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The New New Civil Wars

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Abstract

Post-2003 civil wars are different from previous civil wars in three striking ways. First, most of them are situated in Muslim-majority countries. Second, most of the rebel groups fighting these wars espouse radical Islamist ideas and goals. Third, most of these radical groups are pursuing transnational rather than national aims. Current civil war theories can explain some of what is going on, but not everything. In this article, I argue that the transformation of information technology, especially the advent of the Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, is the big new innovation that is likely driving many of these changes. I offer a theory to explain why rebel groups, especially those in Muslim countries, have chosen to pursue a particular type of extreme ideology and goals. I then identify the six big implications this new information environment is likely to have for rebel behavior in the future. Innovations in information and communication technology are currently manifesting themselves in the rise of global Jihadi groups in the Muslim world, but we can expect them to be exploited by other groups as well.

THE PHENOMENON

Something new is happening in the world of civil wars. After declining in the 1990s, the number of active civil wars has significantly increased since 2003 (von Einsiedel 2014). Over the past 13 years, large-scale civil wars have broken out in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Chad, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Ukraine, while new civil wars threaten to break out in Turkey and Egypt.¹ These post-2003 conflicts are different from previous civil wars in three important ways.

First, most of them are situated in Muslim-majority countries (Gates et al. 2016, Gleditsch & Rudolfsen 2016). Between 1989 and 2003, approximately 40% of civil war episodes were fought in states in which Muslims made up a majority of citizens. Since 2003, that number has risen to approximately 65%. Second, the vast majority of rebel groups fighting these wars espouse radical Islamist goals.² This is quite different from previous civil wars, especially since the end of the Cold War, in which factions tended to form along ethnic and socioeconomic lines and did not represent the ideological extreme. Finally, of the radical groups fighting these wars, most are pursuing transnational rather than national aims. In previous wars, rebel groups sought control of the central government or territorial separation from the state, not the creation of a worldwide entity governed by a single supreme leader. These three patterns are striking and suggest that we are in the midst of a new wave of civil wars that we do not yet fully understand.

These “new new”³ civil wars—all but one of which are being fought in Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia—are troubling for at least three reasons. First, they have the characteristics of wars that tend to last a long time. They include multiple fighting factions (Balch-Lindsay & Enterline 2000, Elbadawi & Sambanis 2000, Regan 2002, Cunningham 2006) and occur in countries with deep societal divisions (Collier et al. 2004). These attributes are especially clear in Chad, the DRC, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, the CAR, Mali, Ukraine, and South Sudan. The existing research on the duration of civil war, therefore, suggests that these new wars are likely to be long ones.

Second, these wars are likely to resist negotiated settlements. Studies have found that combatants are much more likely to sign and implement peace agreements if a third party is willing to commit long-term peacekeepers to help implement the deal (Walter 1997, 2002; Doyle & Sambanis 2000; Fortna 2004b). One of the problems with this new wave of civil wars is that no state or international organization has shown any interest in providing this service. The American public, for example, is vehemently opposed to sending American soldiers back into any conflict zone (Berinsky & Druckman 2007, Dugan 2013), and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council disagree about how these wars should end. This suggests that the combatants in each of these wars will be required to resolve these conflicts by themselves, either through decisive military victories or through negotiated settlements that they will have to enforce.

Third, these wars are occurring in regions where neighboring countries have many of the risk factors associated with civil war and are, therefore, in danger of contagion. Jordan, Bahrain, Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt all have a history of authoritarian regimes practicing exclusionary politics, which are known for corrupt and bad governance (Walter 2004, 2015;

¹This list is generated by summing across all civil war entries in the Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) data set in which the episode state date, as coded by the variable “startdate2,” is greater than 2002.

²Data sources: Gleditsch & Rudolfsen (2016), UCDP–PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset v.4-2015, Pew Research Center.

³The name “The New New Civil Wars” is borrowed from Michael Lewis’ book, *The New New Thing: A Silicon Valley Story*, which describes the culture of rapid innovation and entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley in the 1990s.

Buhaug 2006; Fearon et al. 2007; Cederman et al. 2010). Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey face the added challenge of having to absorb millions of Syrian refugees, an event that research has found to be deeply destabilizing (Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006, Gleditsch 2007, Salehyan et al. 2014). These dangers suggest that we are entering a period of sustained growth for civil wars, not a period of increasing peace.

The purpose of this article is twofold. The first goal is to begin to analyze these new trends with an eye to revealing what our current theories can and cannot explain about them. The second is to offer a new theoretical framework to begin to explain why we are seeing an increase in civil wars—especially those fought in Muslim countries by radical Islamist groups seeking global aims.

I begin by highlighting three distinct waves of civil wars since the end of World War II: one that began around 1951 and ended with the close of the Cold War, a second that began around 1992 and ended soon after 2001, and a third that began with the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and continues today. Each of these periods is distinguished by civil wars with their own distinct attributes. These attributes have shaped how we understand civil wars and have influenced the scholarship that has resulted. The post–World War II wave of civil wars, for example, was dominated by class-based rebellions that elicited a wave of corresponding research focused on peasant mobilization and revolution (Gurr 1971, Scott 1976, Tilly 1978, Popkin 1979, Petersen 2001, Wood 2003). Wars in the 1990s were dominated by ethnically based conflicts, many of them separatist in orientation, which prompted a significant body of research on the role of ethnicity and identity in civil wars (Ellingsen 2000, Quinn et al. 2003, Cederman & Girardin 2007, Fearon et al. 2007, Wucherpfennig et al. 2012, Denny & Walter 2013). We are now in a new phase of civil war where religion and ideology appear to play a predominant role, and where a new technology—the Internet—appears to influence behavior in novel and unexplored ways. This new wave will reveal the boundaries of our knowledge of political violence and will demand additional research on the role of ideology and information technology in different dynamics related to civil war.

