

Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Winter 2018

Ending Civil Wars: Constraints & Possibilities



Karl Eikenberry & Stephen D. Krasner, guest editors

with Francis Fukuyama

Tanisha M. Fazal · Stathis N. Kalyvas

Charles T. Call & Susanna P. Campbell · Lyse Doucet

Thomas Risse & Eric Stollenwerk · Clare Lockhart

Tanja A. Börzel & Sonja Grimm · Steven Heydemann

Seyoum Mesfin & Abdet Dribssa Beyene

Nancy E. Lindborg & J. Joseph Hewitt

Richard Gowan & Stephen John Stedman

Sumit Ganguly · Jean-Marie Guéhenno

Introduction

Karl Eikenberry & Stephen D. Krasner

KARL EIKENBERRY, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2012, is the Oksenberg-Rohlen Fellow and Director of the U.S.-Asia Security Initiative at Stanford University's Asia-Pacific Research Center. He served as the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan and had a thirty-five-year career in the United States Army, retiring with the rank of lieutenant general. He codirects the Academy's project on Civil Wars, Violence, and International Responses.

STEPHEN D. KRASNER, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1991, is Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, the Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations, and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. He is the author of *Power, the State, and Sovereignty: Essays on International Relations* (2009), *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (1999), and *Asymmetries in Japanese-American Trade: The Case for Specific Reciprocity* (1987). He codirects the Academy's project on Civil Wars, Violence, and International Responses.

The essays that make up this and the previous issue of *Dædalus* are the culmination of an eighteen-month American Academy of Arts and Sciences project on Civil Wars, Violence, and International Responses. Project participants have examined in depth the intellectual and policy disagreements over both the risks posed by intrastate violence and how best to treat it.

The Fall 2017 issue, "Civil Wars & Global Disorder: Threats & Opportunities," examines the nature and causative factors of civil wars in the modern era, the security risks posed by high levels of intrastate violence, and the challenges confronting external actors intervening to end the fighting and seek a political settlement. It also explains the project's aims, methodologies, and international outreach program.¹

This issue, "Ending Civil Wars: Constraints & Possibilities," consists of two parts: "Norms & Domestic Factors" and "Policy Prescriptions." The essays in the first section consider the impediments to ending wars of internal disorder when norms such as national identity or commitment to the rule of law are not shared by contending elites, or when rebels are fighting for a transnational, divine cause and not simply the seizure of state power. The remaining essays focus on the "what to do" and offer a variety of recommendations to policy-makers. The issue concludes with the project's codirectors' own reflections informed by their colleagues' writings.

The section devoted to the impact of norms and domestic factors on the character of civil wars opens

with Francis Fukuyama's historical account of England's tumultuous history following the Norman Conquest, during which the country faced violence and civil war roughly every fifty years until the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689 established parliamentary supremacy and brought long-lasting stability to England. Fukuyama uses the English case to illustrate that elite bargains will not necessarily result in a stable state or liberal democracy, arguing that stability after 1689 was instead predicated upon increasing respect for the rule of law, and the emergence of a strong English state and national identity. He emphasizes that these developments took shape over the course of six centuries.

What does this mean for current conflicts? Fukuyama's analysis suggests that "many contemporary conflicts will therefore continue until greater normative commitment to state, law, and democracy come about," and while U.S. assistance might help raise the visibility of certain government institutions in the short term, "the burden of sustainable institution-building necessarily will fall on the local elites themselves."²

In her essay, Tanisha Fazal argues for the recognition of an additional class of rebels, namely religionist rebels, for whom sovereignty comes from the divine: they do not seek international recognition or statehood by conventional means. This is important for two reasons: first, many of the common strategies employed in war and war termination are likely to be ineffective against insurgents who reject the very legitimacy of the modern state system; and second, religionist rebels often conduct war differently from other rebels given that their justification and motivation come from beyond the realm of states and shared international norms.

Fazal offers two options for conflict resolution: fighting to the end, or establishing a "hybrid system in which religionist reb-

els coexist alongside the Westphalian state system." Neither option is necessarily appealing. However, Fazal points out that historically these groups have "bumped up against natural limits, precisely because... the claims they make and practices they engage in during the wars they fight" cannot be sustained.³

Stathis Kalyvas, in his essay, decouples violent jihadism from religion and terrorism, positing that, although both are relevant characteristics of jihadi groups, it may be beneficial to view such elements first and foremost as revolutionary insurgents in civil wars. Kalyvas draws comparisons between contemporary jihadi groups and revolutionary insurgents of the past, specifically Marxist rebels of the Cold War, noting that both groups' revolutionary identities and transnational natures have common attributes. A key difference, however, is the absence of significant external state sponsorship for jihadi rebels, which Kalyvas says may well be their greatest weakness. Ultimately, he suggests that "jihadi rebels might, in the end, represent less of a threat to their opponents in civil war contexts than their older, Marxist counterparts," but cautions against blocking peaceful political mobilization for Islamists, as this may encourage the future emergence of new, violent jihadi movements.⁴

