Identity Issues and Civil War: Ethnic and Religious Divisions

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Note: This draft still needs work. We welcome comment, particularly in overall framing, transitions and coherence between sections, and a deeper critical engagement with the literature. Also help us identify missing citations and debates you think merit discussion.

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Ethnic and religious identities are entangled in most civil wars. By one count, as many as 64% of civil wars in recent decades have been fought along ethnic lines (Denny and Walter 2014; Themner and Wallensteen 2012; Lacina and Gleditsch 2005). As we write, a bloody sectarian war in Syria fought mainly between ‘Alawis and Sunnis has spilled over the borders into Iraq and threatens Lebanon’s delicate sectarian politics. Russia has intervened in Ukraine’s civil war in defense of ethnic Russians. In South Sudan, feuding elites have mobilized tribal militias and disaffected army elements, with much fighting on the ground pitting Nuer versus Dinka. These cases underscore the prevalence of ethnic and religious conflict and reinforce folk wisdom about the explosiveness of identity conflict and the barriers to ethnic and religious accommodation in many societies. Indeed, approximately 14 per cent of the ethnic minorities in the world have been involved in significant violence against the state (Gurr 1996; Fearon 2003).

Yet most ethnic groups in most places live without experiencing large-scale, organized ethnic violence (Fearon and Laitin 1996). Indeed, much research suggests that the entanglement of ethnic and religious identity in political violence and civil war is highly complex. Even civil wars coded as “ethnic” or “religious” in character are fought in ways that complicate popular understandings or the role being played by such identities (Kalyvas 2003, 2006). For instance, in civil wars engulfing Syria and Iraq, notwithstanding the zeal of Sunni Salafists and Shi’a and Alawite radicals on either side, alliances between armed groups and the regional governments backing them appear largely opportunistic in nature (Zubaida 2014). In eastern Ukraine, the roots of the current conflict are arguably more economic than ethnic (Zhukov 2014). And in South Sudan, the logic of violence is essentially material rather than ethnic: “On the surface these appear to be ethnic conflicts, but that is a product of ethnic patronage that constitutes military units, not deep-rooted tribal animosities” (de Waal 2014: 362).

How do ethnic and religious identities shape civil wars? Under what conditions are we likely to see violence organized around ethnic and religious identities and what implications does this have for the dynamics of civil wars? We answer these questions in reviewing the voluminous literature on the identity dimensions of civil war. We first define our terms,
noting ontological controversies over how fundamental concepts such as ethnicity, identity and nationalism should be understood. The second section then reviews what we think we know about the conditions under which identity matters for civil war, examining the role of identity in how wars begin, how they are fought, and how they end. The third section reviews what these findings imply for policies to prevent and manage identity conflicts. We conclude by noting exciting directions for future research. Notably, we focus throughout on the study of civil war in political science, particularly comparative politics and international relations. We therefore set aside the relationship between identity and interstate conflict, as well as growing literatures on civil war in economics and anthropology (e.g. Miguel and Blattman 2010; Kanbur, Rajaram and Varshney 2011).

**Ethnic and Religious Identities**

The politics of identity came relatively late to the academic study of civil war. In 1970, for example, a decade after the turn to identity politics in the social sciences, Ted Robert Gurr’s seminal contribution *Why Men Rebel* made no reference to ethnic or religious identities. Literatures on political violence and social revolution, on the one hand, and identities such as ethnicity, nationalism, on the other, ran largely in parallel. Only with Donald Horowitz’s (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* did they come together. In the following two decades (1985-2005), the number of articles dealing with ethnicity and nationalism in political science roughly quadrupled (Cederman 2013). Civil war was a major focus of this literature, alongside other violent episodes such as riots, terrorism, mass killing and genocide, and state violence and repression.

Several factors converged to drive this interest in the confluence of identity politics and civil war. These included the realization that such violence was a key impediment to development, which raised the profile of identity politics in economics and political economy. Another reason for the focus on ethnic conflict was the marked decline in interstate war that saw a number of international relations specialists turn their attention to “internal” conflicts. Events themselves were a major driver, in particular the breakup of the Soviet and Yugoslav states in a burst of ethnonationalism, with shocking violence in the interrelated separatist and irredentist wars in Yugoslavia. This coincided with emergence of a number of failed states wracked by identity conflicts and incidents of ethnically motivated violence and mass
killings, especially the 1994 Rwandan genocide (see Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Kalyvas 2009).