In what follows, I lay out these three waves of civil wars in greater detail, focusing most heavily on the third and current wave. I then outline what our existing theories have to say about this new phase and what still needs to be explained. The article ends by offering a theory for why so many of today’s civil wars are centered in Muslim-majority countries, why so many are fought by groups that embrace radical Islamist ideologies, and why their aims extend far beyond any single state.

Before continuing, I should be clear about what this article does not do. This article is by no means an exhaustive list of all the excellent research that has been done on civil wars to date. In fact, an abundance of truly outstanding work has been produced over the last ten years that I will not have a chance to discuss. This includes group-level research on rebel organization (Krause 2014, Staniland 2014), rebel alliances (Posner 2004, Furtado 2007, Akcinaroglu 2012, Christia 2012, Seymour 2014), rebel fractionalization (Woldemariam 2011, Warren & Troy 2015), rebel-on-rebel fighting (Cunningham et al. 2012, Fjelde & Nilsson 2012, Nygard & Weintraub 2015, Warren & Troy 2015), and rebel treatment of civilians (Humphreys & Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2007; Flanigan 2008; Wood 2009, 2014a; Balcells 2010; Metelits 2010; Hultman 2012; Wood et al. 2012; Taydas & Peksen 2012; Fjelde & Hultman 2014; Salehyan et al. 2014; Stewart 2015). It also includes micro-level research on individuals’ decisions to join insurgencies (Weinstein 2007, Humphreys & Weinstein 2008), commit atrocities including rape (Wood 2009, Cohen 2013), resist rebel governance (Arjona 2014), and demobilize and integrate into society (Humphreys & Weinstein 2008, Annan et al. 2011).

This article is also not an exhaustive examination of all the questions that still need to be answered or the research that still needs to be done. Volumes could be written on the role of women and women’s status in issues of global conflict. The same could be said about the effects of environmental stress and climate change on stability and security. We are also just starting

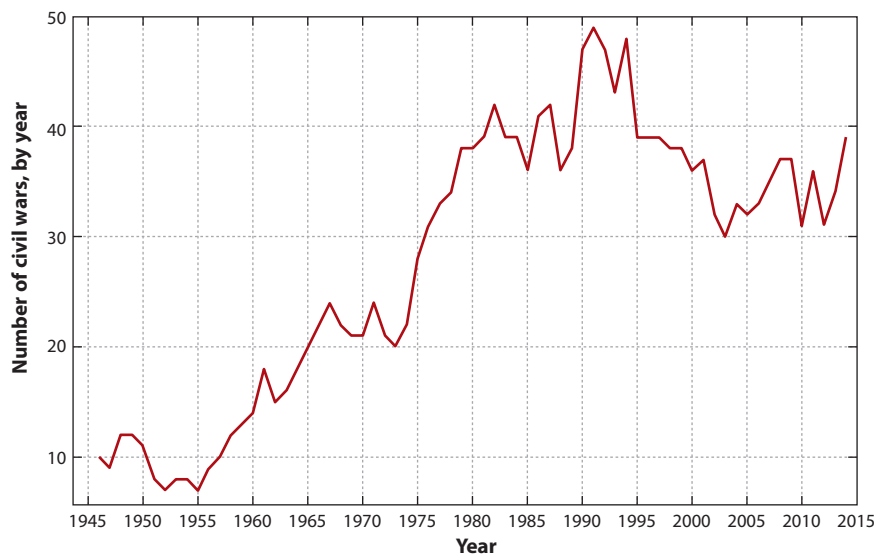


Figure 1

Number of civil wars by year, 1946–2014. The first wave of civil wars shown here began shortly after World War II and ended around 1991. The second began around 1992 and ended shortly after 2001. The third began around 2003 and continues today. Source: UCDP–PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset v.4–2015.

to seriously investigate the effects of food and water insecurity on violence and state stability. Multiple questions could be posed on the effects of aging populations and shrinking working-age populations on conflict. This article, therefore, just scratches the surface of all the important issues that could and should be studied more deeply.

Finally, this article also does not address the explosion of data we are experiencing (for an excellent review, see Cunningham et al. 2016). In this period of data abundance, information is coming online faster than we can analyze it. New types of data (observational, event, geospatial, big data) will allow for a wealth of groundbreaking studies, especially at the group and individual levels. This surge of material offers an unprecedented opportunity for researchers to ground social science theory in high-quality data and in the process make real advances in our knowledge of significant real-world events. This article is simply an attempt to identify some of the biggest trends and most pressing problems for which scholars and policy makers are currently seeking answers.