Drawing from the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, Steven Heydemann concludes the section on norms and domestic factors by examining the persistence of prewar governance practices under conditions of violent conflict. He argues that civil war might, in fact, be the continuation of governance not by different means, but by the same means. This assertion has particular policy relevance in that it "challenges understandings of civil war as marking a rupture in governance: violent conflict may disrupt prewar practices less than is often assumed." It also calls attention to the limits and shortcomings of ex-

Introduction isting frameworks intended to lessen state fragility, highlighting the link between sovereignty and governance and the “weaponization of sovereignty” for political or economic gain. Heydemann notes that viable solutions to such conflicts are difficult to find, and are “likely to require diplomatic, financial, and military strategies that create incentives for embattled regimes and insurgent challengers to end violence and accept meaningful compromises in the interest of securing their minimal requirements,” often without transitional justice or accountability for perpetrators.⁵

Charles Call and Susanna Campbell begin the section on policy options by exploring the logic of prevention, explaining the underlying assumptions and associated tools. They offer three categories of preventive actions – operational, structural, and systemic – that manifest the rationale for prevention in different ways. They then examine various political, institutional, bureaucratic, and decision-making obstacles that have plagued earlier waves of conflict-prevention initiatives. The problems are significant and many: namely, the challenges faced by a state or international organization asked to take action on something that its constituency might not deem important; the lack of clear rules surrounding prevention; and the poor level of understanding about what exactly leads to an effective outside intervention. Call and Campbell reach a modest yet hopeful conclusion: “although we should not expect conflict prevention to work in many cases, the few cases in which it may prevent escalating violence justify an investment, in spite of the odds.”⁶

Sumit Ganguly writes about the Sri Lankan Civil War, an example of civil war termination by means of outright military victory. The Sri Lankan case is one example of the “give war a chance” argument put forth by political scientist Edward Luttwak, who has asserted that “an unpleasant truth often

overlooked is that although war is a great evil, it does have a great virtue: it can resolve political conflicts and lead to peace.”⁷ Though “complete and unequivocal” military victory brought an end to almost three decades of violent conflict in Sri Lanka, the country still lacks a unified national identity due to the deep ethnic and cultural divisions among the Sinhala majority and government and the Tamil minority.⁸ The Sri Lankan government and some civil society representatives assert that progress is being made, but the postwar reconciliation and accountability processes are slow-going. Whether the existing peace will hold over the long term remains in question.

According to Clare Lockhart, over the course of the last two decades, the international community has largely responded to internal conflict and state breakdown with either military forces and large-scale civilian assistance (Afghanistan and Iraq), minimal involvement and calculated distance (Syria), or the misplaced hope that removing a dictator or negotiating a short-term peace deal without long-term planning and institution-building will lead to sustainable peace (Libya). Lockhart advocates an approach between these extremes, what she terms a “sovereignty strategy.”⁹ Such an approach is informed by the principle of helping internal actors establish or restore a core set of governance systems or institutions that can win the trust and meet the needs of their people, reduce the reliance of the country on external support, and contribute to resolving conflicts before they become violent. She argues that by carefully sequencing the establishment of key state functions over an extended time period, public trust can be gained and international obligations met.

In their essay, Thomas Risse and Eric Stollenwerk contend that the relationship between limited statehood and civil war, and therefore the importance placed on state-building efforts for preventing civil

war and violent conflict, is often overstated and misinformed. They point out that limited statehood is the global default, not the exception, and only a small portion of areas of limited statehood is affected by civil war. Weak state capacity may enable civil war, but it is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for civil conflict. External actors, Risse and Stollenwerk suggest, should seek to foster societal and political resilience in areas of limited statehood and to prevent governance breakdowns. They write: “governance-building with a focus on particular state and nonstate institutions, as well as on service provision, is likely to be not only more efficient, but also more effective.”¹⁰

Tanja Börzel and Sonja Grimm also examine approaches to governance-building, analyzing the European Union’s role in creating stable peace in the Western Balkans following the breakup of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. The expansion of the EU to include ten Central and Eastern European states has seen varying success in terms of democratization and stability; Croatia and Serbia appear to have successfully locked in these changes, while other states seem stuck in transition. Structural postconflict conditions, conflicting policy objectives, complex relationships between EU and Western Balkan governments, and the involvement of domestic third-party actors in the reform processes explain much of this variation. To enhance EU efforts to improve governance, Börzel and Grimm emphasize the importance of understanding domestic actors’ interests and aligning them with the interests of external actors, as well as using governance-building instruments consistently and credibly, while acknowledging conflicting objectives.