Similarly, interest in religious identity, which was a relatively neglected area of study aside from the debate sparked by Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), surged after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. The American-led “war on terror” had echoes of this clash of civilizations. Far more important, however, has been the emergence and persistence of religiously inspired and organized insurgent groups in places such as Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria, Chechnya, Syria and Iraq. These conflicts arguably have their roots in parochial tribal rivalries and historical relations between center and periphery, rather than transnational conflict between religiously organized civilizations. Yet, many view these disputes as essentially “religious” in nature, with more attention paid to transnational terror ties than local grievances. The murkiness and complexity of these conflicts underscores the need to shed light on the particular identities and grievances entangled in these wars.

Much research has focused on problems of defining and operationalizing key terms such as identity, ethnicity and religion. An identity is a social category denoting “some fundamental and consequential sameness” in which an individual is eligible to be a member (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Henry Hale conceives of identity as a kind of “social radar” that provides individuals with a point of reference, allowing them to situate themselves within a wider group and understand how their membership affects them in the social world, including relations with other groups (2004).

Ethnic identity is correspondingly conceived as a sub-set of identities in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes based on common descent (Horowitz 1985). A crucial property of these descent-based attributes is that they are both difficult to change in the short-term and visible to other members of society (Chandra 2006). More specifically, “attributes associated with or believed to be associated with” ethnicity include those acquired genetically (e.g., skin color, gender, hair type, eye color, height, and physical features), through cultural and historical inheritance (e.g., name, language, place of birth, and origin of one’s parents and ancestors), or in the course of one’s lifetime as markers of such an inheritance (e.g., last name or tribal markings). Attributes “believed to be associated with descent” are attributes around which a
credible myth of association with descent has been woven, whether or not such an association exists in fact (Chandra 2006: 400).

Religious identity is sometimes synonymous with ethnicity. In present-day Northern Ireland, for instance, Catholic and Protestant religious practices define distinct ethnic communities in ways they do not in 21st century North America. For some groups, religious and ethnic identities may be more or less synonymous, as with Armenians who are overwhelmingly Armenian Orthodox, or Ashkenazi Jews, whose ethnic identity is wrapped up in Judaism. However, as Ashutosh Varshney notes, the distinction between ethnic and religious identity “becomes critical… when ethnicity and religion clash (East and West Pakistan before 1971, Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims, Irish Protestants and Catholics, black and white American Christians)” (Varshney 2009).

Thus, while religion is often an important feature of ethnicity, it is not synonymous with ethnicity. One way of thinking of religious identities as separate from national or ethnic identities is to emphasize the element of practices such as “sacrifice, prayer, meditation, pilgrimage, war, proselytization and charitable acts” (Toft 2012: 674). Religious identities are thus rooted in a system of practice and belief in the attainment of a beneficial personal or collective shift in existence (heaven, nirvana, paradise, salvation, ecstasy, transcendence, oneness, peace), by means of acting or not acting in specific ways which are constitutive of an established community practice, and for which empirical referents are either unnecessary or, indeed, anathema (Toft 2012: 674).

Religion shares ethnicity’s descent based character insofar as one is often born into a religious identity, though the intensity of a religious identities are tied to the extent one ceases to practice and believe in a way that ethnicity is not. We understand what it might mean to be a lapsed Catholic who no longer attends Church, or non-observent Muslim who does not pray four times a day and enjoys the occasional whiskey, or an atheist Jew who eats bacon and shellfish. The same individuals can have overlapping ethnic identities as, say, Poles, Somalis, or Jewish Americans, and these identities are not necessarily diminished by the same actions. Conversely, because ethnicity involves descent-based attributes, converting to Catholicism, Sunni Islam, or Judaism, does not necessarily make one ethnically Polish, Somali, or American Jewish.
These definitions are not without their critics. As an analytic category, identity is “riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations,” so much so that some scholars propose dropping the term altogether (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 34). Kanchan Chandra has argued that many of the causal claims made for ethnicity in political science research concern properties that are not intrinsic to ethnic identity, but vary both across ethnic and other social groups (2006). These include fixity, territorial concentration, dense social networks, cultural cohesiveness, or emotional reactions that identities elicit, all of which vary across ethnicities and other social groups. The relationship of clan, caste, tribal, and linguistic identities to ethnicity, and of ethnicity to nationalism, remains debated (Calhoun 1993).

