

## POLITICS OF CONFLICT – CIVIL WARS

Political Science 490, Fall 2020  
Wednesdays, 08:15 to 10:45  
Harris Hall 107 and online  
William Reno  
106 Scott Hall ☎ 847-467-1574  
620 Library Place ☎ 847-491-5794  
✉ reno-at-northwestern-dot-edu  
[www.willreno.org](http://www.willreno.org)

**Overview:** This course is about conflict, most of which since World War II has been focused *within* rather than between states; i.e., “civil wars”. Why this focus? Interstate wars, at least of the symmetrical regular warfare sort, are fairly rare. Recent interstate wars, such as US military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan led to engagements in civil wars. Civil wars also present interesting intellectual challenges: Students of the historical development of institutions identify warfare as a central element of state-building, while many who study contemporary civil wars associate warfare with state collapse. Has the nature of the war – state relationship undergone a fundamental shift? Do technological advances alter the character or logic of warfare? Studying civil wars provides a chance to conceptualize the roles of violence, recruitment, mobilization and ideology in political relationships and formal institutions; useful for thinking about how to ease conflicts too.

Civil wars in recent decades highlight the roles of state failure, ethnic strife, enterprising commanders, and elements of international politics in civil wars. Are ethnic tensions, great power strategies, religious extremism, colonialism, class warfare, resource competition, ideology or state failure causes or consequences of civil wars? What is the role of narratives, framing, social norms and emotion in civil wars? This course will provide students with analytical tools to understand and evaluate different explanations of the causes and processes of civil wars. This course will be useful for those interested in the politics of ethnic conflict, the relationship between the character of civil wars and the international system, the (diverse) causes of civil wars, civil wars and state-building, and variations in the organization and behavior of armed groups.

This course is divided into four sections.

- The first section is called Section Zero because this section assumes no prior specialized knowledge of its subject and thus starts at the beginning, which is zero. This section examines the magnitude of civil war occurrence and looks critically at how scholars collect and code data about civil wars. It considers the historical role of civil wars in state building in Europe and asks whether civil wars can still play such a role, and if not, why not. Are wars “new” in terms of internal dynamics and impacts, or just differing in degrees from wars past?

- Section I focuses on individual and group-level explanations of causes of civil wars. Do greedy individuals cause civil wars? Are contemporary armed groups comparable to bandits or criminal syndicates? What role does ethnic identity play in these conflicts? How do natural resource endowments shape if and how people fight? Is there a place for ideology and grievances against (or alongside?) a focus on materialist rational choice perspectives? Of course violence plays a role in civil wars. Does violence cause fighting or is it endogenous to some other process that shapes the strategies of combatants?
- Section II looks at elite politics and the state in various causal explanations of civil wars and the behavior of actors. How do the defensive or ambitious strategies of elite groups influence these wars? Are contemporary studies of elite strategy smuggling in class analysis? What is the relationship of politics of elite survival and some of the micro-politics that we will study later?
- Section III would have followed if we had more time. We might have considered other variables such as international intervention and its impact on civil wars. What is the impact of international justice, either as a palliative or a deterrent to violence? How do pressures and evolving norms in the international community to promote democracy shape the behavior of armed groups?
- Another Course: That would be about international law or global norms and warfare, though these issues appear in many readings in this course. This course is not about conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction, although there is relevant material here. The other day I heard a General say that future wars will be all about battlefield nukes. That would be a different course too. Finally, this is not about counterinsurgency, although there is relevant course content.

**Course requirements:** There are two primary requirements for this class. The first is a paper due at the end of the term and the second consists of several opportunities to provide critical commentary on course material and fellow students' analyses.

***The Paper (60% of grade):*** This paper will be about 20 or so double spaced pages, subject to negotiation for undergraduates. The paper is due on the first day of exams (Wednesday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>). One option is to use this paper as a vehicle to try out ideas for a second year paper or explore topics that might be relevant to eventual dissertations. Another option is to write this paper as a review essay or an article for eventual submission to a scholarly journal for publication. More advanced students may want to use the paper as a way to develop a dissertation proposal, a grant proposal, or a chapter of a dissertation. Undergraduates will have the chance to develop a substantial writing sample for job or school applications. I prefer that all papers be sent to me electronically.

“What should I write about?” This list provides suggestions and is not exhaustive.

1. An analytical paper will identify a significant puzzle related to the politics of civil wars. This can take either a comparative perspective, focusing on the dynamics among groups directly engaged in one or several conflicts, or it can consider the international dimension of civil wars or a combination of these

approaches. The emphasis of this type of paper will be on constructing a model or a theory to explain a problem. It will not test the model or theory against a particular set of data. To do so would be to write #2:

2. A review essay would survey a body of work related to one aspect of civil wars. This type of essay focuses on a coherent debate (or identifies one that ought to take place) and identifies avenues for future research. Several of the readings in this syllabus provide good examples of review essays.
3. A research proposal for a grant application or dissertation proposal would identify a significant problem related to civil wars. It would evaluate current approaches to addressing this problem and justify the need for additional research. It then develops a research design to address this absence.

