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# MILITARY TACTICS IN CIVIL WAR

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When Americans think of civil war they think of the pitched battles of the US Civil War, such as Antietam or Bull Run, that were fought by regular militaries with distinguishable sides, mostly wearing uniforms, fighting in lines with massive casualties on both sides but generally limited civilian targeting. The goal of the conflict was secession and the war was fought until one side completely vanquished the other. While each side committed atrocities against the other, sexual violence, terrorism, and genocide did not figure prominently into the conflict.

In other regions of the world, including Central America and sub-Saharan Africa, civil wars have taken on a different connotation and formed a more gruesome picture. The image of civil war in these areas is that of bloody conflicts over resources or ideology, fought by irregular armies on each side, going house-to-house, killing more civilians than belligerents. In Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, various methods for mobilizing the peasants were employed before the state was directly challenged in civil wars spanning from Cuba to Peru. These civil wars were often brutal for the peasantry as the state and the guerrillas used violence to establish social control (Mason and Krane, 1989). In Peru, for example, both the Shining Path guerrillas and the military perpetrated mass atrocities against entire villages, including brutal massacres of civilians and disappearances of dissidents.

In Africa, resource predation is often cited as a motivation for the seemingly endless civil conflict in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the Rwandan case, the genocidal goal and the corresponding tactics seemed to be related to the total elimination of a perceived opposing group. Mass rape has been a strategy used in civil conflicts throughout Africa in cases such as Liberia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Sudan, and the Central African Republic in order to demoralize and dehumanize the other side.

Given these contradictory images of civil war, can a characteristic picture of the uses of violence across diverse civil wars be formed? Research on civil wars suggests that ~~all are~~ [these are all](#) an accurate reflection as participants in intrastate conflicts use a range of military tactics or combinations of military tactics in pursuance of their goals. In addition to the tactics already mentioned, terrorism also features prominently in some civil wars as a mechanism to start the conflict, prolong it, or spoil attempts to end it. The balance of capabilities is often used to explain why terrorism is a tactic in some civil wars and not in others, but other factors such as the connections between the opposing sides likely influence this strategic choice as well. Until

recently, the study of civil war and the study of terrorism have proceeded independently; however, newer research challenges this and identifies some important overlap.

In this chapter, we outline some of the military tactics used in civil wars and discuss possible explanations for their employment based on how they relate to outcomes of interest, such as deaths in war, the onset of civil war, and relationships to other forms of violence. We discuss the specific tactics of terrorism, sexual violence, and genocide as forms of violence that occur in the context of civil war and drive variations in important outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of promising new directions in this research that focus in particular on leaders and micro-level conflict processes.

### **Military tactics in civil war**

There are multiple ways to distinguish types of civil wars: whether they are ethnically motivated (Sambanis, 2001), whether they are driven by attempts at secession or control of the central government (Fearon, 2004), or whether they involve lootable resources (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Another way to distinguish different types of civil wars is to examine the military tactics used by each side in the conflict. While there has been robust debate over what a civil war is (see Sambanis, 2004), most definitions stress that civil war is differentiated from other forms of political violence as it is violence beyond a certain threshold that is perpetrated by state and non-state actors (Young, 2013). The threshold component of the definition is necessary to distinguish civil war from low-level violence. Including both the state and non-state actors and a balance of violence in the definition are necessary to separate civil war from genocide, terrorism, and other forms of one-sided violence. Within any civil war, both sides can use a variety of tactics including terrorism, sexual violence, guerrilla attacks, et cetera. But why do participants in civil wars choose one tactic over another?

Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) examine the interaction of the structural capabilities of each participant (what they call technologies of rebellion) at the start of a conflict to make predictions about the use of different tactics.<sup>1</sup> They identify three technologies of rebellion that are used in civil war: irregular warfare, conventional warfare, and symmetric non-conventional warfare. Irregular war, or insurgency, occurs when the state's military capabilities exceed those of the rebels. Conventional civil war occurs when both the state and the rebels are militarily matched at a high level and symmetric non-conventional war happens when both the state and the rebels are militarily matched, but at a lower level.

