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Transnational Jihadism & Civil War

Since the 1980s jihadism, a form of violent transnational activism, has mobilized civil war rebels, outside entrepreneurs, foreign fighters, and organizers of transnational as well as local terrorism. This mix is integral to the jihadist trend, even though jihadism accommodates competing power centers, divergent ideological orthodoxies, and different priorities and strategies. Much remains to be learned about these largely understudied interconnections. The combination of civil war and transnational terrorism also poses difficult problems for states and international institutions hoping to manage either or both.

What vectors might lead from civil war to transnational terrorism?

Probably the first connection that comes to mind is that civil war facilitates terrorism by providing safe havens for groups planning attacks in distant locations. However, sanctuary may not be necessary for organizing transnational terrorism, and it is easier to achieve under stable sympathetic governments or in ungoverned but secure spaces. The advent of drone warfare also decreases safe spaces and disrupts the operations of armed groups.

Second, civil wars can mobilize outside support, including the recruitment of foreigners for local fighting and the activation of "homegrown" terrorists. Civil wars where Muslims appear to oppose non-Muslims are propaganda assets for jihadists. As ISIS leader Baghdadi admonished in a September communication, "Do not let the crusaders rest in their homes and enjoy life and stability while your brethren are being shelled and killed." Afghanistan is of course a case in point, and foreign volunteers came to fight in Bosnia as early as 1992. In addition, experienced fighters may return home to commit acts of terrorism or to start or join rebels in local conflicts. If their home countries prevent them from returning they may join transnational networks (in Europe, for example).

Third, civil wars have spillover effects. Jihadist rebels can use terrorism defensively to punish or deter hostile neighboring states or distant enemies. Defeat at home can lead them to move their operations across borders. Striking enemy civilians at home can be initiated from the outside (the 9/11 attacks), the inside (Orlando 2016), or a mix of the two (Paris and Brussels 2015-2016).

Fourth, civil wars furnish convenient targets for terrorism within the conflict zone, including foreign militaries. Admittedly the question of whether or not attacks on military targets can be considered terrorism is contentious. But the targets of opportunity also include

UN civilian agencies and other neutral or humanitarian organizations, which are attractive to spoilers. The UN in particular is also regarded as a proxy for the United States. (Note that attacks do not occur exclusively in civil war contexts; as early as 1993 UN headquarters in New York was targeted in the "landmarks" plot that was linked to the first bombing of the World Trade Center.) The effects of such terrorism can be extremely detrimental to conflict resolution. For example, when such "soft target" actors withdraw from conflict zones under pressure, or peace processes collapse, the terrorist cause gains.

Other vectors lead from terrorism and the mobilization of foreign fighters to civil war.

Both connections to transnational jihadism and the presence of foreign fighters might lead to escalation and complicate conflict resolution, especially if jihadists are a type of absolutist religionist rebels. The introduction of transnational jihadist networks can "Islamicize" essentially nationalist or separatist conflicts that might otherwise be amenable to negotiation and compromise. Al Qa'ida has shown itself to be particularly adept at co-opting and exploiting local grievances. Conversely, the jihadist "brand" often attracts independent local groups such as Boko Haram. New allegiances alter both targets and tactics. For example, signing on to jihadism is often a precursor of suicide missions.

Terrorism can be a useful propaganda tool for recruiting foreign fighters as well as mobilizing external support for terrorism and civil war rebels. There are links between foreign fighters and suicide terrorism in civil conflicts (foreign recruits are often inexperienced at combat but zealous to the extreme). At the same time, foreign fighters are not necessarily an asset for civil war rebels. However, as mentioned earlier, as jihadists suffer defeats they may initiate or escalate transnational terrorism as a substitute. Thus the loss of the territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria may encourage more terrorism by ISIS and sympathizers.

Possibly jihadists are more prone to use terrorism as a tactic in civil wars than are non-jihadists. To some scholars this association implies that jihadist rebels are unlikely to win in the long run. Other researchers find that armed groups that use terrorism are more likely to secure concessions in negotiated settlements to civil conflicts. These questions remain to be answered.

Last, there are feedback loops.

Terrorism against outside powers can provoke military intervention, which not only intensifies and internationalizes civil war but also sparks more terrorism against the occupiers and their local allies. Domestic terrorism can undermine the stability of local host governments, thus impeding the withdrawal of foreign forces, whether peacekeepers or combatants. Consequently, an important question is whether or not powerful states can resist terrorist provocation. In searching for an answer, should we be thinking of alternatives to military force (such as negotiated solutions) or the smarter application of coercion? In either case, we cannot continue to treat terrorism and civil war as distinct and autonomous phenomena.