**Critical commentary** consists of three response papers (**30 % of total grade**—10 % each). Your commentaries can be about three-five pages in length. These are exercises in interpreting the readings and will help to prepare for your qualifying exam. In this spirit, here are some ideas about how to write commentaries:

- Identify key facts or situations that you find puzzling or surprising.
- Explain how your readings providing you with ways of thinking about politics of violence. Are you surprised by any of the claims in these readings? Do you believe these claims? Explain why or why not. Are these claims interesting? As you consider these claims, think about how your week's readings fit into some of the key issues from previous weeks.
- Does the evidence in a particular text fit the argument? What evidence would you need to see to be convinced? Does the author use the argument in a way that actually supports the author's claims?
- Does the author leave you with unanswered questions?
- Draw connections between readings; their definitions of concepts, claims, arguments, methods, data and conclusions.

Students will choose the weeks for their responses after the first class meeting. Essays should be sent to me electronically by 5pm the day before the class.

**Class participation (10 % of the total grade)** Please complete all weeks' assigned readings prior to our class meetings. Since your engagement to critique and / or defend readings will be the basis upon which I judge participation, sharing good notes and teamwork can serve well for this and future academic challenges.

**Readings:** Articles and chapters will be posted on Canvas and sent directly to you. The following books should be purchased.

Mary Kaldor (2001) *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford University Press.

Roger Peterson (2011) *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Uses of Emotion in Conflict*, Cambridge University Press (**or Balcells**).

Paul Staniland (2014) *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press.

Stathis Kalyvas (2006) *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge University Press.

Laia Balcells (2017) *Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence during Civil War*, Cambridge University Press (or Rogerson).

Jeremy Weinstein (2007) *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, Cambridge University Press.

**More Stuff:** You will find that some readings are authored by current and past graduate students from our Department of Political Science, including articles by Chris Day ('13 graduate) and Patrick Johnston ('09 graduate).

Several very good sites highlight new research on political violence. They strive to connect this research to policy debates and weigh in on recent events: [Political Violence at a Glance](#) – a team of academic experts who are a sort of quick reaction team to provide analysis to foreign policy-makers, scholars and practitioners [Empirical Studies of Conflict Project](#) (ESOC) – data-driven analyses of insurgency, civil war, and other sources of politically motivated violence worldwide. [Conflict Consortium](#) provides good general information about departments, programs and people who conduct research about conflict, with the aim of facilitating research collaboration.

Some scholars whose work you read in this course post their research on their personal sites and / or maintain blogs. Good ones include [Stathis Kalyvas](#), [Chris Blattman](#) (who writes about lots of other things on his blog too), and [Jacob Shapiro](#). Other favs include [Paul Staniland](#) and [Phil Roessler](#). [Romain Maljacq](#) ('13 graduate) tells me everything I need to know about Afghanistan.

Those interested in how concepts and frameworks from this course are applied to national security & military affairs may find [The Strategy Bridge](#) to be of interest. [Small Wars Journal](#) has material that bridges academic and policy worlds, as does [War on the Rocks](#). [War Room](#) at the US Army War College is interesting too, as is [War Is Boring](#).

Need conflict data? Armed Conflict & Event Database ([ACLED](#)) is a conflict collection, analysis and crisis mapping project. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program ([UCDP](#)) collects data on organized violence and is the oldest ongoing data collection project for civil wars. The Cross-National Time-Series ([CNTS](#)) Data Archive supplies data on “domestic conflict” from 1815 onward. The Peace Research Institute Oslo ([PRIO](#)) compiles conflict data and links to other conflict data sites.

That's it for my recommendations. Now you kids get off my lawn!

## CLASS CALENDAR

### Section Zero: Overview, Empirical Evidence & Historical Context

**16 Sept: What is “civil war?”** How should one count them and why do they seem to be so hard to count? Are there more civil wars now than in the past? How does the frame of inquiry affect what one thinks is a civil war?

Stathis Kalyvas (2007) “Civil Wars,” in Carles Boix & Susan Stokes, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, (NY: Oxford University Press), 416-34.

Nicholas Sambanis (2004) “What Is a Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48:6 (Dec), 814-58.

Paul Williams (2016) “Counting Conflicts in Africa (and Their Casualties) in his *War & Conflict in Africa* (Cambridge: Polity), 15-41.