Academic debates over how to define these concepts have real world relevance. One particular danger is that highly aggregated notions of identity shift from being categories of analysis employed by scholars to investigate social phenomena into categories of practice inherent in everyday social experience used by ordinary actors (Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). By uncritically adopting certain identities as categories of analysis, scholars can reinforce and reproduce the efforts of political entrepreneurs who use ethnicity or religion as things that exist primordially and essentially, rather than as socially constructed categories—either as “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) or “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991). For instance, in the Soviet Union, designation of certain ethnic groups as “nations” entitled to varying degrees of institutional status, a practice reflecting prevailing nationalist analysis, arguably contributed to the USSR’s collapse through a series of national revolutions that led to still simmering civil wars (Suny 1993; Bunce 1999; Roeder 2007). David Campbell (1998) argues that academic portrayals of ethnic violence in Bosnia during the bloody civil war of 1992-1995 played into the hands of ethnonationalists who sought to portray the coexistence of multiple national groups on Bosnia’s territory as unnatural and undesirable. By uncritically adopting nationalist portrayals of exclusive and irreconcilable identities, academics unwittingly helped legitimate ethnic partition. Mahmood Mamdani (2010) makes a similar point about the way violence in Darfur was uncritically portrayed by the media and academics. Rather than viewing the war in Darfur as a messy insurgency involving communities with complex identities and histories, the violence was portrayed as a one-sided genocidal campaign pitting ethnic “Africans” versus “Arabs” in ways that sought to legitimate western intervention (Seymour 2014). In sum, the act of designating certain ethnic or religious communities as groups and making
claims about the consequences of groupness calls for careful attention, especially where violence is concerned (Brubaker 2004).

**Under what conditions and how does identity matter in civil wars?**

Turning to explanations that situate identity in civil war processes, we examine arguments about how ethnicity and religion shape how wars begin, how they are fought, and how they end.

*Identity and the Causes of Civil Wars*

Identity-based arguments have played an important role in explanations for how civil wars begin. For Horowitz (1985), ethnic conflict was rooted in the social-psychology of group entitlements that evoked passions, anxieties and apprehensions as rival groups contested their relative superiority within a state. Other authors make similar arguments linking ethnic grievances to contestation over the state or state based discrimination (Gurr 1993; Gurr and Moore 1997). The social-psychological elements of Horowitz’s arguments rest on a view of ethnicity rooted in kinship, fictive but accepted by coethnics. This is seen as particularly relevant for issues of threat perceptions. As Horowitz writes, “if group members are potential kinsmen, a threat to any member of the group may be seen in somewhat the same light as a threat to the family” (1985: 65). The conflation of ethnicity with kinship accounts for the increased probability and intensity of ethnic conflict in societies where political contestation becomes organized along ethnic lines.

The strongest version of such claims take the form of primordialist or essentialist arguments emphasizing the irrational psychological and emotional mechanisms behind the sense of kinship that pervades ethnically and religiously organized violence. As Walker Connor argues, “people do not voluntarily die for things that are rational” (1994: 206). The symbols, poetry, songs, metaphors and recurrent images behind ethnic appeals—“blood, family, brothers, sisters, mother, forefathers, ancestors, home”—tap into the sense of kinship that underlies ethnic and religious solidarities (Connor 1994). In a similar vein, Stuart Kaufmann (2001) emphasizes the symbolic and mythical elements of ethnic politics that appeal to emotions rather than rational interests. Structural changes can trigger emotional mechanisms of fear, hatred, and resentment that promote ethnic violence and conflict. Roger Petersen (2002) has taken this insight further in arguing that the same “ancient hatreds” many
academics are quick to dismiss do in fact serve as “schema” that shape ethnic violence. Recent work has emphasized the role of emotion in catalyzing grievances and sustaining collective action (e.g. Petersen 2011; McDoom 2012; Pearlman 2013).

