generally amenable to compromise, civil wars tend to be low-intensity, existential struggles, making them, therefore, inherently-protracted affairs. Moreover, the decentralized organizational structure of contemporary insurgencies and their tendency to fragment and become engulfed in internecine fighting further undermines attempts at reaching a political settlement. Third, peace is difficult to achieve when, for many actors, war is preferable. Often ignored is the capacity of war to endow belligerents with profits and power. Various cases of "enemies" colluding to prolong violence challenge the common assumption that the ultimate objective of war is victory.

Finally, the essay questions what an "end" to civil war implies. Even when one side claims total victory or in the rare cases where peace accords are signed and the war is formally concluded, the transition from large-scale civil violence to peace is not so clear. Collective memories of mutual violence persist into the post-conflict period, and cultures of violence are sustained. If not fully addressed, along with the underlying grievances that originally inspire violence, peace will remain at best fragile, and violence may continue in other forms. In this light, even the success stories of post-accord societies in Latin America and Lebanon appear to be "unfinished" civil wars.[1]

The Asymmetric Nature of Civil Wars:

Given that interstate wars are generally fought in a series of direct confrontations between professional armies and across defined frontlines, they are relatively quick and decisive. In contrast, intrastate wars are distinguished by the asymmetric distribution of material power among the main parties of the conflict, usually the incumbent government or power and the rebels or insurgents opposing it. The asymmetric nature of internal conflicts forces insurgents to adopt a strategy of guerrilla warfare in which the evasion of the enemy is a matter of survival. To overcome its military weakness, the insurgent force gradually wears down the enemy through hit-and-run tactics. Civil war is thus an inherently-protracted affair.

What adds complexity to these wars is that they are almost never wholly internal. In an age of interconnectivity and interdependency, their outcome is often of strategic interest not only to neighboring powers but also to the international community at-large. The role of external intervention in influencing the balance of power between parties and therefore the trajectory of civil wars is critical. When external intervention is balanced between the opposing sides it can increase the duration of war.[2] This was most evident when the Cold War superpowers played out their ideological struggle in the conflict theater of the global South. The weaponry and supplies they provided fueled some of the most ferocious internal conflicts. Similarly, the internationalization of the contemporary Syrian conflict seems to

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have reconfigured the balance of power towards a prolonged stalemate.[3] Here, negotiation may only be contemplated when both parties reach a "mutually hurting stalemate,"[4] that is, a stage of deadlock when both sides simultaneously perceive continued fighting as offering little returns and mounting costs. However, with external actors distorting the perception of warring parties' prospects on the battlefield, arriving at this stage may take many years.

Limited Space for Compromise

Interstate wars may be driven by border disputes; they could be a reaction to some existential threat, an attempt at regional hegemony, or a contest for access to trade routes and resources, to name a few. In theory, all of these factors are amenable to compromise, even if they too can produce long and costly wars. The Persian Gulf War is but one example; after eight years of conflict, Saddam Hussein relinquished his demands for complete control over Shatt-Al Arab and began withdrawing his forces from Iran, effectively bringing the war to a close.

Where civil wars are driven by limited aims and objectives, the government can respond with the necessary reforms and negotiate with the aggrieved parties to stifle the conflict. When the objective is to secede, to overthrow the government, or even to radically transform social structures, compromise is improbable if not impossible.

Secession is unfeasible for there can only be one government. Such wars are existential struggles with each side framing the conflict in terms of "victory or death."

Unsurprisingly, they take an intensely violent nature. Where belligerents cannot envision a common future of power sharing, incumbents have attempted to delegitimize their opponents by labeling them "terrorists," "criminals," or " foreign agents." This de-politicization of the opposition is a common feature of civil wars and serves as a serious impediment to their termination through civil means. As long as insurgents are excluded from the political arena, violent force will remain their primary means of communication.

In other cases, parties may be willing to compromise on their original political goals and form a united government. However, the vulnerability of disarming and demobilizing entails, given the absence of mutual trust and the lack of a third party entity to monitor and enforce the agreement, can encourage combatants to reject opportunities for a peace settlement.[5] Here, it is the security dilemma, rather than the limited scope of compromise that inhibits the resolution of civil wars.[6]

Organizational Structure: Fragmentation and Internal Rivalry

A central requirement for any effective peace settlement is the presence of strong, representative leaders at the negotiating table. Interstate wars meet this condition more easily. Governments tend to maintain a unified hierarchical structure, with a strategic apex that exerts a tight reign over its security apparatus. In contrast, contemporary insurgencies are decentralized coalitions, plagued by factionalism and weak command and control.[7] Their propensity for fragmentation is a serious impediment to their resolution, which only becomes more potent as the war goes on and as new sub-groups emerge with their own interests and agendas. As the number of parties to a conflict increases, the prospects for agreement shrink, and, consequently, the duration of the internal war expands.[8]

The contemporary experience of Syria is telling. As the war enters its third year, the broad coalition of groups constituting the armed opposition has grown to include thousands of foreign fighters and Salafist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, who all possess their own unique ideological vision of Syria's future.[9] These increasingly potent groups, among other factions, refuse to succumb to the influence and control of the Free Syrian Army and its political wing, viewing the latter as an elite grouping of self-interested exiles. The detachment between the political wing of the opposition and those on the battleground is problematic. Any decision made on the negotiating table at the national or international level is of limited value without the consent of those who control the reality on the ground.

