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Civil Wars, Violence, and International Responses project
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This memo draws from my two forthcoming co-authored *Daedalus* articles: with Bruce Jones, “**Civil Wars and the Post-Cold War International Order**,” and with Richard Gowan, “**The International Regime for Treating Civil Wars**.”

- 1.) Judged by prosperity and peace, the international order of the last thirty years has been remarkably successful.
- 2.) The current order has been highly interventionist in civil wars in unique ways. International interventions in civil wars in the post-Cold War order have been largely motivated by the belief that political agreement is more appropriate than military victory for ending civil wars.
- 3.) Hence, since the late 1980s major powers, multilateral institutions, the United Nations have acted on the assumption that civil wars are amenable to political, social, and military engineering, resulting in an international order that resolutely rejected giving war a chance.
- 4.) Most of these interventions fall into two distinct, but sometimes combined, treatments. The first, what we call the standard treatment, is mediation and the use of peacekeepers to implement peace agreements, and has become so frequent that it is uncontroversial in national capitals or in inter-governmental forums. The second is the use of military force to protect civilians caught in war, which remains controversial and no consensus has emerged over when, where, and how it should be applied, or whether it should be applied at all.
- 5.) These two different treatments shape the current international order in opposite ways. Mediation and agreement-based peacekeeping as a response to civil war has become a pillar of international order: major powers and most member states hold stable expectations about the appropriateness and legitimacy of this response to civil wars. There are no such stable expectations about the appropriateness and legitimacy of the use of military power to protect civilians in civil wars, and as such this approach to civil wars remains disruptive to international order.
- 6.) One final word on the treatment regime: regardless of what happens with the major powers and their commitment to the current international order there are big question marks over

the sustainability of the regime. The very nature of civil wars may be changing in ways less amenable to mediation and peacekeeping. But more importantly over the last fifteen years peacekeeping in pursuit of civilian protection has become unmoored from diplomatic and political efforts to end conflicts. This is a recipe for permanently failing missions.

- 7.) All of this is a backdrop to current assessments of the post-cold war international order. As a result of civil violence in Libya and Syria a popular narrative arose about a world teetering on chaos. Pundits claimed that civil violence, terrorism, failed states, and the number of refugees are at unprecedentedly high levels. The world is falling apart, most people are worse off than they were thirty years ago, and globalization is to blame. By almost every measure, this narrative is empirically incorrect.
- 8.) The wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya are the latest manifestations of a historical crisis in the Middle East, a region that has posed the hardest test for the Post-Cold War international order – a test that the order has repeatedly failed since the aftermath of the first Gulf War.
- 9.) The wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya have produced 3 major repercussions for international order: refugees, ISIS, and the failure of the major powers to manage the conflicts. This latter repercussion is by far the most serious challenge going forward.
- 10.) The most damaging failures are a.) the abandonment of the standard treatment regime for civil wars (mediation and peacekeeping) for a Cold War style patron-client interventionism; b.) the inability to manage the proximate refugee crises that the wars produced; and c.) the weakening commitment of the EU to the international refugee regime.
- 11.) These failures have taken place at a time when international order is threatened – not from civil wars, but from international and domestic political processes that challenge the political consensus underlying a cooperative international order. A dramatic rise in national populism within the United States and Europe has led to policy pronouncements and choices hostile to international cooperation on trade, finance, migration, and security essential for today's order. This rise in populism has been aided and abetted by transnational actors who have developed a sophisticated strategy of disinformation aimed at undermining trust in government, democratic institutions, civil society, and the media in democratic countries.
- 12.) Three questions have potential major impact for the roles and effectiveness of the UN. The first is whether the wars of the Middle East are a harbinger of things to come or an exception: should we expect to see a reversion to Cold War patron-client interventions elsewhere in the world? The second is whether the major powers and Member States will recommit themselves to strengthening the standard treatment regime for civil wars or instead let it drift towards potential catastrophic failure. The answers to these questions likely depend on a third more fundamental question, indeed existential question concerning the Post Cold War international order: will the rise of economic nationalism and populism in the wealthy democracies lead to an abandonment of international economic and security cooperation on which the order has depended?



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Civil war and the current international system

Some trends and patterns

- The number of countries with a civil war in progress that killed at least 1,000 people grew steadily from 1946 to a high point of 48 in the early 1990s (48 is about 30% of non-microstates). It then declined to levels between 26 and 32 since 2000 (16 to 20%). Global civil war prevalence has been increasing again for about the last 10 years.
- Civil war prevalence declined substantially in all regions after the early 1990s, then leveled out in all regions except MENA. MENA is the only region to see a substantial increase, occurring since about 2001.
- Relatedly, a striking trend is that the share of ongoing civil wars in which one or more rebel groups self-identifies as jihadis has increased from about 5% in 1990 to 44% today.

PKOs, problems and prospects

- The results of a fair bit of academic research suggests that on net, PKOs in the 1990s probably contributed to the decline in global civil war prevalence just noted. Outside of Asia and MENA, over 50% of the civil wars that ended or were ongoing in 1990-2014 had PKO “treatment” (a massive change from before 1990). Research finds evidence that peace duration following PKO intervention is greater than without a PKO, other things equal.
- But developments of the last 15 years suggest two major problems with the “PKO+ treatment regime” (PKOs plus post-conflict aid, NGOs, int’l justice, etc).
 1. Current conditions in MENA do not favor the use or success of the PKO+ treatment model. But this is where, arguably, the biggest threats to int’l peace and security related to civil war and state failure are now.
 2. In countries with dysfunctional states, the PKO+ treatment model acts as at best a Band-Aid. Third parties (the UN, the US in Iraq or Afghanistan, NATO, the EU, etc.) simply do not know how to help locals build a self-governing, self-financing state within U.N. recognized borders or, in some cases, any borders.