Figure 1 reveals that the first post–World War II wave of civil wars was the longest and most distinctive phase to date, coinciding almost exactly with the Cold War period and characterized by steady growth in the number of civil wars. On the surface, the reason for this increase is fairly easy to explain: More civil wars were starting during this period than were ending (Fearon 2004). Below the surface, however, two important phenomena were transpiring to encourage so many civil wars to begin. The first was the end of colonialism. In the 30-year period between 1950 and 1980, Western governments withdrew from their African and Asian colonies, leaving behind weak regimes open to contestation. The decision by Portugal to relinquish its colonies in 1975, for example, led to the immediate outbreak of civil wars in Angola and Mozambique as competing domestic factions fought to control these newly independent states. The increase in civil wars during this time, therefore, was partly due to the transformation of former colonial wars into active civil wars.

The second phenomenon driving this increase was the Cold War rivalry that developed between the Soviet Union and the United States. Until the late 1980s, Moscow and Washington eagerly channeled equipment and funds to opposing sides fighting civil wars in an effort to influence the ideological balance around the world. Rebels and governments fighting civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Peru all benefited from this Cold War proxy funding. The result was a wave of new civil wars that tended to break down along class lines and be heavily funded by the superpowers (Russett 1964; Huntington 1968, 1991; Gurr 1971; Paige 1975; Scott 1976; Muller 1985; Kanet 2006; Kalyvas & Balcells 2010).

The second wave of civil wars began with the end of the Cold War and lasted until approximately 2003. This was a period of retrenchment: More civil wars were ending than were beginning. The defining feature of this phase was the large number of civil wars—many of them long-standing—that were being resolved in negotiated settlements. Combatants in countries such as Cambodia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Croatia, Mozambique, and Bosnia had two reasons to pursue peace agreements at this time. The first was the end of easy financing from the Soviet Union and the United States (Byman et al. 2001, Kalyvas & Balcells 2010). The Contra rebels, for example, had no real interest in negotiating with the Nicaraguan government until Washington discontinued aid in 1985. Once money dried up, combatants suddenly had incentives to cooperate. The second was the rise of a unified and activist UN Security Council willing to approve peacekeeping operations to support these settlements. Combatants who were willing to negotiate peace agreements suddenly had a third party willing to help them implement the terms (Walter 1997, 2002; Doyle & Sambanis 2000; Fortna 2004a). The result was a slew of peace agreements that were not only signed but were actually executed.

Figure 2 reveals the large increase in the number of UN peacekeeping operations between 1989 and 2000, a period that coincided almost exactly with the drop in the number of civil wars

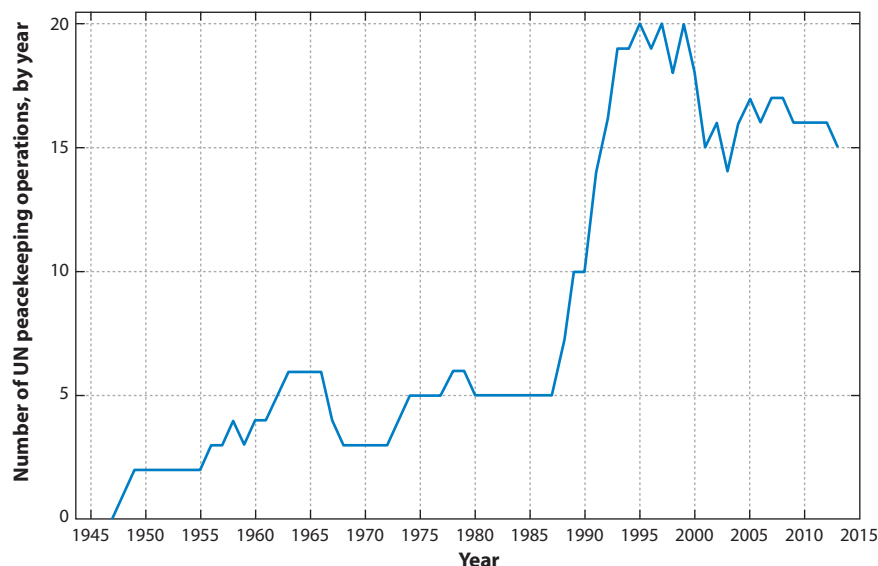


Figure 2

Trends in UN peacekeeping operations, 1947–2013. Source: IPI Peacekeeping Database (<http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/contributions/>).

Table 1 Large-scale civil wars started since 2003

Location	Episode start date	Muslim-majority country?	Muslim population percentage	Islamist rebellion?
Iraq	2004	Yes	99	Yes
Chad	2005	Yes	56	No
Sri Lanka	2005	No	9	No
Somalia	2006	Yes	99	Yes
Pakistan	2007	Yes	96	Yes
Rwanda	2009	No	2	No
Yemen (North Yemen)	2009	Yes	99	Yes
Syria	2011	Yes	93	Yes
Libya	2011	Yes	97	No
Nigeria	2011	Parity	50	Yes
South Sudan	2011	No	6	No
Central African Republic	2012	No	15	No
Mali	2012	Yes	90	Yes
Democratic Republic of Congo	2012	No	1.4	No
Israel/Palestine	2014	Parity	49*	Yes
Ukraine	2014	No	0.9	No

*Israel/Palestine figures include Muslims living in the West Bank and Gaza.

during that time. Together, the removal of external financing for civil wars and the rise in the availability of peacekeepers meant that for many combatants a negotiated settlement became a more attractive option than continued fighting. The result was fewer civil wars.