The Personalization of Civil Wars

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Though fragmentation can prolong civil wars, strong leadership is not necessarily a panacea. The Syrian civil war, like others, has also been sustained by its deeply personalized nature. The reputation of Bashar Al Assad among loyalists has achieved a "non-negotiable" status, while the opposition has refused to accept anything short of his removal from power. Gaddafi and Milosevic are two examples of leaders who opted for their own political survival over the national interest, manipulating and inflaming existing social divisions to escalate the war and secure their power.[10] Jonas Savimbi appeared to be the main "spoiler" of the Bicesse peace accords, rejecting the outcome of 1992 presidential election and returning the country to a state of war.

Indeed, it was only with his death that his successor, Paulo Armindo Lukamba returned UNITA to the negotiating table and large-scale violence subdued.[11] General Michel Awn's sense of omnipotence drove him to reject numerous invitations to join the post-Ta' if government, and instead to declare a "war of liberation" against the Syrian military presence that would claim more than a thousand lives.[12] Of course, leaders are not always the all-powerful decision makers who the media portrays, and placing too much emphasis on their character can lend to their demonization. Nonetheless, the role of the individual cannot be completely discredited either. Indeed, breakthroughs in peace negotiations have frequently coincided with changes in the top leadership.[13]

A Political Economy Perspective: Entrenched Interests in the Continuation of Violence

The amount of material destruction and human suffering a civil war produces is immense. Yet, while the majority of the population may seek its end, a minority can develop an entrenched interest in its continuation. Thus, attempts to explain the longevity of civil wars are only complete with reference to the political and economic incentives they present.

As the civil war rages on, the state's capacity to control all its territories, enforce the law, and provide basic goods and services are eroded. A range of informal actors, from warlords, militias, and gangs, emerges to fill the vacuum, often carving out their own enclaves where they can become the prime source of social administration and coercion as well as the de-facto owners of the area and its resources. In this context of the state collapse, ordinary civilians can become willing participants in violence. For young uneducated and unemployed men and women, joining an armed band may be the only alternative to a life of destitution. Violence becomes a means of subsistence, supplying its members with shelter and food as well as a sense of protection, belonging and status in a society in which family networks and state institutions have disintegrated.[14]

State collapse does not imply an inherent descent into anarchy and senseless violence. Rather, an organized war economy based on looting, extortion, and protection rackets forms around the armed groups. Militias originally relying on volunteers to fill their ranks and finance their operations mutate into professional business entities with profitable links to regional and international trading networks. This has been particularly the case after the end of Cold War. With the sudden absence of external patronage, the warring parties to many conflicts in the South still had to look beyond their borders for alternative means of financing their operations. Therefore, even if economic globalization may not cause civil wars, for their roots often lay in cultural, historical and political grievances, one cannot deny its role in empowering violent sub-national actors by sustaining contemporary war economies. [15] As sub-national actors develop their taste for the status, power and profits violence accrues, they may show small interest in capturing a weak state with no means of enforcing its control over its territories and resources. In the current state of conflict there is a sense of familiarity and economic security. Meanwhile, peace represents uncertainty. For a negotiated peace is ultimately based on promises of political and economic inclusion that can easily be betrayed.

A popular assumption is that the objective of each of the warring parties is the total defeat of the enemy's capability.[16] In reality, the state of violent conflict can endow criminal activities with a rare legitimacy, and therefore every effort is made by belligerents to eschew decisive battles.[17] Indeed, governments may form informal alliances with their enemies to exploit unarmed civilians and natural resources. In Sierra Leone, the poor pay and training of government forces and their affiliated irregulars encouraged them to prey on civilians rather than engage in costly combat with the Revolutionary United Front. Demonstrating this, elite figures in the Angolan administration and security forces have been accused of selling weapons to UNITA on multiple occasions.[18]

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Similarly, an authoritarian government may deliberately prolong the civil war as a means of concentrating its power and destroying all opposition. In the name of combating "terror" and suppressing "rebels," a government may declare a state of emergency; introduce draconian laws to limit the freedom of expression, assembly, and association; and indefinitely delay elections. The actions of the Algerian government's in its contest with Islamist insurgents during the 1990s seem to follow this logic. In the series of massacres of the mid and late 1990s, government forces merely watched from a close distance as Islamist guerrillas slaughtered and mutilated civilians for hours.[19] As the war progressed, the population became alienated from the Islamist cause while the government enjoyed an increase in its support. Only by escalating and prolonging the war could Algeria's military regime entrench its political power.