An important alternative to arguments based on seemingly innate identity emphasizes the instrumentalization of identities, particularly by entrepreneurial elites (c.f. Gourevitch 1979; Bates 1974, 1982). Against an essentialist view that identities endure and give rise to deep seated grievances between groups competing for status, the instrumentalist argument portrays identity and the grievances to which it gives rise as malleable, or, at the extreme, even epiphenomenal. “Pure instrumentalists emphasize individual calculus in an identity marketplace in which ethnic entrepreneurs can create and sell new identity categories to willing buyers” (Sambanis and Shayo 2013: 299). The focus here shifts from the emotions and passions that ethnonationalism and religion evoke to the strategic rationale behind adopting or promoting particular identities according to self-interest. For example, V. P. Gagnon argues that “the violence in the former Yugoslavia was a strategic policy chosen by elites who were confronted with political pluralism and popular mobilization” (2004: 7). Benjminin Valentino (2004) makes a comparable argument about the elite calculus behind mass killing, arguing that events like the 1994 Rwandan genocide reflect brutal strategies design to counter threats to leaders’ power and advance their interests.

A different set of perspectives downplay the role of identity altogether. A number of scholars have emphasized the degree to which mobilization for conflict and individual participation in conflict can instead be linked to opportunity. While ethnicity gives would-be rebels a stronger base of support from which to recruit, a social base in a particular identity is insufficient without the opportunity to rebel afforded by financing or state weakness. Many ethnic (and some religious) groups tend to be geographically concentrated, making the physical act of mobilizing easier (Gates 2002; Toft 2003). In a seminal article, Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that state capacity is a key variable explaining rebellion. Insurgencies have the opportunity to mobilize in peripheral areas of weak state capacity with minimal police or military presence (see also Buhaug, Gates and Lujala 2009). Others emphasize “greed” as a motive for rebellion (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), downplaying the role of grievances and emphasizing the gains to be had from lootable resources and diaspora funding that provide the key to financing wars (LeBillon 2001; Ross 2004). Mueller (2004) shows that even the disputes commonly considered “ethnic” (Yugoslavia and Rwanda) include high
levels of apparently opportunistic participation in violence. The role of opportunity factors, broadly construed, rather than identity factors, has been borne out in empirical work on civil war. “Cross national statistical studies find surprisingly few differences between the determinants of civil war onset in general, versus “ethnic” civil wars in particular” (Fearon 2008, 857-58; see also Fearon and Laitin 2003). However, a series of studies have presented counter evidence to this. For example, Hegre and Sambanis (2006) find that identity is associated with conflict at lower levels than are often used to test this empirically.

In response to the emphasis on opportunity, an important counterargument has sought to reclaim grievances as central to the outbreak of civil war. The concept of “identity” was, so some extent, recast as an issue of grievance. Historically, grievance suggested economic and political disadvantage. Using fine-grained data on the ethnic power relations within states, Cederman, Wimmer and Min (2010) link ethnic identity to political grievance that vary with groups’ access to state power (see also Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013)). Grievance is not immutably linked to ethnic or religious identity, but often develops and perseveres along those lines. The systematic exclusion of particular ethnic groups at the center of the state and the downgrading of ethnic groups removed from central power create conditions for violent mobilization, as excluded populations have no recourse within the political system.

Another set of explanations for conflict outbreak and perseverance focus on the bargaining process from a rationalist perspective, observing the escalation to civil war as an outcome of a failure to achieve an ex ante settlement (Powell 2004; Walter 2002, 2009). War, in this view, is “inefficient” in the sense that the costs incurred could be avoided through a negotiated compromise (Fearon 1995). Such arguments focus on the multiple ways states and ethnic groups are constrained in their ability to reach a negotiated agreement, which leads them into violent conflict. One insight is that a government has an incentive not to make concessions to one group if doing so exacerbates problems elsewhere by provoking similar demands (Toft 2003; Boone 2003; Walter 2006). Cunningham and Weidmann (2010), for instance, show that local ethnic heterogeneity creates incentives for ethnic groups to oppose accommodation of others, which they argue leads to increased grievance and a greater likelihood that groups will resort to violence against the state. A related insight focuses on problems of “issue indivisibility” as ethnic groups construct claims to territory that make concessions difficult (Hassner 2003; Goddard 2006; Toft 2006). Monica Toft (2006), for instance, shows how the Russian government’s fear of creating a precedent by bargaining
over autonomy interacted with Chechen obstinacy on the issue of independence to collapse the bargaining space for a negotiated settlement that would have precluded the bloody war in Chechnya. Finally, credible commitment insights suggest that when engaged in a dispute with the state, the stability of group identity, paired with a history of grievance, can inhibit both states and ethnic rebels from making credible promises not to fight or abuse power again (Denny and Walter 2014).

