



Civil wars: a very short introduction

by Florence Gaub

The civil war in Syria is not the first of its kind to be extraordinarily complex, violent and difficult to settle. Lasting ten times longer than international wars (on average 7 years), civil wars are the longest, and tragically, the bloodiest of all forms of human conflict. Although 2% of countries in the world are undergoing some form of civil war at any given time, the phenomenon is less studied than international wars – in part because it is so much more complex to understand, prevent and bring to an end, as the Syrian example shows.

What is a civil war?

There are over 30 definitions of civil war. While some differentiate by motive, others use the number of casualties or the type of actors involved as criteria. One of the most comprehensive definitions is that of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which classifies non-international armed conflicts as a 'situation of violence involving protracted armed confrontations between government forces and one or more organized armed groups, or between such groups themselves, arising on the territory of a State.' A civil war is therefore different from isolated acts of terrorism, riots, civil unrest, genocide or a revolution in that there is a minimum degree

of organisation and resistance on the non-state side (with at least 5% of casualties inflicted by the weaker party), and a minimal level of intensity in the fighting.

But it is chiefly the existence of an *organised*, non-state armed group (typically consisting of between 500 and 5000 members) which differentiates civil wars from other forms of conflict: a reason why the large-scale violence which plagued Iraq from 2006 onwards does not fall into this category. In the case of Syria, however, the ICRC declared the conflict to be a civil war in July 2012 based on a series of benchmarks, such as intensity of armed clashes, the type and numbers of government forces involved, and the number of casualties and damage caused.

In its assessment of the level of organisation of non-state forces, the ICRC looks at military criteria such as 'the existence of a chain of command, the capacity to transmit and enforce orders, the ability to plan and launch coordinated military operations, and the capacity to recruit, train and equip new fighters'. This definition – like many others – does not account for the motives for conflict. Indeed, there are different types of civil wars, including wars of secession, anti-colonial struggles, or wars aiming at regime change.

Why do civil wars break out?

Given the interest political science takes in civil wars, there is a tangible bias in the literature towards examining their political root causes, often to the detriment of economic factors. In recent years, however, more extensive analyses of all civil wars since 1945 have refuted several commonly-held beliefs.

First of all, an outbreak of civil war is not necessarily more likely to occur in multi-ethnic states. Indeed, it depends on the degree of societal fragmentation and, even where this is at its worst, other factors are of greater relevance. In fact, research shows that states with many ethnic groups are actually less likely to experience civil war. It is statistically proven that it is only when one ethnic group forms an absolute majority that there is a slight increase in the likelihood of such a conflict. Therefore, while it is true that the leaderships of respective conflicting parties frequently employ ethnic narratives, ethnic diversity *per se* is not enough to trigger a civil war.

Instead, civil wars occur mostly where there is an opportunity - in other words, civil wars break out because the conditions are right for them to do so. Importantly, the main factor here is financial, as establishing and equipping a non-state armed force is extremely costly. For example, the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers needed revenue of €150–250 million per year, which corresponds to 20–35% of the claimed territory's GDP. This figure is extraordinarily high considering that a peaceful political opposition party like the Australian Labor Party operates with €35 million a year. Simply put, civil wars break out where the finances are available to sustain the necessary non-state armed force.

An economic factor which facilitates rebel access to funds is the presence of primary commodities, i.e. any goods which require minimal processing before being used (such as crude oil, cotton, rubber, grains, timber, diamonds, metals and other minerals), since these can be sold easily. Syria, with its exports largely made up of crude oil, minerals, fruits and vegetables, is a good example in this regard. So strong is the link between civil wars and primary commodities that a decrease in their prices can actually increase the likelihood of an end to the fighting. Conflicts in countries which depend on primary commodities

are therefore more likely to end in negotiated settlement than outright victory for either side.

There are, of course, other factors which affect the likelihood of a civil war breaking out. At high risk are also those countries which have a low GDP as the state is less likely to have control over the whole territory and there is a greater pool of recruits available to the rebels. Statistically speaking, €1000 less in per capita income corresponds to a 36% likelier chance of civil war. Conversely, a fast-growing GDP provides a certain protection against civil war because the labour market is dense and, therefore, rebel organisations face more difficulties in finding recruits.

Moreover, mountainous countries are equally at a higher risk – in part because mountains are difficult to access (and therefore natural safe havens), but in part also because they have, on average, lower levels of GDP. Lastly, civil wars are also more likely to break out in states which have a high percentage of males aged 15 to 29 – who are more likely to be recruited by rebel organisations.