Seyoum Mesfin, who served as Ethiopia’s minister of foreign affairs for nearly twenty years, and Abdeta Beyene, who recently served as chief of staff of the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission pursuant to the Agreement to Resolve the Conflict in

South Sudan, explore the use of buffer zones as a strategy for responding to the security challenges posed by failed states in the Horn of Africa region. Buffer zones are neutral areas designed to prevent acts of aggression between hostile nations, and can be established jointly in a shared territory, or unilaterally through force. For example, in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia and Kenya maintain buffer zones inside Somalia to manage the threat posed by militant extremist groups such as Al Shabaab. Uganda also employs a similar strategy in South Sudan. Interstate tensions often arise, however, because buffer zones usually represent a violation of the weaker state’s sovereignty by the stronger state seeking to maintain stability and order in the broader region. Buffer zones, Mesfin and Beyene persuasively argue, can be essential for both fighting terrorism and returning refugees to their places of origin in regions plagued by states incapable or unwilling to impose order.

Drawing upon her vast experience in reporting from the front lines of the most violent and consequential civil wars of our times, BBC Chief International Correspondent Lyse Doucet explores the impact of the media on the Syrian conflict policies of U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. She provides a nuanced analysis of the so-called CNN Effect: a term that entered the lexicon nearly three decades ago and described the power of twenty-four-hour American news networks to dictate policy and which later was largely dismissed. Doucet argues that media can play an important role in thrusting issues to the top of policy-makers’ agendas, but that context matters greatly and influence is often ephemeral.

Attempts by belligerent parties to manipulate the media and messaging to help achieve their war aims, of course, have been a constant in the long history of human conflict, well preceding the CNN Effect. What is truly new and novel, how-

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Nancy Lindborg and Joseph Hewitt analyze current U.S. efforts to address state fragility, a contributing factor to intrastate warfare, which, as is argued elsewhere in this volume and in the previous issue of *Dædalus*, can threaten regional and international security. Why do we struggle to implement effectively policies that transition countries away from fragility and prevent civil wars? Lindborg and Hewitt advance three main reasons: First, U.S. policy is largely crisis-driven, and thus the focus remains on the most urgent developing crises, rather than on prevention. Second, bureaucratic impediments, such as the placement of government bureaucracies into distinct security, development, and political silos, render a system without cohesive frameworks or joint plans of action. Third, the lack of a “shared consciousness,” exacerbated by lack of communication and coordination among different government agencies and teams, prevents effective implementation of such policies. The authors identify this last challenge as the most im-

portant, noting: “meaningful progress will require a concerted effort to transform the business model of government, making it more proactive, adaptive, and integrated.”¹²

Lindborg and Hewitt, however, find some room for optimism and make a values-based argument for positive action. They assert that, in recent years, the development community has experienced a paradigm shift that has bolstered the international community’s “collective wisdom” with regard to reducing state fragility and mitigating state failure. While significant organizational and doctrinal reform is necessary to improve the U.S. government’s ability to address effectively the significant challenges posed by failing and failed states, a selective approach that prioritizes areas in which external interventions can achieve decisive results is feasible.

Richard Gowan and Stephen Stedman recount what they refer to as the international regime for treating civil war, developed beginning in the late 1980s. In describing the evolution of norms and practices, they highlight: “1) a belief in the efficacy of mediation in ending intrastate conflicts; 2) investments in multinational peacekeeping operations to secure the resulting deals; 3) an overarching focus on the humanitarian obligations to minimize civilian fatalities and suffering in war zones; and 4) the ongoing controversy about the limits and principles of humanitarian intervention.”¹³ They assert that the international standard treatment regime’s future viability depends on several factors, including U.S. leadership, relations between great powers, and the willingness of the international community to learn from the lessons of the previous twenty-five years. Gowan and Stedman convincingly argue that, though imperfect, the approach has been sufficient and adaptive in many ways, and for these reasons, is worth preserving.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno, in the final essay on policy prescriptions, addresses the Unit-

ed Nations' role in civil wars. He writes that, since the end of the Cold War, the UN has become increasingly multidimensional, adding political, military, development, and humanitarian components to its postconflict stabilization toolbox. However, twenty-six years after the end of the Cold War, it is clear that the UN must revisit its strategy for engagement in civil wars. Despite increasing interconnectedness, global government is not a realistic response, and neither is a return to fully autonomous states. Guéhenno endorses a less state-centric approach at the strategic level, and urges the UN to lower expectations, but deploy stronger capacities to strengthen the effectiveness of the blue helmets in conflict and postconflict settings at the operational level. He highlights the importance of setting the appropriate level of ambition and emphasizes the relevance of four discrete sectors: governance, security, legal frameworks, and revenue collection. Ultimately, as Guéhenno reasons, the ability to adapt to an ever-changing, complex, and multifaceted world will prove essential for the success of the UN and the maintenance of global stability.