Denny and Walter provide a useful summary of three key mechanisms linking ethnicity to civil war that emphasizes the different perspectives reviewed above: “Rebel movements are more likely to organize around ethnicity because ethnic groups are more apt to be aggrieved, better able to mobilize, and more likely to face difficult bargaining challenges compared to other groups” (2014: 200). Rather than thinking of these different explanations as mutually exclusive, recent work tends to bridge these disparate explanations. Sambanis and Shayo (2013), for example, argue that while ethnic identities are socially constructed, historical and contemporary ethnic polarization is also an important part of the explanation. Likewise, Cederman, Wimmer and Min (2010) put ethnic grievances alongside considerations of the military and economic feasibility of rebellion. These studies point towards integrated explanations and mark an important advance in our understanding of the role of identity factors in the causes of civil war.

The empirical record – quantitative findings on ethnicity and war onset

As the extant literature suggests, there are a number of paths through which ethnic and religious identity might influence conflict. Detailed case studies can uncover which mechanisms are dominant at particular points in history. The quantitative literature, by contrast, has sought to determine whether ethnicity plays a role in conflict in general. Table 1 summarizes some of these findings with reference to the unit of analysis and scope of the study.
Table 1. Selected Findings on Civil War and Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Unit of analysis</th>
<th>Scope of study</th>
<th>Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic diversity and religious diversity are not associated with chance of civil war</td>
<td>Country/5 year intervals</td>
<td>Global, 1945 – 1999</td>
<td>Fearon and Laitin 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethic groups excluded from power see more civil war</td>
<td>Politically relevant ethnic group/year</td>
<td>Global, 1946 - 2005</td>
<td>Cederman et al. 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic diversity increase chance of small scale civil war</td>
<td>Country/year</td>
<td>Global, 1946 - 1992</td>
<td>Ellingsen 2000</td>
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Identity and Wartime Dynamics

The literature on civil war was slow to pay attention to dynamics within wars, including the role of identities in shaping wartime processes. Recent work seeks to put these processes at the center of work on civil war, much of which has traditionally focused on either how wars begin or how they end (e.g. Wood 2008; Lyall 2014; Checkel 2014). We briefly survey research highlighting number of important processes linking identity to important wartime dynamics, including cohesion and fragmentation, levels of violence, civilian victimization, and patterns of recruitment and participation.

Early work applying the security dilemma to ethnic conflict noted how ethnic identity facilitated cohesion among co-ethnics and this is seen as one of the underlying reasons that conflict breaks out and sustains along ethnic lines. Group cohesion enhances the vulnerability of neighboring ethnic groups, particularly when there is a history of ethnic conflict, settlement patterns that create incentives for ethnic cleansing, and windows of opportunity arising from state collapse (Posen 1993). Chaim Kaufmann (1996) similarly argues that violence itself “hardens” ethnic identities in ways that promote ethnic cohesion, echoing a number of authors who provide explanations for the mechanics and effects of identity polarization (Kuran 1998; McDoom 2012). Ethnic and religious identities provide potentially cohesive social bases for recruiting combatants and maintaining their allegiances in the military contest against the government (Gates 2002). Yet as noted in our introduction, cohesion may not always promote conflict. Fearon and Laitin (1996) suggest that in-group
policing of deviant behavior within ethnic groups helps maintain cooperation across groups. Varshney (2003) shows that variation in social structure—whether dense civic networks are intercommunal rather than intracommunal—explains variation in the ability of Hindu and Muslim communities to live together peacefully in some places but not others.

Kalyvas (2003, 2006) calls to question the centrality of “supralocal” identities in civil war, showing a high level of violence at the local level is often unrelated to overarching identity cleavages. “[W]e label political actors in ethnic civil wars as ethnic actors, the violence of ethnic wars as ethnic violence, and so on. Yet such characterization turns out to be trickier than anticipated, because civil wars usually entail a perplexing combination of identities and action” (Kalyvas 2003: 476). Drawing attention to endogenous processes of revenge and protection seeking, and the ways that local conflicts promote alliances with more powerful outside actors, Kalyvas notes that much violence is driven by local conflicts often unrelated to the wider ethnic or religious stakes in a given war.