The third distinct wave of civil wars began around 2003, when the number of civil wars that were starting once again outpaced the number that were ending. Two phenomena likely accounted for this increase. The first was the decline in the number of civil wars ending in negotiated settlements. After an activist period in the 1990s, UN peacekeeping operations fell off, leading to fewer successfully implemented peace agreements. But there was an additional reason why the number of civil wars rose after 2003. Longstanding authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa that had once seemed invincible faced the possibility of collapse. The US decision to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the wave of Arab Spring protests in 2011 created a collection of vulnerable and unstable governments across these regions. The result was the outbreak of civil war in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen and the expansion of al Qaeda into countries such as Chad, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Somalia.

This third wave of civil wars is unique in at least three ways. As **Table 1** reveals, these new civil wars are located mostly in countries with large Muslim populations. Of the 16 large-scale civil wars that started since 2003, 10 of them (63%) are in either Muslim-majority countries or countries with parity between Muslims and non-Muslims. The only post-2003 civil wars that have not been in countries with large Muslim populations are those in the DRC, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Ukraine, and the CAR.

A second defining feature of this third phase of civil wars is the large proportion of rebel groups that espouse radical Islamist ideas and goals. In fact, many of these civil wars appear to be dominated by a particularly extreme type of Islamist group: Salafi-Jihadists, groups adhering to an ultraconservative ideology that seeks not only to institute sharia law but also to establish

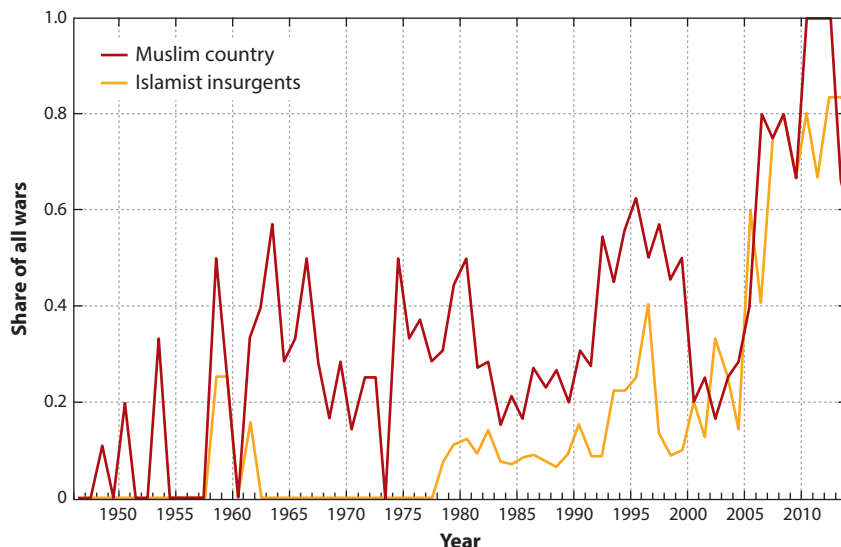


Figure 3

Share of civil wars taking place in Muslim countries and share of Islamist insurgents, 1946–2013. Adapted with permission from Gleditsch & Rudolfsen (2016).

a transnational caliphate based on Sunni dominance. Salafi-Jihadists reject democracy as well as Shia rule and believe that jihad in the form of violence and terrorism is justified in pursuit of their goals. Salafi-Jihadist groups account for approximately 35% of all major militant groups in Iraq, 50% of all major militant groups in Somalia, and 70% of all militant groups in Syria.⁴

Part of what is driving the growth of Salafi-Jihadist groups is the emergence of al Qaeda and its strategy of building a global international terrorist network by co-opting and cooperating with like-minded jihadist groups around the world. Since the early 1990s, al Qaeda has formed relationships with groups from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Somalia, Eritrea, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. It has also supported efforts in the Balkans, Central Asia, Chechnya, and the Philippines. In short, much of the expansion of radical Islamist groups around the world appears to be the result of al Qaeda’s policy of expanding its influence via alliance building (see Joscelyn 2013). **Figure 3** reveals the increasing dominance of Muslim countries in the civil war landscape and the central role Islamist insurgents play in fighting these wars.

A third defining characteristic of the current wave of civil wars is the transnational nature of rebel goals. Salafi-Jihadists have global aims; their objectives are not limited to a single government, a single country, or a single region. Their goals are to erase international boundaries and create a worldwide government. The Islamic State, for example, pursues these goals by aligning with “global affiliates”—groups that have pledged allegiance and support for the Islamic

⁴The Islamic State (ISIS), al Qaeda, al Shabaab, Boko Haram, and the Abu Sayyaf Group are only a few of the most prominent organizations that identify along Salafi-Jihadi lines (Mapping Militant Organizations 2010). Only two groups in Pakistan are Salafi-Jihadist; however, the Deobandi tradition—another fundamentalist group that adopts violent means to achieve ambition—is dominant in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Notably, though, Deobandi cross-national ambitions are much more muted.