Will Reno (2015) “Lost in Transitions: Civil War Termination in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *American Historical Review*, 120: 5 (Dec), 1798-1810.

Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, Arthur Quesnay (2017) “Prolegomena: For a Sociological Approach to Civil Wars?” in their *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*, (NY: Cambridge University Press), 1-24.

**23 Sept: Civil Wars—big processes:** Civil wars historically have been associated with state-building, yet contemporary civil wars are associated with state collapse. Has the nature of the warfare – state-building relationship changed? How has the development of “globalization” influenced the behavior of armed groups? Are wars in the global periphery “post-state” these days, or do they reflect the nature of political authority in existing states (and are these propositions mutually exclusive)?

Charles Tilly (1985) “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In*, (New York: Cambridge), 169-91.

Charles Tilly (1992) “Soldiers and States in 1992,” in his *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell), 192-227.

Mary Kaldor (2001) *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press). [**Book that you purchased**—not a long book & perhaps read faster through the elements of the FYR case.]

Stathis Kalyvas (2001) "'New' and 'Old' Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?" *World Politics*, 54:1, 99-118.

## **Section I: Individual and Group-Level Explanations of Mobilization**

**30 Sept: Individual and group-level theories and approaches:** How do rational actors respond to incentives and threats associated with conflict? How do these outcomes contribute to "causes" as we study them? Security dilemmas, both individual and group, and other ideas from International relations can be applied to civil wars. Ethnicity and violence: Are ethnic wars truly "ethnic?"

Russell Hardin (1995) "Self Interest, Group Identity," Albert Breton, et al., *Nationalism and Rationality*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 14-42.

James Fearon & David Laitin (2003) "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil Wars," *American Political Science Review*, 97: 1 (Feb), 75-90.

Jack Snyder & Robert Jervis (1999) "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," Barbara Walter & Jack Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insurgency, and Intervention*, Columbia, 15-37.

Donald Horowitz (2000) "Conflict Theory and Conflict Motives," *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* [2<sup>nd</sup> edition], Berkeley: University of California Press, 95-140.

Rui de Figueiredo, Jr. & Barry Weingast (1999) "The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict," Barbara Walter & Jack Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insurgency, and Intervention*, Columbia, 261-302.

Charles King (2004) "The Micropolitics of Social Violence," *World Politics*, 56:3 (April), 431-55.

Nicholas Sambanis, (2001) "Do Ethnic and Nonethnic Civil Wars Have the Same Causes?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45: 3 (June), 259-282.

**7 Oct: Political scientists throw bouquets to the economists:** The role of resources ['greed'] in shaping recruitment and the organization of armed groups. The rewards of conflict: How do leaders and followers make strategic calculations with regard to resources, and how do these choices affect recruitment and organizational discipline?

Jeremy Weinstein (2007) *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, (Cambridge University Press). **[Book you purchased]** Readers may consult Stathis Kalyvas's book review in *Comparative Political Studies*, 40:9 (Sept 2007), 1146-51.

**14 Oct: Dynamics of armed force and patterns of violence:** The spatial distribution of control and the behavior of rebel and state forces. What is the role of allegiances in the context of ‘intimate violence’? Does ideology matter? Do grievances matter? The task of separating causes of civil wars from the processes of civil wars.

Stathis Kalyvas (2006) *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). **[Book you purchased]**

**21 Oct: Framing violence:** What are the limits and / or adaptability of core rational choice assumptions? Levels of conflict: How do political dynamics play out differently at an elite vs community level? To what extent are emotions in violent conflict wrapped up in an endogenous dynamic? How can the researcher consider the relationship of reason and emotion in the context of violent conflicts?

Roger Peterson (2011) *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Uses of Emotion in Conflict*, (Cambridge University Press). **[Book you purchased]**

~ or ~

Laia Balcells (2017) *Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence during Civil War*, (Cambridge University Press) **[Book you purchased if you didn't purchase Peterson's book]**

## **Section II: Organization of Armed Groups**

**28 Oct: Social Processes and Armed Group Organization:** What are the roles of social networks in the organization of armed groups? What are the implications of urbanization for rebel organization? Are rebels better able to organize in the social spaces of rural and “traditional” societies? What are some consequences of democratic reforms in terms of rebel organization?

Paul Staniland (2014) *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, (Cornell University Press) **[Book you purchased]**

**4 Nov: States and Elite Actors behind Rebels?** The relationship of state power to experts in violence and other ground-level aspects of civil wars studied earlier in this course. State power and informal political authority – how do the two interact and what does this mean for the nature of civil wars? Does the state-rebel relationship have to be theorized differently for Africa? Rebels within and rebels without: what is this battlespace?