Other work demonstrates the weakness of ethnic or religious identity as a driving force that maintains cohesion. Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour (2012a, 2012b) examine internally fragmented groups, demonstrating that internal fragmentation is common and fosters violent conflict among coethnic factions and against civilian population (see also Cunningham 2014). Another set of works emphasizes the dynamic nature of fragmentation within nominally coherent “armed groups.” Staniland (2012, 2014) links the societal structure of a group with the organizational structure of rebels representing them and demonstrates that certain types of rebellions are susceptible to state strategies to “flip” faction and turn violence against co-ethnics. In her study of alliance formation in Bosnia and Afghanistan, Christia (2012) show the tenuous loyalty of fighters on the same “side” can be altered by wartime shifts in power and the resulting estimation of likely victory. Other work looks beyond ethnic and religious cleavages to uncover important dynamics of contention and fragmentation within ethnonationalist communities as rival organizations compete for representation, legitimacy and hegemony (Pearlman 2011; Lawrence 2013; Krause 2013).

The identity dimensions of violence against civilians have been an important line of investigation. Some research finds little connection between ethnicity and civilian victimization generally (Valentino, Huth and Balch-Lindsay 2004; Wood 2010), despite ample case studies of particular cases that suggested the centrality of identity cleavages.
Quantitative studies of conflict in ethnically fractionalized societies, for instance, find little evidence of more intense violence against civilians (Querido 2009; Kim 2010). Others, however, drawing on disaggregated data, find some support for the notion that ethnic divisions promote more intense violence against civilians, whether through the interaction of macro-territorial motives that promote ethnic cleansing with micro-level polarization-territorial motives that promote ethnic cleansing with micro-level polarization (Weidmann 2011), or through strategic incentives to target the civilian supporters of ethnic adversaries (Fjelde and Hultman 2013).

Related to this work are a set of relatively recent findings about the gendered dimensions of civil wars, especially sexual violence. In examining the impact of civil wars on men and women, Plümper and Neumayer (2006) find that women are more adversely affected due to wars indirect consequences for agriculture, infrastructure and public health provision. Notably, the adverse effects of conflict for women are especially higher for women than for men in ethnic wars. The systematic perpetration of rape is one obvious consequence that women tend to bear more than men. Novel cross-national data on patterns of sexual violence reveal that ethnicity is the most common form of targeting choice, particularly for state militaries that commit most incidents of sexual violence (Nordås and Cohen 2014). Dara Kay Cohen (2013) argues that massive wartime rape is tied to specific recruitment mechanisms that “socialize” new recruits into the group to increase unit cohesion. Upending both stereotypes and many explanations emphasizing female victims and male perpetrators, evidence form Sierra Leone suggests that women can be perpetrators of rape. Rape arguably follows from leaders’ decisions to commit sexual violence against targeted ethnic groups, which can sometimes have a strategic dimension in identity wars (Wood 2007). Far from being inevitable, however, wartime rape occurs when organizational norms and indiscipline allow combatants to do so, implying that it can also be stopped or limited (Wood 2009).

Others link ethnic and religious identity directly to recruitment and participation in civil war. Much of this work proceeds from the collective action problem facing rebels. Given the potentially high costs of participation in rebellion in pursuit of collective goods, we should see much free-riding as rational individuals forgo the costs of participation (Moore 1995; Lichbach 1998). From this perspective, the density of identity networks helps rebels solve collective action problem through ingroup policing and monitoring and sustain high-risk mobilization by rooting participation in quotidian social networks (Parkinson 2013). Groups
with political agendas and social resources rooted in ethnic or religious identities are likely to
behave differently. Jeremy Weinstein (2007) notes that groups with variable complements of
resources will generate different types of rebellion, with economic endowments promoting
opportunistic joiners, and social endowments such as ethnic and religious identities bolstering
activist recruitment and participation. Yet there is nothing inevitable about ethnic conflict
becoming “ethnic war” in which combatants recruit through ethnic networks rather than
irregular war where violence is organized across ethnic lines (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007).
Many conflicts are marked by “ethnic defection” as co-ethnics are recruited both insurgent
and counterinsurgent armies and fight one another (Kalyvas 2008; Lyall 2010; Staniland
2012; Seymour 2014). This suggests a far more complex relationship between identity and
participation in civil wars and violent acts taking place in the context of such wars.