State—and it has found willing partners in Sudan, the Philippines, India, Algeria, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Indonesia, Tunisia, Russia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Somalia. The transnational nature of these goals means that groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda threaten a larger number of people in a greater number of countries than any group in the past. It also means that the resources from which they can draw, in terms of both money and human capital, are likely to be deeper and more extensive, making them a more formidable foe.⁵

WHAT OUR CURRENT THEORIES SAY ABOUT THESE NEW TRENDS

Our current theories can explain some of what is going on in this third wave of civil wars but not everything. Existing macro-level studies help illuminate why so many civil wars have broken out in Muslim-majority countries. Chad, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Nigeria, Chad, Mali, CAR, and Yemen are all countries where GDP per capita is low, unemployment is high, and governments are repressive, corrupt, and unconcerned with the rule of law. These are all factors that have been found to increase the risk of civil war (Hegre et al. 2001, Sambanis 2002, Fearon & Laitin 2003, Collier et al. 2004, Buhaug 2006, Fearon 2010, Walter 2015). Citizens in so many Muslim countries likely rebelled in large part because the leaders of these states were some of the most repressive and authoritarian in the world, not because these countries were Muslim.

Still, the timing of these wars remains to be explained. The governments of North Africa, West Africa, and the Middle East have been highly repressive and authoritarian since they were formed after World War II, and many of them have been ruled by the same leader for decades. In addition, there are other repressive, corrupt, and poverty-stricken states that are not in the Muslim world and did not experience rebellion. What, then, accounts for the outbreak of these wars, in these countries, starting in 2003?

Macro-level theories that point to the role of state capacity in deterring rebellion partly answer this question (Collier & Hoeffler 2002, Fearon & Laitin 2003). The US decision to invade Iraq and oust Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the Arab Spring demonstrations that began in 2011 created an opening for political actors to compete for power. Leaders who had once seemed unbeatable disappeared overnight or were revealed to have far less support from their own citizens and military elites than had once been assumed (Bellin 2012, Stepan & Linz 2013). The result was a wave of protests and uprisings from individuals demanding change.

But civil wars broke out in only four countries that experienced popular demonstrations (Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen), not all of them. Existing bargaining theories can, perhaps, fill in some of the remaining gap. Bargaining theories contend that civil wars are much more likely to break out in countries where government leaders are unwilling or unable to negotiate with challengers. President Assad of Syria, President Gaddafi of Libya, and incumbent leaders in Iraq and Yemen could have avoided civil war had they been willing to make sufficient concessions to placate protesters. This is exactly what King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia did when he increased the economic stipends to Saudi citizens following protests in 2011 and 2012. It is also what President Ben Ali of Tunisia and President Mubarak of Egypt did when they agreed to step down from power. Governments that refused to offer any concessions to the protesters were the ones that were forced to fight.

⁵The Islamic State, for example, successfully recruited approximately 15,000 foreign fighters from mid-2013 until the end of 2014 (see Dodwell et al. 2016).

Why would some leaders refuse to make allowances? If leaders such as Gaddafi and Assad had the ability to avoid war via negotiations, why did they choose not to? According to Fearon (1995b) and Powell (2006), one of the main reasons violence occurs is because warring parties cannot credibly commit to share power with each other over time. The decision by some Arab leaders not to negotiate was likely made in large part because these leaders faced severe commitment problems stemming from deep demographic imbalances in their countries. In Syria, the minority Alawite regime of President Assad had incentives to fight a civil war because it could not trust the far larger Sunni majority to continue to share power in the future. In Iraq, the minority Sunnis could not trust the more numerous Shia population to honor any promise to share oil revenue and political control once in power. The choice for leaders like Assad and Gaddafi was not whether to reform or fight, it was whether to be ousted from power (and likely imprisoned or killed) or fight to retain full control. Most minority-in-power regimes chose to fight.

WHAT WE STILL DON'T KNOW

Existing theories help explain the broad outlines of this third wave of civil wars—why wars broke out in predominantly Muslim countries, why they broke out in the late 2000s, and why only in some Arab Spring countries, for example—but they do not explain at least two big, new patterns we are observing.

Why the Proliferation of Radical Jihadists?

For reasons we have not yet identified, the number of rebel groups espousing extreme ideologies, especially the radical Islamist ideology we call Salafi-Jihadism, has increased (Gleditsch & Rudolfson 2016). “Extreme” here refers to a rebel group’s pursuit of an ideology that is more extreme than the majority opinion of the population it seeks to rule (Lake 2002). Salafi-Jihadists favor a stricter interpretation of Islam than the bulk of society in the countries they seek to control. This makes the growth and spread of these groups particularly puzzling. Most Muslims surveyed have expressed disdain for groups such as the Islamic State. A 2015 Pew Study of 11 countries with significant Muslim populations found that “in no country surveyed did more than 15% of the population show favorable attitudes toward the Islamic State” (Poushter 2015). Why have radical jihadists done so well since the early 2000s when most Muslim citizens have unfavorable opinions of them?