With its mountainous terrain (especially in the West, where most of the fighting is taking place), a low GDP, a sizable percentage of young men (23% of its population was under 25 in 2011)

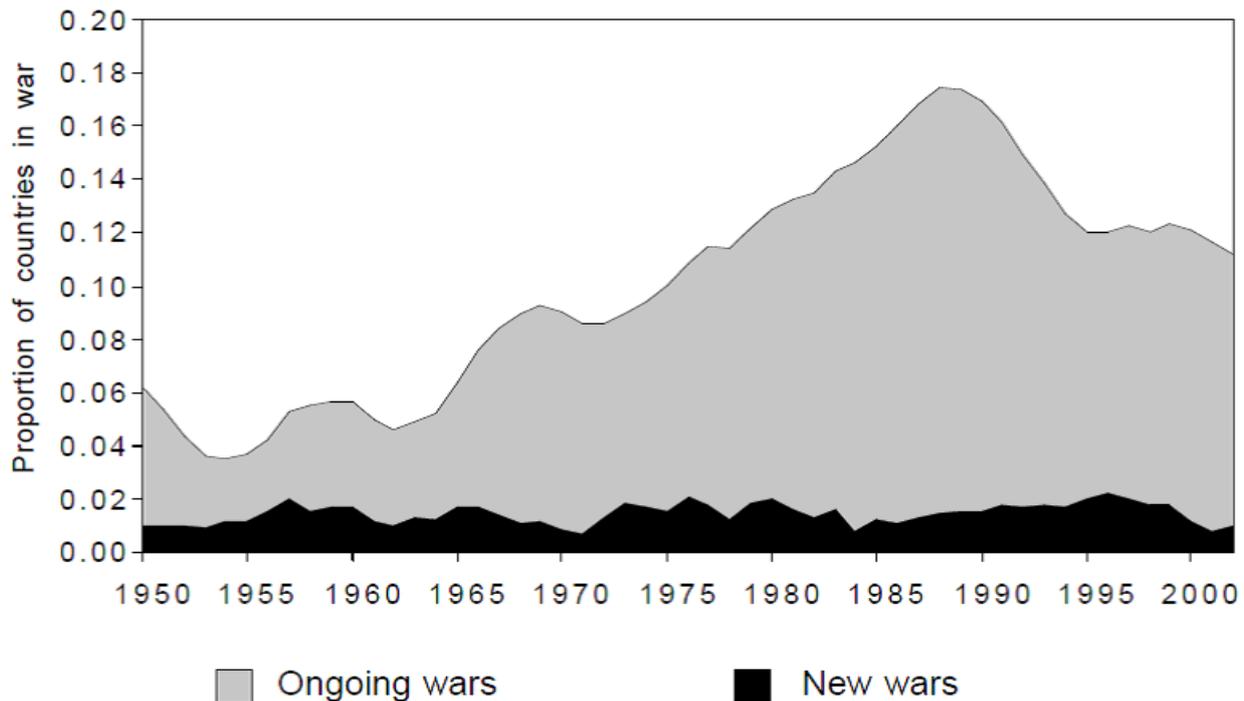
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and the availability of primary commodities, it is apparent that Syria was at high risk of civil war for quite some time. The same applies to other countries in the area, such

as Lebanon (which experienced 15 years of civil war itself), and to many African states. Islam, although used by some as a causal explanation, statistically has no impact on the occurrence of civil wars.

There is no correlation between the size of a country's armed forces and the likelihood of a civil war – but most states with a low GDP do not have the ability to mobilise quickly and execute counter-insurgency operations, since their intelligence capabilities are limited and their resources poor. Furthermore, in the case of authoritarian regimes, their centralised structures are often not responsive to local demands. Nevertheless, civil wars are not necessarily more likely in autocracies than they are in established democracies. Where civil wars are most likely to occur is in ‘anocracies’: a political model of transition between autocracy and democracy.

The global incidence of civil war, 1950-2002



Source: Havard Hegre, 'The Duration and Termination of Civil War', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.41, no.3, May 2004, p.244

How do civil wars end?

A common explanation for the peak in the number of civil wars in the 1990s was the end of the Cold War, which allegedly 'defrosted' old conflicts. But statistics clearly show that the yearly onset of civil wars has remained relatively constant over the last century. What has changed, however, is their length, which has constantly grown since the end of the Second World War, thus increasing the overall number of on-going conflicts. While the 'average' civil war lasted 2 years in 1947, it lasted 15 years in 1999. The explanations for this are not exhaustive, but length tends to vary according to the type of civil war: where rebels fight for secession or natural resources, and where they are funded by smuggled goods, it tends to be longer than in other cases. Oddly enough, the partition of states does not make civil war recurrence less likely – thus highlighting the importance of socio-economic, rather than political, aspects of a conflict.