- The UN system and the major power donors should focus on **containment** of the effects of state failure in general, and of the transnational jihadi movement in MENA in particular. This will entail better humanitarian relief for refugees where it is possible to deliver without making matters worse (a problem that needs more attention), and more generally trying to help protect from spillover effects basically functional states whose neighbors have major conflicts or collapsed, highly dysfunctional states.
- Longer-run stabilization and possibilities for effective state building and economic development in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Lebanon, and affected neighbors likely awaits “diplomatic revolutions” (and/or internal revolutions) among competing regional powers and extra-regional major powers engaged in the MENA region. UN-sponsored or mediated diplomacy might help here.



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The Global Refugee Crisis: Regional Destabilization and Humanitarian Protection

Many governments express concern about the destabilizing effects of hosting large refugee populations. Large-scale forced displacement places an immense strain on the resources of the host states, the refugees, and international donors. Some governing parties fear challenges due to popular anger at perceived economic hardship and social pressures sparked by refugee populations. Refugee crises may exacerbate existing political, ethnic, or religious tensions within the host state or between the host and sending states. Host states struggling to meet the needs of both displaced people and their own citizens resent the lack of assistance from wealthier Western countries. In the worst case scenario, destabilization of the host state and threats to refugee protection can exacerbate civil and international conflict. Current refugee crises in the Middle East have provoked some of those concerns in host states, although the most extreme worries remain hypothetical at this point.

The Syrian displacement crisis currently receives the most attention in the Middle East, and beyond. Although many comparisons are made to the militarized Palestinian refugees of past decades, Syrian refugees are not a similarly radicalized or militarized population. The following sections describe the risk factors that can lead to destabilization in a refugee-hosting state. Overall, the provision of legal and physical protection for the displaced, and progress toward a durable solution to their situation, will blunt many of the potential risks. Analyzing the following risk factors allows observers to determine the likelihood of destabilization, and potential policies to avert negative outcomes.

Reasons for displacement. The origin, or cause, of the refugee crisis directly influences the refugees' propensity for militarization and radicalization. Three categories of refugee groups are situational refugees, persecuted refugees, and state-in-exile refugees. Situational refugees, such as the Syrians, fled from generalized violence and threats; they have minimal political organization or allegiance to any of the combatant groups. The primary goal of situational refugees to return home in peace and regain their means of livelihood. State-in-exile refugees are highly militarized and usually left their country as a strategy of war. Persecuted refugees flee due to targeted violence or threats based on a group characteristic such as ethnicity or religion. This category includes Palestinian refugees from 1948 and 1967. Persecuted refugees tend toward

greater group cohesiveness than situational refugees, but have less likelihood of military organization than state-in-exile groups (Lischer, 2005).

Length of time in exile. The history of the Palestinian refugees demonstrates that a persecuted refugee group can coalesce over time, increasing its capability for political action and radicalization. Solutions to break that cycle include return to the home country, permanent integration into the host country, or third country resettlement. The worst situations afflict refugees stuck in camps, which were originally meant as temporary accommodation, where international attention and assistance dwindle over time. Frustrated, desperate refugees are not allowed to leave, to hold jobs, own land, and children do not receive adequate education or health care. In that context, joining a militant group may seem like the best available option.

The conditions of exile. Measures intended to reduce host state destabilization such as enclosed camps and denial of legal employment infringe on refugee protection and rights. Over time, those policies meant to increase state security backfire by isolating and impoverishing the refugees and creating resentment. Far-flung camps also offer increased opportunities for criminal and political violence to flourish. Refugees seek freedom of movement, the right to work, and education for their children. While locals may resist allowing refugees those freedoms, in the long run, more self-sufficiency reduces tensions and can even have a positive economic impact. Regardless of legal restrictions, markets will abound among the displaced. The question is really whether jobs will occur legally or as part of a distorted informal economy (with the criminal networking that goes with that).

A determinative factor for regional destabilization is the capability and willingness of the host state to promote stability. Factors that influence host state policy include the historical context of displacement, regional and domestic politics, and the international response to the crisis.

Unsurprisingly, refugee crises tend to occur in unstable and high-conflict regions, which begets further violence and displacement. Trying to resolve a crisis in isolation of the regional security environment generally leads to frustration and a waste of resources. For example, the return of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees who had been in Syria does not indicate improvement in the Iraq conflict; it merely demonstrates the decreasing options available to the Iraqis who, for the most part, remain displaced within Iraq. Rather than solving a problem, refugee return merely relocated it

Policy-makers often view host state security and refugee security as unrelated—or even opposing—factors. In reality, refugee protection and state stability are deeply intertwined; undermining one factor weakens the other. Policies to protect refugees, both physically and legally, reduce potential threats from the crisis and bolster state security. Overwhelmed, and often impoverished, host states cannot provide this protection without significant international assistance. Outside help is also required when the host state is hostile to the displaced population or seeks to manipulate their situation for unrelated gains. Mitigating the risk factors for host state destabilization and refugee insecurity will reduce the likelihood that a refugee crisis will contribute to further conflict.