Currently, we know very little about the role of ideology in civil war, especially extreme ideology (Walter 2017). We do not know, for example, whether rebel leaders embrace a particular ideology for its own sake (because they genuinely believe in such ideas) or for more instrumental reasons (because ideology helps solve certain practical problems related to recruitment and retention).⁶ We also do not know why some ideologies emerge and resonate at some times and places but not others. What we do know is that the more extreme groups in this current wave of civil wars—especially the Salafi-Jihadists—are flourishing in ways that more moderate groups are not.⁷

One reason for the proliferation of these radical groups could be that other groups observe their success, learn from them, and imitate their practices. The better these groups perform in war, the more likely other groups are to copy them. Learning, however, does not explain why these

⁶Sanin & Wood (2014) provide an excellent summary of both arguments.

⁷Salafi-Jihadist groups, such as al Qaeda, the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and al Shabaab, have been more successful in obtaining recruits, financing, and territory than have their moderate competitors.

groups have had such success. Three different literatures offer potential insights into why more extreme groups appear to have done better in war than more moderate groups. Spatial models of political competition in American politics suggest that an extreme ideological position could give rebel groups a recruiting advantage with more devoted and committed supporters (see Iannaccone & Berman 2006; see also Berman 2003, 2009 and Berman & Laitin 2008, and see Kedar 2005 on why moderate voters prefer extreme parties). The ideological extreme is where individuals are likely to be more willing to fight and die for a cause (see Gates & Nordas 2015). Moderate citizens, by contrast, are likely to be more difficult to recruit because they view the political stakes of victory or defeat as less valuable. According to US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Rep. Mike Rogers, “[c]ertain elements of the [moderate] rebels are reaching across to these jihadist units because they tend to be armed and effective and committed fighters, which is more than they can say for their own units at times” (Ostovar & McCants 2013, p. 28).

The literature on product differentiation from the field of industrial organization offers a second explanation for the success of ideologically extreme groups in civil war. An extreme ideology may help organizations positively differentiate themselves from other similar-looking groups and thus carve out a segment of a highly competitive market.⁸ One way for a group to differentiate itself is to identify a value that is widely endorsed within a population and position itself as the most committed defender of that value. In Muslim societies, Islam is such a value. Adopting a position as the “most Islamic” group has advantages. Few potential recruits motivated by a desire to protect Islam will be excited to join the second most Islamic group. The desire to present oneself as the most committed representative of a group, therefore, could spark a race to the ideological extreme, leading to a proliferation of ever more radical organizations.⁹

Bargaining theory may provide a third explanation for the emergence and success of so many radical groups. Rebel groups competing for political control—especially in countries with weak institutions and a history of political corruption—face a potentially debilitating commitment problem. Citizens in these countries know that political elites, once in power, have few constraints on their abuse of power.¹⁰ Knowing that the opportunity for exploitation is high, potential supporters are likely to try to determine which rebel leaders are less likely to sell out once in power. Espousing an extreme ideology such as Salafi-Jihadism could serve as an effective commitment device because it promises to punish individuals for bad behavior (Iannaccone 1992, Fearon 1995a, Bueno de Mesquita 2008; also see Berman 2009). In this way, rebel leaders can clearly signal that they are more likely to govern honorably once in office, making them potentially more attractive even to moderate citizens.

Why the New Emphasis on Transnational Aims?

All of these theories help explain the proliferation and success of violent extremist groups but not why so many of them have embraced an ideology—Salafi-Jihadism—that emphasizes global aims. They also cannot explain why so many groups have adopted these goals at this particular time. These are the puzzles we still need to solve.

⁸Theoretical synergies can be found in the literature on industrial organization. See especially Tirole (1988).

⁹I am indebted to Andrew Kydd for this insight.

¹⁰This mechanism is related to the signaling mechanism identified by Berman (2009) but takes it further. Berman argued that the sacrifices required by fundamentalist organizations helped to screen out unreliable recruits. I argue that sacrifices can serve a wider purpose, enabling a group to credibly commit to policies that enhance the public welfare rather than enrich the organization.

One possible explanation for the rise of globally oriented groups is that rebel leaders are being strategic about building the largest possible base of support. An appeal to a worldwide Sunni caliphate has the advantage of tapping into an enormous international audience. Sunni Islam is the most popular form of Islam, comprising 90% of all Muslims and extending across multiple ethnicities and international boundaries. By framing their goals around a transnational Muslim caliphate, rebel leaders have found a way to potentially mobilize millions of people behind a much larger grab for power.¹¹ In addition, appealing to a sectarian identity that extends across international borders allows groups to recruit money and soldiers from around the world, not just locally. Militant groups in Somalia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh, therefore, may announce that they are Sunni not only to appeal to domestic audiences, but also to signal to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that they welcome their support. The result could be more funding from a large, wealthy pool of external patrons.

THE MISSING LINK: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND CIVIL WAR

The biggest gap in our understanding of the new new civil wars has to do with timing. The advantages of embracing an extreme ideology and of appealing to a global audience existed long before 2003. The fact that militant Islamic rebel groups are proliferating now suggests that something else is going on.

New information technology, especially the advent of the Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, is the big innovation that is likely driving many of these changes. Rebel groups are embracing the Internet and adapting their strategies and tactics to exploit a radically new information environment and it is this new information technology that likely explains their strategies. In 1998, only 12 terrorist-related websites existed on the Internet. By 2003 there were approximately 2,630 sites, and by January 2009 there were 6,940 (Inst. Homeland Secur. 2009). Today, the number of media sites used by rebel groups and terrorists continues to grow exponentially: In Iraq, the number of downloadable posts disseminated by the Islamic State via official websites, Twitter, Facebook, and various social media accounts increased 12-fold between January 2014 and January 2015 alone (Walter & Phillips 2016 data set). What distinguishes this third wave of civil wars from previous waves is that it is the first to be fought in a new information environment that rewards a more extreme and global orientation.