Kevin Mazur (2020) “Networks, Informal Governance, and Ethnic Violence in a Syrian City,” *World Politics*, 72:3 (July), 481-524.

William Reno (2017) “Fictionalized States and Atomized Public Spheres: A Non-Western Approach to Fragility,” *Daedalus*, 146:4 (Fall), 139-151.

Nicholas Krohley (2015) “The Sanctions Era: Shifts in Civil Society and the Rise of the Sadr Movement,” in his *Death of the Mehdi Army*, (NY: Oxford), 35-57.

Marielle Debos (2016) “Fluid Loyalties” and “Benefiting from War: The Unequal Share of War Dividends,” in her *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 77-118.

Kent Eaton (2006) “The Downside of Decentralization: Armed Clientelism in Colombia,” *Security Studies*, 15: 4 (Oct-Dec), 533-62.

Chris Day (2011) “The Fates of Rebels: Insurgencies in Uganda,” *Comparative Politics*, 43: 4 (July), 439-58.

**11 Nov: Global Networks, Big Processes:** What is the impact of the urbanization of populations on the organization of armed groups? The end of the Cold War affects everything – why not violence? Is urbanization a significant variable? What is the relationship between technology, social networks and violence?

Stathis Kalyvas & Laia Balcells (2010) “International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict,” *American Political Science Review* 104: 3 (Aug), 415-29.

David Kilcullen (2013) “Future Cities, Future Threats,” in his *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, (NY: Oxford University Press), 52-115. [For an earlier perspective on urban guerrillas, see Carlos Marighella (1969) [\*Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla\*](#).]

Jake Shapiro & Nils Wiedmann (2015) “Is the Phone Mightier than the Sword? Cell Phones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq,” *International Organization* 69: 2 (March), 247-74

Aisha Ahmad (2015) “The Security Bazaar: Business Interests and Islamist Power in Civil War Somalia,” *International Security*, 39:3 (Winter), 89-117.

**18 Nov: The relationship between violence and various kinds of political orders** (the centrality of context): Are there convincing grand theories that link different kinds of violence? Are civil wars / insurgencies simply one end of a spectrum of violent political action? Goodbye to Mao: When are rebels “states in waiting” and when are they

something else? Armed actors and even “rebels” as instruments of regime survival strategies?

Paul Staniland (2012) “States, Insurgents and Wartime Political Orders,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 10:2 (June), 243-54.

Philip Roessler (2011) “The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups and Civil Wars in Africa,” *World Politics*, 63: 2 (April), 300-46. [He has a [book!](#)]

Henning Tamm (2016) “The Origins of Transnational Allegiances: Rulers, Rebels and Political Survival in the Congo Wars,” *International Security*, 41: 1 (Summer), 147-81.

Emile Simpson (2012) “Strategic Narrative,” and “Ethos, Vision and Confidence,” *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first Century Combat as Politics*, London: Hurst & Co., 179-226.

Laurent Gayer (2014) “A Contested City,” in his *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City*, (NY Oxford), 17-52.

~ That’s it for the Fall Term ~

**Doesn’t fit: How do wars end?** Let them fight it out, or jump in and save them from themselves? Has war termination changed over time?

Barbara Walter (1999) “Designing Transitions from Civil War: Demobilization, Democratization, and Commitments to Peace” *International Security*, 24: 1 (Summer), 127-55.

Will Reno (2015) “Lost in Transitions: Civil War Termination in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *The American Historical Review*, 120:5 (Dec), 1798-1810.

Lisa Hultman, et al. (2014) “Beyond Keeping Peace: United Nations Effectiveness in the Midst of Fighting,” *American Political Science Review*, 108:4 (Nov), 737-53.

James Fearon (2004) “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?” *Journal of Peace Research*, 41:2 (May), 275-301.

Monica Duffy Toft (2010) “Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?” *International Security* 34: 4 (Spring), 7-36.

**Section IV: Yet More Major Topics That Were Left Out**

If we had more time, we might have looked more at international intervention in civil wars. What is the record of intervention? Is it an effective antidote to civil wars? What about international justice? Does the threat of prosecution for crimes against humanity deter or otherwise shape the behavior of combatants? Does counterinsurgency work? What is the impact of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the study of civil wars and political development? We haven't even got to rebel governance!

Please don't be shy about raising these issues in discussion. Other issues might include whether Mexico's current troubles should be classified as organized crime or a rebel war or some other kind of civil war. How does crime fit in the study of the politics of violence? Here is a popular culture view of individuals such as [El Chapo](#) and groups like [Los Zetas](#). Here's a [significant guy](#) in Colombia who makes his own music! There is growing scholarly attention to rebel / militia governance, and its impact on (or consequence of) rebel organization and behavior... material for another seminar!