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### **Irregular civil war**

Irregular civil wars are more likely to occur when the conditions within a state favor insurgency (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Irregular warfare, or insurgency, occurs when a small group of often lightly armed rebels – who are weak relative to the government that they oppose – operate in rural areas and attack the state. Insurgent groups typically range in size from a few hundred to a few thousand rebels who lack the capacity to challenge the state on a traditional battlefield so instead operate clandestinely to attack the government despite having fewer actors and resources (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). There is disagreement among guerrilla practitioners about the optimal strategy to mobilize for a civil war. Mao Tse Tung (1961), for example, argued that a vanguard is necessary to mobilize the peasants and that conditions must be ripe for this to occur. The war then follows a three-phased approach that starts with gaining support of the population, moves to a guerrilla conflict, and builds to more conventional civil war. Guevara (2010) argued that a revolution could be built even without the necessary preconditions. Similar to Mao, he argued that winning the war was dependent upon securing the support of the population and thus

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restraint should be exercised when dealing with civilians. Other practitioners, such as Marighella (2002 [1969]), argued that organizing a civil war should begin in the cities and not in the countryside. For Marighella (2002 [1969]), terrorism and “propaganda by the deed” in urban areas are more useful than mobilizing peasants in the countryside.

Given the optimal conditions (although, as discussed above, this is highly contentious), a small number of actors can engage in a protracted insurgency that builds to civil war. According to Fearon and Laitin (2003), a large population, rough terrain, a new state, and political instability are among the conditions that limit the capacity of the state to effectively pacify the population and thus these are conditions that favor insurgency. Events in the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda suggest that ethnicity can be relevant to the onset of civil conflict. Horowitz (1985) offered explanations and potential solutions. Few studies of civil war, however, find a robust relationship between measure of ethnic diversity and civil war (Hegre and Sambanis, 2006) and instead focus on structural factors that increase the probability of insurgency and civil war (Fjelde and de Soysa, 2009; Hendrix, 2010). Repression and mass atrocities by the state can also provide a catalyst for mobilization that leads to civil war (Mason and Krane, 1989; Kalyvas, 1999).

Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) show that irregular wars comprise just over half of the civil wars between 1944 and 2004. Since both state and rebel capabilities decreased following the collapse of the US–Soviet competition, the end of the Cold War resulted in a decrease in the percentage of conflicts that were irregular, going from about two-thirds during the Cold War to about one-quarter after 1991 (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Irregular civil wars are different from other technologies of rebellion, not just in how they begin but also in how they end. Balcells and Kalyvas (2012) found that irregular wars last longer and are more likely to be won by the incumbent as compared to both conventional wars and symmetric non-conventional wars.

### **Conventional wars**

Conventional civil war occurs when the state and the rebels both have significant levels of military capabilities and are more evenly matched (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2012). The classic example is the US Civil War, which was characterized by pitched battles fought by regular soldiers. The tactics of conventional conflict have been more likely to occur at different periods throughout history.

Since the end of the Cold War, conventional wars have become more common (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). During the Cold War, the USSR funded military training camps that provided networking opportunities for radicals from across the globe to disperse revolutionary ideology (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Once the Cold War ended, the United States no longer had an interest in supporting states in the developing world and without external support many states had to rely on domestic resources and capacity. Additionally, the end of the Cold War led to a period of new state growth.<sup>2</sup> These new states were capable of meeting one another in conventional battles, the result being an increase in the percentage of conventional wars and symmetric non-conventional (see below) wars post-Cold War and a decrease in irregular wars. Changes in the technology of rebellion also altered the likely outcome, duration, and pattern of violence in conflict. Conventional civil wars are more likely to end in a draw between the opponents than irregular wars, but do not tend to last as long, and are the most lethal technology of rebellion (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010).

### **Symmetric non-conventional**

Symmetric non-conventional civil war occurs when the state and the rebels are militarily matched, but at a low level. The toxic combination of weaker states (Herbst, 2000), less desire for

external intervention, and fixed border norms (Atzili, 2011) has resulted in an increase in this type of conflict. Recent civil wars in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo provide support for this claim. Symmetric non-conventional wars are more likely to end in a draw and, when controlling for duration, they also have the highest death tolls (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010).

In sum, dividing up the interaction of the two major actors in a civil war can help explain a number of important factors related to the onset, timing, duration, and intensity of civil war. In the next section we discuss more specific tactics undertaken by states and rebel groups that can influence the process of civil war, such as terrorism, sexual violence, and genocide.

### Terrorism

In general, the academic study of terrorism and civil war are independent (Findley and Young, 2012; Sambanis, 2008). Even at the level of policy, the US pursued a global war on terrorism without much effort – rhetorical or otherwise – spent dealing with civil war in countries exporting terrorism. Findley and Young (2012), however, find that a majority of terrorist acts occur in the context of civil war, which suggests that this is an important tactic in the context of the larger struggle between state and non-state actors. Like civil war, defining and operationalizing terrorism has been fraught with difficulties (Weinberg, *et al.*, 2004; Young and Findley, 2011). One area of consensus is that death thresholds do not characterize terrorism – contra to civil war. Several authors have offered consensus definitions of terrorism (Hoffman, 2006; Weinberg *et al.*, 2004), and this debate seems to be declining. Most scholars conceptualize terrorism as a political act utilizing violence or the threat of violence to induce fear. Many also contend that it is necessary to separate the audience for the violence from the victims (Young and Findley, 2011); this distinction differentiates terrorism from genocide.