In what follows, I explore six large implications of this new environment on the outbreak, conduct, and resolution of civil wars. In the process, I hope to map an emerging set of research programs to engage some of the most pressing unanswered questions in the field.

The civil wars that have broken out since 2003 are the first to be fought in a Web 2.0 era of user-generated material. We now live in a world where citizens and elites operate in an interactive Internet environment, where anyone with a smartphone can easily produce and disseminate material from almost anywhere on the globe (Shapiro & Weidmann 2015). This new information environment will produce winners and losers and change the dynamics of civil wars in ways we have not yet explored (Aday et al. 2010). For example, mass propaganda used to be out of reach to everyone fighting civil wars except governments. Those who did not control television or radio stations were forced to disseminate propaganda by word of mouth or by hand, greatly limiting their audience and influence. The Internet, however, has given even the smallest rebel groups (and even individuals) the same access to large audiences as the governments they are seeking to

¹¹The use of transnational ideology is not new. Transnational Sunni Islamism is akin to transnational communism/Marxism during the Cold War. What is new is the oil wealth into which these appeals are likely to connect.

defeat. In addition, the type of information that can be disseminated has changed. Real-time videos can now be wirelessly posted from battlefields to websites, allowing combatants to disseminate material throughout the war even from remote locations. The Internet also allows combatants to build networks of individuals—many with the same extreme ideological views—who can easily connect to each other and organize their activities. Add to this the fact that propaganda in an Internet age is difficult to stop (governments cannot intercept communications without sacrificing everyone's privacy) and it becomes clear that information will become a bigger, not smaller, part of the strategy of war.

Instantaneous, global communication is likely to have at least six major implications for civil wars that will need to be studied in greater detail. First, information technology is likely to benefit individual citizens (especially citizens in highly repressive countries) more than political elites in those countries. Dictators and autocrats will face greater difficulty in limiting and controlling the flow of information and the messages their citizens receive. Government elites will also have greater difficulty in preventing individuals from coordinating their protest activity. Citizens are likely to be better informed about the behavior of government officials, the well being of their particular ethnic or sectarian group relative to other groups, and the level and extent of dissatisfaction in society. The result could be a boon for popular demonstrations and grass-roots organizing. Recent micro-level research on the use of Twitter by protesters in Egypt, for example, found that social media allowed protesters to better organize their activity and evade government crackdowns, making spontaneous demonstrations possible (Steinert-Threlkeld 2016).

Second, global Internet campaigns are likely to make it more feasible for rebel groups to form, leading to civil wars with a greater number of warring factions (Cunningham 2006, 2011, 2013). Rebel entrepreneurs formerly required a base of local support and financing to make mobilization possible. The Internet, however, is likely to change this. (Jacobson 2010 describes the dramatic shifts in how rebel leaders can raise and transfer funds.) Internet media campaigns make it easier for rebel entrepreneurs, especially those with limited local backing, to garner international attention and solicit the soldiers and financing necessary to start a war (Collier & Hoeffler 2004). Likely results include greater external involvement in civil wars, in different guises, and a larger number of warring factions. The evidence seems to support this prediction: The average number of rebel groups fighting in civil wars has indeed increased over time (Harbom et al. 2008; see also Christia 2012). In 1950, the average number of rebel groups in civil wars was 8; in 2010, it was 14.

Third, the new information environment also means that rebel groups are likely to have greater incentives to frame their objectives in global terms—something we have observed with the proliferation of Sunni groups. First, the Internet allows warring factions to be more ambitious, ignore international borders, and set their sights on effecting large-scale change by drawing on the resources of a globalized world. Second, the Internet is likely to reward groups, such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State, that have global aims, because they then have a wider audience from which to generate revenue and recruits. In short, the new information environment has shifted the advantage from home-grown groups with local bases of support to transnational groups with global networks and connections.

Fourth, the Internet is likely to make it possible for rebel groups to sustain themselves longer in war. This is because warring parties can now tap into a greater variety of financing that, cumulatively, is likely to be more consistent over time (Collier et al. 2004). The decentralized nature of the Internet means that rebel groups need no longer be dependent on a single source of income or a single patron. If they lose access to one source of income (e.g., coca) or one patron (e.g., Iran), they still have access to millions of potential individual donors. The easier it is for

rebel groups to obtain consistent financing, and the easier it is for outsiders to help finance rebel campaigns, the longer civil wars are likely to be.

Fifth, the Internet is likely to promote the spread of civil war. Research has found that civil wars produce a contagion effect; the outbreak of one civil war increases the risk that civil war will break out in neighboring countries (Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006, Gleditsch 2007, Salehyan 2007, Kathman 2010). One of the potential implications of a Web 2.0 world is that ideas and ideology are likely to spread more rapidly and more widely. This occurs in two ways: directly, through the dissemination of information via the web, and indirectly, through the recruitment of foreign soldiers. The Islamic State and al Qaeda, for example, use Internet propaganda to recruit foreign fighters from around the world. These fighters then come to active war zones, receive training, indoctrination, and experience, and eventually return home, creating new networks in their native countries.