Identity and Ending Civil Wars

Scholars have also debated the role of ethnicity on the duration and recurrence of civil wars.
Arguments related to duration draw on the literatures above that emphasize ability and
incentives for mobilization to violence (assuming greater incentives will lead to longer wars),
as well as the literature that centers on the challenges of bargaining effectively to prevent or
resolve war.

Insofar as ethnicity makes mobilization more likely and bargaining to resolve a dispute more
difficult, ethnicity is argued to increase war duration. Several studies have found this to be the
case. Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2010) show a correlation between ethnic polarization
with longer civil wars. Other suggest that the relationship is non-linear, that countries with a
moderate degree to ethnic fractionalization have the longest wars because these are likely
categorized by several distinct but large ethnic groups that can maintain cohesion vis-à-vis
one another (Collier et al. 2004). In contrast to the purported conflict lengthening effect of
ethnic diversity, Cunningham et al. (2009) find in that greater ethnic fractionalization is
associated with shorter wars when we take into consideration a number of other
characteristics of the rebel groups ignored in other studies. Recent work has sought to unpack
the relationship between identity and civil war duration, identifying intervening variables.
Fearon and Laitin (2011), for instance, link ethnicity and migration patterns, demonstrating
that the ethnic dimension of many conflicts relates to minority group protection of their land
in the face of in-migration from a dominant population. One study suggests that institutions
mediate the effects of ethnicity on civil war duration, as the politicization of identity backfires on governments unable to accept settlements to end protracted conflicts (Wucherpfennig et al 2012).

Though religion has been studied less, there are reasons to believe that religious conflicts are longer and harder to resolve because of the challenges posed by bargaining over sacred spaces or other seemingly indivisible issues. Ron Hassner argues that “conflicts over sacred space are a pervasive and global phenomenon” and that there are a variety of ways that they contribute to the outbreak and maintenance of conflict (2003: 4). Monica Toft (2006) furthers this logic, suggesting that nationalist homelands as well and religious belief can create indivisibility by changing the way people think about their own time- horizons and increasing the value of seemingly insignificant territory (see also Goddard 2006).

The question of how to manage the challenges of ethnicity in the post-conflict phase has also generated robust debate. Arend Lijphart’s (1977) seminal work on power-sharing offered an institutional response to bargaining and commitment challenges ethnic groups face by advocating a system in which each minority has a veto and a degree of political autonomy. The “consociationalism” model Liphart advocated, which emphasizes the cooperation of elites from different organized groups to promote stability and democracy while avoiding violence, has met with criticism (e.g. Lustick 1995; Horowitz 2014). Indeed, a vibrant debate has emerged over the prospects for different types of power-sharing to end ongoing civil wars, prevent their recurrence, and forestall civil wars in countries susceptible to violence. Recent work has emphasized various types of institutional arrangement related to power sharing across ethnic and religious groups, such as territorial, political, and security sector power sharing, different electoral arrangements, or autonomy and federalism (Hoodie and Hartzell 2005; Lake and Rothchild 2005; Roeder and Rothchild 2005; Cammet and Malesky 2012; Erk and Anderson 2013).

Donald Horowitz, in a bleak review of the challenges ethnic divisions pose to interethnic power sharing, argues that “many states that need conciliatory institutions will not get them; others will not keep them if majorities are able to break out of them; and still others will not change them when stalemate indicates that change is necessary” (2014: 18). Pessimism over the prospects for reconciling divided ethnonationalist and religious groups is mirrored in work on partition and secession as a solution to protracted violence. Partition along ethnic
lines to separate scattered warring groups into consolidated, defensible enclaves is advocated as a last resort (e.g. Kaufmann 1996, 1998; Mearsheimer and Van Evera 1995). Rooted in the insights of the security dilemma and primordialist views of identity, partition is recurring theme in the list of solutions to identity-based conflicts, most recently in Iraq (Galbraith 2006; Kaufmann 2006). The theory has been criticized on empirical, pragmatic and ethical grounds (e.g. Kumar 1997; Sambanis 2000; Fearon 2004; Kuperman 2004; Licklider and Bloom 2006; Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl 2009; Jenne 2012). Moving away from a primordialist reading of deeply rooted group hatreds driving conflict suggests different prescriptions. If, for instance, we believe in the malleability of intergroup cleavages and the ability to meaningfully alter identities and their political salience, warring communities no longer necessarily have to be forcibly separated in the interests of peace. In sum, much of what we think about the conditions under which partition or power-sharing are likely to succeed hinge on theoretical and empirical findings about the nature of identity itself.