Drawing from their colleagues' essays in this issue and in the previous issue of *Dædalus*, Stephen Krasner and Karl Eikenberry offer insights on security challenges posed by civil wars and on the implications for policymakers. They assess the six threats that might directly impact the wealthy and more powerful polities of the world, or the nature of the postwar liberal international order: pandemic diseases, transnational terrorism, refugee flows, regional destabilization, great-power conflict, and criminality. Their conclusion is that the first two – pandemics and international terrorism – are potentially the most consequential, although neither poses the kind of existential threat presented by war among nuclear-armed states. Large-scale cross-border or internal movements of people fleeing intrastate violence

can both undermine liberal states' commitment to humanitarian norms with significant domestic political consequences, and complicate efforts to find lasting peace settlements. The continuing diffusion of global power may lead to a growing number of regional conflicts due to the unwillingness and inability of major stakeholders to facilitate mediation, enable peacekeeping operations, and provide a modicum of development assistance. At the same time, there is an increasing risk of great-power conflict stemming from proxy-war engagements or even direct confrontations in civil wars. While transnational criminality complicates efforts to end civil wars and weakens the ability of states to create a stable polity, it rarely poses a direct threat to international order and is most easily dealt with through domestic and multinational law enforcement.

Krasner and Eikenberry identify four policy considerations relevant to states and regional and international organizations, contemplating external interventions to resolve a civil war. First, external actors and local elites rarely share a common future vision. The obstacles to putting a war-torn country on the path to Denmark are many, and ambitions should be tempered accordingly; establishing adequate or good enough governance is a realistic and reasonable goal. Second, the presence of irreconcilables fighting for outcomes that transcend or reject existing and internationally accepted borders can frustrate efforts to reach negotiated settlements. The termination of conflicts involving rebels of the divine, insurgents inspired by an uncompromising transnational ideology or separatists who reject association with their opponents, often requires a bloody military victory or partition. Third, efforts by a major world or regional power to resolve a war of internal disorder can often be hopelessly undermined by an opposing state or coalition of states. Small investments by

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Fourth, the ways and means available to the United States and its partners, other major powers, and the international community vary greatly in costs and appropriateness. Direct military interventions are hugely expensive and usually require protracted campaigns; thus, they are difficult to sustain domestically and lead to problematic attempts to make credible commitments. More modest approaches, including employment of tailored military forces such as special forces and combat enablers, increased reliance on security assistance programs, and provision of limited foreign aid programs, are less costly and easier to maintain, but are often akin to the application of life support. The standard

international treatment regime, developed since the early 1990s, combining mediated peace agreements with UN or regional organization peacekeepers and development assistance, has proven more successful than is widely understood. However, the regime is ineffective when the protagonists do not believe they are in a hurting stalemate, when the presence of irreconcilable insurgents is significant, and when relevant regional and great powers have substantial conflicting interests.

Krasner and Eikenberry conclude that civil wars may become more prominent on the international landscape and their consequences for the security of the United States and global order are serious, but do not rival the existential threat of nuclear-armed and near peer-state competitors.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Information on the civil wars project may be found at American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “Civil Wars, Violence, and International Responses: 2015 – Present,” <https://www.amacad.org/content/Research/researchproject.aspx?d=22262>.
- ² Francis Fukuyama, “The Last English Civil War,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ³ Tanisha M. Fazal, “Religionist Rebels & the Sovereignty of the Divine,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ⁴ Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Jihadi Rebels in Civil War,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ⁵ Steven Heydemann, “Civil War, Economic Governance & State Reconstruction in the Arab Middle East,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ⁶ Charles T. Call and Susanna P. Campbell, “Is Prevention the Answer?” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ⁷ Edward N. Luttwak, “Give War a Chance,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1999, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1999-07-01/give-war-chance>.
- ⁸ Sumit Ganguly, “Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ⁹ Clare Lockhart, “Sovereignty Strategies: Enhancing Core Governance Functions as a Post-conflict and Conflict-Prevention Measure,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ¹⁰ Thomas Risse and Eric Stollenwerk, “Limited Statehood Does Not Equal Civil War,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ¹¹ Lyse Doucet, “Syria & the CNN Effect: What Roles Does the Media Play in Policy-Making?” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ¹² Nancy E. Lindborg and J. Joseph Hewitt, “In Defense of Ambition: Building Peaceful & Inclusive Societies in a World on Fire,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).
- ¹³ Richard Gowan & Stephen John Stedman, “The International Regime for Treating Civil War, 1988 – 2017,” *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).