Finally, the Internet could potentially eliminate the restraints that limit the abuse of local citizens by rebel and government leaders. Studies have found that rebel groups that rely on the local population for support or financing are less likely to commit human rights violations (Wood 2014b). Conversely, rebel groups that receive significant material support from external patrons are more likely to use violence toward civilians (Weinstein 2007, Wood 2009, Salehyan et al. 2014). Rebel groups in the current civil wars appear to be following this pattern. In Iraq, ISIS and the al Mahdi Army both enjoyed significant financing from outside, and both have been significantly more likely to target civilians with violence than groups that did not [see Walter & Phillips's (2016) data set]. By freeing combatants from the need to solicit local support, the Internet may also be freeing them to engage in more civilian abuse.

These six implications only scratch the surface of the many ways information and communication technology (ICT) is likely to affect the strategies and tactics of political players competing for power. Players at every level of a conflict—citizens, protesters, rebel leaders, rebel organizations, societal groups, governments, and external states—are likely to be affected by advances in information technology. In addition, innovations in ICT will play a multifaceted role at every stage of conflict, from protest to violence to civil war, and the implications will be far ranging. It is now easier for individuals to obtain information about their government and each other. It is easier for them to coordinate themselves in protest. It is easier for rebel groups to form and sustain themselves.¹² And it is easier for outside players—individuals, radical organizations, and states—to intervene in these wars and influence their progress and outcomes. The increasing technological capability of combatants and their access to information is the big new breakthrough in the study of civil war.

The fact that the new ICT environment will affect so many aspects of civil wars means that all combatants in every civil war will feel its effects. Citizens and rebel leaders in non-Muslim civil wars, such as those currently taking place in the DRC, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, South Sudan, and the CAR, are certainly strategizing about how best to navigate these new technologies. What is different about Muslim-majority countries—and the reason these trends are first observed there—is that these countries were best positioned to take advantage of a Web 2.0 world. The global Sunni population is enormous, creating a ready-made base of support that the Internet and social media could suddenly reach. In addition, the Sunni population in oil-poor countries such as Syria, Somalia, Chad, and Mali could use ICT to link directly to the oil-rich Sunni populations of the Persian Gulf. This large transnational kinship group was perfectly situated to be tapped by web-savvy political entrepreneurs.

¹²The same argument may apply to the rise of pro-government militias. See Carey & Mitchell (2017) in this volume for a detailed discussion of these factions.

This does not mean that other groups in other regions of the world will not learn how to exploit the advantages of ICT. My guess is that any group with a large number of international kin (especially wealthy kin) will pursue similar strategies. Sunnis are leading the way because the benefits of a Web 2.0 world have been easiest for them to tap, but others will follow.

CONCLUSION

The world is experiencing a new wave of civil wars unlike ones we have seen in the past. These wars are characterized by the rise of rebel groups pursuing extreme ideologies, a rise in the number of transnational actors involved, and the use of goals and strategies directed at global rather than local audiences. These trends are a precursor to a series of changes we are likely to see in civil war as players adapt to a new and evolving ICT environment.

The field of civil war study has not yet theorized about the ways in which this new technology is likely to revolutionize civil war. This article identifies some of the ways in which combatants are likely to adapt their strategies to exploit this new information environment, but much more work needs to be done. The fact that the Web 2.0 has radically changed the quantity and quality of information available to individuals, groups, and governments (and the way they transmit it) means that much of what we know about civil war dynamics will also change. This transformation is currently manifesting itself in the rise of global Jihadi groups in the Muslim world, but it will be exploited by other groups as well.

Not surprisingly, the new ICT had its first and largest effects in countries that had most heavily restricted information and free speech. Globally oriented groups such as al Qaeda and ISIS formed and prospered in countries that had previously been some of the most information-poor countries of the world (in addition to some of the most authoritarian). It was in these countries that the newfound flow of information allowed for an opening—an opening for individuals to organize, for rebel groups to link to other groups, and for human capital and war financing to begin to flow.

Combatants in Muslim countries were also quick to figure out how to exploit ICT to their advantage. They discovered that framing their movement based on an identity that was large (Sunni), wealthy (oil-rich), and ideologically extreme (Salafi-Jihadist) allowed them to utilize the web in ways that brought in more money and recruits than had previously been possible. In fact, the trans-border nature of both the Sunni population and Persian Gulf financing was tailor-made for the Internet age.

One challenge we face as scholars is to figure out the full range of implications that emerging technologies will have for every aspect of civil war. Another is to theorize about who is most likely to utilize these technologies, when they are likely to do so, and the conditions under which the new strategies are more or less likely to succeed. I have outlined some implications and theorized about why we are observing these new civil wars in predominantly Muslim countries. But much more work needs to be done. We do not know exactly how this third wave of civil wars will evolve and which additional groups and countries will best exploit these advances. Nor do we know which strategies will turn out to be the most successful and how these strategies are likely to change over time. What we do know is that the Internet will play an increasing role in every decision that is made. Our job is to figure out what role it is likely to play and the conditions under which it is more or less likely to be influential.

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