A source of continued debate over the definition of terrorism is whether attacks on the military should be considered as terrorism. When filtering these attacks out, Findley and Young (2012) still find a large number of attacks occur in civil wars making this distinction seem less relevant empirically.

The reason that terrorism as a tactic may be more prominent in some civil wars than others likely relates to the balance of capabilities of the participants but could also relate to ethnic differences. According to Crenshaw (1981, p. 387) “[t]errorism is a logical choice when oppositions have such goals and when the power ratio of government to challenger is high. The observation that terrorism is a weapon of the weak is hackneyed but apt.” Groups from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to the Weather Underground in the United States to the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka have used terrorism as a means to challenge much more powerful adversaries. In Carlos Marighella’s classic *Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerrilla*, a prominent text on prosecuting acts of terrorism, he argues that “[i]n this conflict, the police have superiority. The urban guerrilla has inferior forces” (2002 [1969], p. 14), and thus can never relinquish terrorism as a weapon.

Lake (2002), among others, has argued that terrorism is often used in conflicts to provoke a disproportionate response from the state. This so-called “political jujitsu” is a tactic used to elicit a brutal or repressive response from the state in the hope that moderates in society will be forced toward the extremist camp and away from negotiations with the state. This tactic is also used to build coherence in a community and aid rebel recruitment. Kydd and Walter (2006) argue that terrorism can be used to spoil potential peace among moderate factions in a civil war and empirical evidence supports this claim (Findley and Young, 2013). Terrorism then can be a tactic to prolong civil wars or to generate support for the larger conflict. Relatedly, it can be a tactic to move from low-level conflict to a full-scale civil war. Kydd and Walter (2006) suggest that

terrorism can serve as a provocative strategy consistent with Lake's (2002) claims. For example, the Weather Underground tried to start a civil war in the United States by using terrorism to generate support and publicity for their cause.

If weakness alone predicted the use of terrorism against a state, then there would likely be a good deal more of it. Goodwin (2006) hypothesizes that terrorism will more likely occur in situations where the rebels view civilians connected to the government as complicit. These civilians are likely to be targets of terrorism when they are of a different ethnic or religious group from the rebels or where there is physical separation between these two groups of actors. Goodwin's argument helps to provide a place for ethnicity in some civil wars, suggesting that the relationship between ethnicity and civil war be revisited, and predicts that these civil wars might also be more likely to be fraught with acts of terrorism.

### **Sexual violence**

Tactics of civil war are not limited to the military capabilities of each side. Systematic sexual violence is also a weapon and a strategy of war that aims to control, demoralize, and eradicate the enemy. Causes of systematic sexual violence in conflict may be individual or structural, for financial gain or ideologically based, or any combination of these factors (Meger, 2010). Sexual violence can be used instrumentally as a strategy to accomplish political or social objectives, incite terror, control territory, and destroy personal and community security (Anderlini, 2011; Aranburu, 2010; Carlsen, 2009; Meger, 2010). Hannah Arendt (1970, 79) stated that violence is an instrument to achieve a political or social goal rather than the goal itself. There are multiple potential strategic goals for utilizing systematic sexual violence in conflict: for example, the rape of one woman in a community incites fear within the entire population (Anderlini, 2011; Card, 1996). In this way, sexual violence and terrorism intersect.

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While sexual violence against civilians in conflict is pervasive, it is not ubiquitous. There are conflicts where systematic sexual violence is completely absent, showing that, contrary to popular belief, sexual violence is not an inherent component of conflict (Anderson, 2010; Meger, 2010; Wood, 2009, 2010). Sexual violence in conflict may also be infrequent, as was the case in El Salvador, Peru (Wood, 2006), and Azerbaijan (DCAF, 2007). Even when sexual violence does occur in a conflict, not all combatant groups necessarily commit it. For example, in the Congo there are many armed groups but the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC) are the most prolific offenders of sexual violence (Carlsen, 2009). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (Wood, 2006) and the Vietcong in Vietnam (Brownmiller, 1975) are groups who eschewed sexual violence despite its use by their opponents. The existence of groups who do not engage in systematic sexual violence in conflict challenges the conventional notion that rape is an inevitable side effect or tactic of war.