Most civil wars end with the military victory of one side, while only 30% result in a negotiated settlement – a trend that has been somewhat reversed since the end of the Cold War, when international preference (and pressure) for negotiated solutions emerged. Nevertheless, the chances of such a settlement are particularly low during the first three years of a conflict, and increase only gradually over time. This indicates that civil wars have a sort of an 'internal clock' that has yet to be entirely understood.

The chances for negotiated settlements to succeed depend, essentially, on two criteria. First, the leaderships of the parties involved must have the commitment and the capacity to execute what is agreed upon (in a fragmented situation, the latter is not always the case). Second, all sides involved have to have realised that they cannot win militarily. Such realisation depends largely on perception: how a party in a civil war assesses the likelihood of victory is contingent on subjective as well as objective factors. The supply of weapons from outsiders, for instance, not only enhances the probability of a civil war but also increases the expectation of an eventual military victory.

As the hope of outright victory decreases with time, a negotiated solution is more likely the longer a conflict lasts. Outsiders can play an important role here, since the success of a settlement depends in part on a 'guarantor' who is both willing and able to enforce the agreed framework. Examples include NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as Kosovo, or the United Nations in East Timor. Ideally, the guarantor has not only sufficient financial and military capabilities but also a strong commitment to peace.

One option to end a civil war is a full-scale military intervention. Statistics show that intervention on the government's side tends to lengthen a war, while intervention on the rebel side shortens it. If

both sides are assisted by outsiders, the conflict reaches a stalemate and is therefore prolonged - which explains why, on average, civil wars involving outsiders are both deadlier and more difficult to resolve. In addition, military intervention alone does not alter the conflict's structure: if the political and economic causes underlying the war are not addressed simultaneously, then terrorism and/or insurgency against the outside forces will begin – as was the case with the Multinational Force in Lebanon in 1983, ultimately leading to its withdrawal.

When civil wars are over

Unfortunately, no countries are at higher risk of civil war than those that have just emerged from one. Despite being at odds with the general desire for short peacekeeping and time-limited peace-building missions, a 40% probability of relapse in the first ten years after a conflict means that a long-term commitment is required. Security in this context is not only important for humanitarian and social reasons: it allows for the re-launch of the economy, which is essential for decreasing the likelihood of further conflict.

If an outsider is to enforce peace in such a situation, its success will essentially depend on the number of troops committed. Studies assessing the size of forces for any military operation have shown that the key determinant in a post-conflict environment is not the size of the territory to be covered, or the size of a potential guerrilla force to be countered, but the size of the overall population in a given territory.

Past peace-enforcement operations have had on average 13 troops per 1,000 inhabitants, but successful ones – such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, East Timor or Kosovo - have exceeded this with 20 per 1,000 inhabitants. The necessary number depends entirely on the local situation: where fighting has totally ceased and the situation is stable, one soldier per 1,000 inhabitants will suffice, but given the volatility of post-civil war environments and the high relapse probability, this is rarely the case. With a population of 22.5 million, Syria would therefore require a force that ranges from 22,500 to 450,000 troops.

The actual cost of such a force depends on the sending agency. Traditionally, a NATO soldier in a peace-enforcement environment is estimated to cost €150,000 per year, whereas one sent by the United Nations would cost €33,000. The yearly costs for a small mission could thus range

from € 745 million a year for a small UN force, to €67.5 billion for a large NATO force.

Finally, while the general tendency has been to push for elections in a post-conflict setting (especially after a negotiated settlement), research shows that elections can have a negative effect on stability if they take place too early. Since the end of the Cold War, the average time to the first post-conflict elections has dropped from 5.5 to 2.7 years. Yet it is important to remember that a recurrence of conflict is more likely the less time elapses between the end of a civil war and elections – something that is reduced by 30% if elections are held five years after peace is established.

It is also true that fragile democracies are more likely to return to war than autocracies. This is in part because an election's outcome can be contested by groups that still possess the weapons, resources and organisational networks to wage war and partly because election campaigns, which are divisive by nature, tend to fuel existing tensions in a post-conflict society. Furthermore, elections held in low-income countries without prior democratic experience tend to fall short of Western standards, thereby potentially jeopardising the legitimacy of the emerging government.

Elections early on, therefore, need to be buttressed by a strong international military presence and effective power-sharing institutions. When it comes to the establishment of state institutions in general, time is a critical factor: the World Bank's World Development Report shows that it takes at least two to three decades to reform institutions in terms of corruption, rule of law, general effectiveness and military involvement in politics.

In conclusion, although civil wars remain the most difficult form of human conflict, a vaguely positive trend is emerging: the lethality of civil wars has declined since 1990, and international norms are emerging on how to settle them. This notwithstanding, there will never be a quick fix or easy solution without large-scale international commitment.

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