Civil Wars, Violence, and International Responses project
The Evolution of Armed Groups: Crafting Effective Responses Workshop
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Religious vs. Religionist Rebels

SUMMARY POINTS
- **While many rebel groups, or armed non-state actors (ANSAs), self-identify as religious, not all are religionist.** Religionist rebel groups are characterized by three features: (1) the view that sovereignty emanates from the divine, and not from the people or from the international community; (2) the rejection of the legitimacy of other polities whose sovereignty does rest on secular sources such as popular support and/or recognition by other units in the system; and, (3) the rejection of territorial limits on their sovereignty claims. Religious rebel groups, by contrast, might want to impose a new religious system on a particular state or secede to create a new state, but typically seek to operate within the confines of the existing state system. The Islamic State is an example of a religionist rebel group. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front is an example of a religious rebel group.
- **Religionist rebel groups are not new, nor have they been exclusively Muslim.** Previous religionist rebel groups prompted major wars in 19th century China and Brazil.
- **Religionist rebels pose particular challenges with respect to the conduct and termination of war.** These challenges stem from a lack of perceived limits on ends and means given that religionist rebel groups view their mandate and sovereignty as emanating from a divine source, as opposed to from the people or from other polities in the system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UN PEACE AND SECURITY ACTORS
- **Appeals to humanitarian norms are unlikely to be a source of leverage when dealing with religionist rebel groups.** In fact, some religionist groups may seek actively to flaunt humanitarian norms, which are often viewed as being sourced in Western, Judeo-Christian culture.
  - One option may be to **explore alternative presentations of humanitarian norms.** Religionist groups that self-identify as Islamic, for example, might be more receptive to appeals based on Islamic humanitarian law, particularly insofar as Islamic humanitarian law can be distinguished from public international humanitarian law. This strategy, however, is by no means guaranteed to work

given the lack of consensus and codification of Islamic humanitarian law as well as internecine conflicts between (often self-professed) jurists claiming to best represent Islamic humanitarian law.

- **Religionist rebel groups will have few to no bounds on their territorial ambitions.**
- **Religionist rebel groups are unlikely to accept the legitimacy of interlocutors, including mediators from organizations such as the UN.**

RELIGIONIST REBELS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There tend to be natural limits to the expansion and survival of religionist rebels. This was certainly the case historically, and we observe a similar phenomenon today with, for example, the fall of Raqqa. Aside from waiting them out, however, there are not many viable non-military options for addressing the threats posed by religionist groups such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram.

Religionist rebellion also has tended to be historically rare. When confronting a new armed non-state actor that self-identifies with a particular religion, it is therefore important to void confusing religious and religionist groups. It is critical to take the time to identify a group's political aims. Insofar as these aims are consistent with, or even depend upon, the preservation of the existing state system, it is very likely that peace and security actors will be able to negotiate and exert pressure upon religious – but not religion*ist* – groups.

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Jihadi Rebels in Civil War

In my essay I argue that rather than attempting to make sense of jihadi groups solely through frames that stress terrorism and religion, we should view them as revolutionary rebels who often chose to fight civil wars. This observation carries two implications.

First, Jihadi Islamism is a revolutionary ideology seeking to achieve a political utopia. Seen from this perspective, it can be fruitfully compared to revolutionary ideologies of the past, most notably revolutionary Marxism-Leninism.

Second, civil war is a political strategy often picked by revolutionary actors. Not all civil wars are revolutionary, just as not all revolutionary actors choose to engage in civil wars. A well-known alternative for such actors is to exclusively pursue terrorist campaigns, sometimes with a transnational dimension (of course, terrorism can be deployed in the context of civil wars as well). The decision to opt for terrorism over civil war usually is a function of the balance of power between rebels and states. If the balance of power is heavily skewed on the state's side, rebels may opt for terrorism via clandestine political action. If not, they may be able to launch a civil war.

Revolutionary groups draw ideological and material resources from transnational revolutionary movements. Hence, defeating a group in a particular conflict does not necessarily spell the end of the broader revolutionary challenge. Many Marxist-Leninist or revolutionary socialist groups were defeated during the Cold War, yet Marxist-inspired insurgencies and terrorist campaigns kept popping-up around the world.

Despite considerable material support from the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and their satellites, most socialist revolutionary insurgencies were defeated. Cuba and Vietnam were outliers rather than representative cases. The reason is that their opponents mobilized extensive resources, including American assistance, to fight against what they considered to be an existential political challenge.

Unlike socialist revolutionary rebels, jihadi insurgents enjoy no access to external state support, let alone major power assistance. This makes them particularly weak, hence their frequent defeats and recourse to terrorism. However, like socialist revolutionary rebels, they represent an existential threat for both the states they challenge and the established international order more generally. As a result, their armed challenge leads to extensive counter-mobilization.

Two conclusions emerge from this comparison.

First, jihadi rebels are highly likely to be militarily defeated in civil wars.

Second, these defeats do not spell out the end of the jihadi challenge. Jihadi revolutionaries will vary their political strategies, resorting to transnational terrorism, and will keep taking advantage of state weakness to challenge existing regimes. As long as peaceful alternatives in the Middle East are foreclosed, as long as existing regimes fail to perform adequately, and as long as no alternative revolutionary ideological agendas emerge, Jihadism will continue to be the most attractive radical option in Muslim lands, including violent action in a variety of forms including civil wars.