Sexual violence may be a tool in a conflict where ethnic difference is a contributing factor. Meger (2011) suggests that sexual violence is more likely in smaller, civil, less conventional conflicts because ethnic conflicts rely on a strong notion of in-group and out-group identity (Sherif *et al.*, 1961) that can lead to increased aggression. This aggression may be focused more toward women and children than it had been in more traditional conflicts of the past (UNIFEM, 2002).

Sexual violence also emasculates the men in a community by reinforcing their inability to protect "their" women (Card, 1996). Systematic sexual violence in conflict can be considered a form of terrorism that serves as a catalyst for the migration of the target population from a contested area of land, especially that which has desired resources (Amnesty International, 2004). Sexual violence can also destroy the culture and social bonds of a group by attacking the

women of a community, which diminishes the physical and emotional security of the entire population (Farwell, 2004).

Sexual violence in conflict creates disorder in communities by violating social norms and dissolving social bonds through humiliation, shame, and terror (Mackenzie, 2010). The breakdown of the rule of law and social norms has an impact upon the whole community, not just the victims of the violence. Formal and informal social controls are diminished during civil war and communities in conflict lack a functional formal system to maintain order. Wood (2010) found that pervasive sexual violence in conflict exists either because it is explicitly ordered by those in command or it is implicitly tolerated by a lack of punishment from commanders that could deter the behavior. The lack of adequate social control, both for perpetrators and target populations, may be a large reason for the pervasiveness of sexual violence in conflict and can become the social norm.

Weak rule of law leads to broken community bonds, a problem that is exacerbated by systematic sexual violence (DCAF, 2007). Broken community bonds result in decreased informal social control and collective efficacy (Sampson, *et al.*, 1997). Clear (2007) states that when many individual networks that function as informal social controls and create collective efficacy are dismantled within a given community, that community too will suffer. Systematic sexual violence in conflict proliferates in a climate of impunity where formal and informal social controls are weak or absent. Widespread sexual violence further breaks down the social bonds within communities, which creates a perpetual cycle of decreasing social controls.

The lack of rule of law and social controls, and the increased social disorganization in post-conflict communities provides a ripe environment for further perpetration of sexual violence (Amnesty International, 2004). Farwell (2004) suggests that condoning sexual violence, either explicitly or implicitly, during conflict may lead to increased sexual violence after the conflict has ended, as it can become a social norm. In Liberia, for example, the rates of post-conflict sexual violence increased, which may be due, at least in part, to the culture of impunity surrounding the perpetration of sexual violence during the conflict that allowed for many of the perpetrators to hold high places in the post-conflict society (UNIFEM, 2002). When sexual violence offenders are not punished during conflict it can also lead to vigilante justice, and set a poor precedent and a new social norm when the conflict has ended (Anderson, 2010). Moreover, protecting offenders when the conflict has ended increases the long-lasting negative effects of sexual violence by eroding public trust in officials (Wood, 2009). In some conflicts, the perpetrators of sexual violence were members of the victims' communities (Wood, 2006), further adding to the loss of social bonds and collective efficacy, both during and after conflict.

Systematic sexual violence in conflict has been called a weapon to incite terror and accomplish genocide. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable during armed conflict as sexual violence has been employed at a tactic of terror and intimidation to incite the migration of a particular ethnic, cultural, or religious community (United Nations, 1994; Card, 1996). Systematic sexual violence has been called a form of genocide in that it kills members of an ethnic group and damages that community's identity through the destruction of their cultural and social bonds (Carlsen, 2009; Card, 1996). Anderson (2010) argues that, due to high levels of HIV infection among armed groups, systematic sexual violence is a means of genocide through the spread of a disease that erodes nations socially, politically, and economically. Even within the Rwandan genocide, the rape of Tutsi women has been called a form of genocide in itself (Wood, 2010).

Whether sexual violence is primarily a consequence of the strategy or tactic of leaders or the lack of control of militaries is an ongoing debate. Understanding why this tactic is used in some conflicts and not in others can help develop an answer. Additionally, micro-level data from

conflicts that currently experience this form of atrocity will help researchers to explore this question more systematically.

### **Mass killing and genocide**

Similar to terrorism, the use of genocide and mass killing as a tactic is quite common in the context of civil war (Krain, 1997). Mass killing is the intentional murder of large numbers of unarmed people (Valentino, *et al.*, 2004), and genocide is mass killing based on some characteristic of the target group, such as race, ethnicity, or religion. Similar to other discussions related to civil war, the balance of capabilities between the state and rebel groups often helps to explain the outbreak and severity of genocide and mass killing (Rummel, 1998). Krain (1997) suggests, however, that mass killing is likely to occur when opportunities in the political opportunity structure open. Krain views these opportunities as internal and external wars, decolonization, and changes in the formal rules of the political game.