**Paths forward in future research**

While studies of identity divisions and civil war have made important strides in the past three decades, there is clearly much more work to be done. By way of conclusion, we chart several exciting avenues for future research, including interdisciplinarity, improved research designs, methods and access to comparative data, unpacking identity politics, and theoretically integrated explanation.

First, while contemporary social science has been slow to study ethnicity and religion, identity is now a key conceptual category in political science, anthropology, economics, sociology and history. There are promising avenues for connecting related research across these fields (Kanbur, Rajaram and Varshney 2009). Recent studies demonstrate how political scientists can meaningfully engage with history (Mylonas 2012; Lawrence 2013), anthropology (Parkinson 2013; Autesserre 2014), sociology (Staniland 2014), economics (Blattman and Bazzi 2014), criminology (Skarbek 2014), and psychology (Pearlman 2013). Complementaries between these fields, both theoretical and methodological, promise to advance our understanding of identity divisions. Political science is well positioned between the generalizing and deductive push of economics and the context specific focus of
anthropology, and between society, markets and the state, to take advantage of insights from other disciplines.

Second, reflecting the influence of other fields, the study of identity and civil war has seen important advances in research design, methods and data. Comparative case studies have become much richer, often informed by original data collection and formal modeling that builds on extended fieldwork and country expertise (e.g. Christia 2012; Driscoll 2014; c.f. Lyall 2014). The study of civil war has seen the increasing use of experiments, including field experiments, to improve the barriers to causal inference in violent, data poor settings (Habyarimana, Humphreys, and Posner 2011; Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009; Voors et al. 2009; Lyall, Blair and Imai 2013). Large-n work has similarly improved with the refinement and disaggregation of data and better modeling techniques. Researchers can now look beyond aggregated country-level data into much more fine-grained phenomena, including ethnic power relations through the EPR-ETH dataset (Cederman, Wimmer and Min 2009), geocoded civil wars data including ethnic settlement pattern through UCDP/PRIO GeoEPR, geocoded conflict events (UCDP Georeverenced Events and ACLED), and even alternative strategies to war such as non-violent campaigns for political change in NAVCO 2.0 (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013). An important next step is data collection at the organizational level below the level of “ethnic” and “religious” identity groups, with several projects already underway (Asal et al. 2008, Cunningham et al. 2013).

Third, while ethnicity has been the focus to date, the renewed prevalence of religious, sectarian, tribal, clan and kinship identities promises to be an exciting avenue of research. These identities, as much or more than ethnic ones, are at the center of protracted conflicts unfolding in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. By only focusing on ethnic or religious cleavages, existing studies often ignore other important cross-cutting cleavages (Selway 2011). Whereas ethnic groups are hierarchically ordered, bounded units, other forms of social organization, such as tribal or clan identities, are relational and situate shifting groups within more fluid social orders marked by the ability of conflict to scale up or down segmented lineages.

Finally, and in closing, after over three decades of research, the microfoundations of identity-based conflict are still unclear (Miguel and Blattman 2010). Advances into our understanding of identification, identity mobilization and processes of ethnification and increasing
religiosity in conflict are likely to be made at the intersection of the theories surveyed above. Individuals are obviously self-interested, but at the same time also care about co-ethnics and co-religionists; instrumental rationality can be in tension with bounded and value rationality; identities change and identity repertoires shift, but slowly and within limits.

This review provides a basis for cautious optimism about the progress made in the past three decades of research into the dynamics of identity in civil wars. In answering foundational question—such as why men rebel, why ethnonationalism is so conducive to severe conflict, or why ethnic and religious conflicts are so difficult to resolve—we have a set of compelling answers, or at least an emerging consensus on the answers. A series of important new questions have also emerged along the way, particularly those concerning the dynamics of conflict and violence, promising important insights in future research.
References (in progress)