Unfinished Civil Wars: Sustained Cultures of Violence and the Legacy of Atrocities

Even where these barriers to negotiated settlement have been overcome and contesting forces have engaged in dialogue and agreed to end all military confrontations, the transition from war to peace has been less than clear. In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the ideological violence of their protracted civil wars seems to have been merely substituted with extreme levels of criminal violence.[20]

There are many explanations for why "peace" can be difficult to distinguish from war. However, in all cases where the peace process has failed to address the roots of the conflict and to challenge the political structures, social divisions and economic inequalities that gave rise to insurgencies in the first place, violence has been renewed. In the case of Nicaragua and Guatemala, the continued economic marginalization of its youth and the incomplete efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants into civilian life have manifested in the plethora of criminal gangs that dominate urban and increasingly rural areas and threaten the rule of law.[21] The same failure to reintegrate demobilized fighters was a feature of the Dayton and Abouja peace processes.[22]

Post- Ta'if Lebanon's peace is at best described as a fragile one. The incessant paralysis of state institutions, which is to a large extent the product of the accords' consociational formula, has allowed crime to fester and the country to be consumed by political assassinations and kidnappings. More problematically, it has led citizens to increasingly rely on their own sects for economic and social security.[23] Consequently, the relationship between the various confessional groups in Lebanon is still dominated by a degree of distance, suspicion, and even animosity. Problematically, these social divisions have proven to be easily inflamed by regional developments and external forces as well as local elites.[24] It follows that Post-Ta'if Lebanon is more accurately conceptualized as a prolonged ceasefire, rather than as a consolidated peace as virtually the same socio-economic and political structures that gave rise to the civil war remain intact. In such an environment the threat of renewed large-scale violence is omnipresent.

Critical to understanding the fragility of post-conflict societies peace are the legacies of atrocities, which remain unaddressed. While the populations of warring states are separated and secured by their respective borders, civil wars do not offer such sanctuary. By their nature, civil wars occur among and between the people and, therefore, claim large number of civilian casualties. With the objective of controlling the populace, factions resort to coercive and brutal means. When so many civilians are displaced, brutalized and killed, a once unified society becomes a deeply polarized one. Healing the psychological wounds of a protracted civil war to avoid its renewal proves to be a long and challenging process.

The consolidation of peace is further endangered by the culture of violence that protracted civil wars can breed and sustain, and which often persists into the post-war period. During the civil war, the barrel of the gun becomes the main means of resolving disputes, making demands, and attaining perceived rights among large swaths of the population. The intensity of battle and the level of atrocities against civilians can erode the social norms that may have regulated the use of violence in the past. In the post-civil war environment, often characterized by a weak security apparatus and criminal justice system, the widespread availability of weapons and weak civil society, and with the collective memories of atrocities still fresh, every incentive is available for an individual to distribute his or her own retributive justice. When violence is not sanctioned and barely condemned it becomes normalized and legitimated.

Conclusion

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This essay has attempted to present a number of structural explanations for the protracted and persistent nature of civil wars relative to interstate conflicts.

At the most fundamental level, civil wars' protracted nature stems from the material asymmetry between the incumbent and the insurgents, their tendency to become internationalized, and the limited space of compromise they involve. The essay has also highlighted the role of their factionalized as well as personalized nature as barriers to a negotiated settlement. Given the immense physical destruction protracted civil wars entail, they are often reduced to irrational and meaningless conflicts. However, such views disregard the economic and political incentives that the continuation of violence presents to both sub-state actors and the state itself. The structural aspects of intrastate conflict present clear barriers to a negotiated settlement, but even in the cases where it has been reached, it has rarely succeeded in putting a decisive end to the war. As long as the root causes of civil war: insecurity, poverty, overpopulation, political exclusion as well as the legacy of atrocities and cultures of violence, are not addressed, violence continues, even if it mutates into different forms and occurs between different parties.

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Footnotes

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[6] Walter (2002).

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[12] Zahar (2002), p. 574; Atlas and Licklider (1999), pp.48-49.

[13] King (1997), p. 62.

[14] Winton (2004)

[15] Duffield (2000); Berdal (2003).

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[17] Ibid (1998)

[18] Gamba & Cornwell (2000), p.166; Gberie (2005), p. 64; Keen (2001), p. 166-167

[19] Kalyvas (1999), p. 253.

[20] UNDP (2011); McNeish and Rivera (2009), p. 50.

[21] Rodgers (2006)

[22] Mackinlay (1998), p. 119.

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[24] Dehghanpisheh (2012)

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