Valentino *et al.* (2004) argue that mass killing is used by the state when rebels use guerrilla tactics and the state cannot distinguish the rebels from civilians and may attempt to “drain the sea” to win the war.<sup>3</sup> Most of the studies of military tactics within civil war and genocide have focused internally rather than looking at transnational relations. In genocide research, interventions from third parties have been shown to reduce the duration and severity of violence (DeMeritt, 2013; Krain, 2005).

### **Units of observation**

Many of the early studies of civil war utilized large cross-national databases (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). While they helped identify where civil war was likely and pointed to some structural explanations for the cause of this violence, these studies could not explain *when* it might occur or the exact causal process. For example, both Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Collier and Hoeffler (2004) find a robust relationship between gross domestic product and civil war, yet they interpret it differently. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) interpret the relationship between low GDP and a higher likelihood of civil war to increase opportunities for rebellion, whereas Fearon and Laitin (2003) link this to substandard counterinsurgency.

When examining military tactics in civil war, it is necessary to change the unit of observation. As the disaggregating civil war movement that emerged in the mid-2000s noted, these are strategic contests between actors and yet scholars generally study them using country-level data (Cederman and Gleditsch, 2009). This mismatch led to recent studies that focused on micro-dynamics of civil conflict (Kalyvas, 2006; Hegre, *et al.*, 2009) and conflict dyads (Cunningham, *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, new data are becoming available that are targeted at performing analyses consistent with this new focus (<http://esoc.princeton.edu>).

Other recent work suggests that it is fruitful to examine the incentives of the leaders of states and how this might promote or deter rebellion (Young, 2008, 2009, 2013). This leader-centric framework has also been used to explain interstate war (Debs and Goemans, 2010). Similar to previous structural work, this stream of research points to the importance of looking at the security of the leader as an indicator for the kinds of military tactics they may employ against rebels. From state repression to accommodation, the choices of leaders can provide political opportunity for dissidents to either take part in nonviolent political participation or to mobilize for civil war. Even in the context involving genocide and mass killing, focusing on leaders and their strategic incentives can help explain why it begins and how it ends (DeMeritt, 2013). Finally, the choice of torture in a larger conflict can also be explicated using a leader-centric framework (Conrad, 2012).

## Conclusion and future research directions

While the recent shift from large, aggregated, cross-national studies to micro-level dynamics has generated a wealth of new data, there are also unresolved issues with this line of research. A study of state-group interactions in a country, such as the Philippines, may better explain that particular conflict (see, for example, Shellman, *et al.*, 2013). Unpacking how repression, dissent, ethnicity, and other factors influence patterns of violence can be clear within a single time-series case. These studies likely do not, however, generalize to other places and time periods as well as the cross-national studies do. One of the challenges of future work in this area is to move up and down these levels and produce valid inferences at each. Additionally, it is necessary to examine whether what we know at each level translates up or down. For example, does the local economy influence civil war as much as the national economy? Does a booming national economy trump local stagnant economies that might create a region that is ripe for civil war?

New levels of analysis and the interactions among them are important, and as discussed above, new units of observation can provide new perspectives on current problems. Incorporating more studies of leaders of organizations and of states would help explain the variation in choices of tactics that remain elusive. Furthermore, very little research has investigated rebel group leadership and its influence on military tactics. A recent debate over the efficacy of the elimination of leaders of rebel movements is a first step in this direction (Johnston, 2012; Jordan, 2009).

While the choice of these tactics in civil war may be contingent upon previous choices, most studies do not make this assumption. As discussed above, terrorism and civil war are often discussed in isolation (see Findley, *et al.*, 2012 as an exception). An integration of types of violence and theories that can explain the strategic choice of each in relation to the other is clearly missing.

In relation to this, the choice of rebels to use nonviolence is almost completely ignored (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008). As experiences from the American South in the 1960s, India in the 1920s and 1930s, and Serbia in the late 1990s demonstrate, nonviolent resistance can be a pathway for rebels to achieve their desired ends that may be more successful than violent means (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). More research is needed in comparing the use of these tactics vis-à-vis violence to explain the outcomes of civil wars.

## Notes

- 1 See Kalyvas (2006) for other arguments related to how strategic interaction influences the patterns of violence during civil war.
- 2 See Atzili (2011) for the effects of fixed and flexible borders on conflict.
- 3 This phrase relates to Mao Tse Tung's famous maxim that in a guerrilla war, the population is the sea in which the guerrilla fish swim.

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