

POLITICS OF CIVIL WARS

Political Science 376 / African Studies 390

Spring 2023

Lectures by William Reno

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Tuesdays & Thursdays, 09:30 to 10:50
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Overview

Scholars typically depict internal or “civil” wars as rebels versus a government, unlike inter-state wars in which armies of two or more states wage war. But all wars involve multiple layers of conflict and a variety of agendas. This course will focus on these layers of conflict at local and national levels within states. Agendas of armed actors, such as ethnic militias, vigilantes, foreign mercenaries, and criminal gangs, reflect these layers of conflict. A key proposition in this course is that these multiple agendas and complex dynamics—“wars within wars”—occupy new roles in recent and ongoing civil wars. This development stands in contrast to civil wars through the mid-20th century that included complex arrays of armed groups and agendas but tended to feature more clear-cut distinctions between state and rebel combatants. Recent civil wars, such as in Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen challenge such clear-cut distinctions. That shift constitutes one of the themes of this course, as do impacts of geopolitical change (i.e., the end of US hegemony and the rise of great power competition) on civil war initiation and character. These civil wars can become subject to broader competition between regional and global powers, with impacts on civil war character and duration.

The first part of this course will consider theories of causes of civil wars. These range from the idea that abundant natural resources and other economic opportunities provide incentives for rebellion to enterprising individuals, to “security dilemmas” (reciprocal fears that neighbors pose a threat) cause civil wars, and to the investigation of how changes in the global structure of economies and politics influence civil wars. The second part of this course will focus on the micro-politics of violence. That part will explore how armed actors use violence at the ground-level as an instrument to shape people’s behavior, recruit collaborators and encourage collusion, and create preferred political environments. The third part of the course will consider recent changes that influence the character of civil wars, such as new technologies of surveillance. Attention also turns to major geopolitical shifts, such as the decline of US hegemony in the world

and intensifying competition between great powers and regional competitors—with important consequences that include turning civil wars into proxy wars between more powerful countries and possible weakening of global norms forbidding conquest. These changes drag civil wars closer to realms of international relations and inter-state wars.

Course Requirements

Students must complete all required assignments to be eligible for a passing grade. The relative weight of each assignment is as follows:

Participation	10%	(See note below)
Two memos	30%	(15% each) Due 20 April & 16 May
A midterm exam	25%	Administered in class on 25 April
A paper (~ 10 pages)	35%	Due 30 May, in class

Participation means showing up for class and exhibiting evidence of having read assignments. A big part of life is showing up. Failure to show up for class will have a negative impact on evaluation. The midterm exam will be an essay format exercise administered in class. Details will be provided before the exam day, Tuesday, 25 April. The two memos require the student to identify and critically engage a key idea in one of the readings encountered in class readings up to that point. These memos should be about 4 pages in length.

The paper is due at the last class (30 May). This paper should be about 10 pages. The paper's topic is negotiable and can accommodate interests and goals of individual students. More general topics are permitted, i.e., "My theory of violence in civil wars" or "globalization and civil wars—the real story". Third year students might use this paper to develop an undergraduate research grant proposal. Fourth year students may set sights on bigger fellowships and grants. These and other combined purposes are welcome, provided that the topic of the paper is relevant to issues and analytical considerations associated with this class. Evaluation will be based upon the coherence of argument and presentation of supporting evidence against at least one reasonable alternative. Readings from class may be used to provide data and other information to make an argument. Students are welcome to consult work beyond the assigned readings. As length is limited, this assignment should not spiral into a major research project.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Have the capacity to distinguish among different theories and approaches for identifying and analyzing the politics of civil wars and apply this knowledge to any conflict that the student may encounter.

- Evaluate the relative efficacy of different strategies in armed conflicts and understand why various actors in conflicts adopt specific strategies.
- Understand and explain why actors in some conflicts are more prone to certain kinds of violence.
- Understand and explain the role official policies (i.e., counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, et al.) play in contemporary and recent civil war conflicts.
- Make informed judgements about efficacy of policies and tradeoffs policy choices entail.
- Think about and discuss plausible directions in which actors interested in mitigating or halting civil war violence might pursue to address new challenges.
- Critically evaluate how social science theories can inform the public and government officials about the nature of civil war outbreak and ongoing violence generally and about specific contemporary conflicts.

GOALS OF THIS COURSE

The primary goal of this course is to lead students to their own understanding of theories and empirical evidence regarding the character of historical and contemporary civil wars. This will require reading course material, discussing it in class, and writing essays based on readings, discussions and one's own analysis of core issues related to civil wars. Additional goals include:

- Educate students regarding the nature and evolution of civil wars.
- Understand the substance of academic debates over civil wars.
- Examine questions that these civil wars present to policy makers and citizens.
- Recognize the priorities and underlying assumptions of policy responses to conflicts.
- Promote critical analysis of the impact of shifts in the global structures of power and technological innovations on warfighting.
- Gain an understanding of past and current norms concerning the conduct of war.
- Understand debates about the role of international law in the conduct of civil wars.
- Promote student capacities to read social science research, and understand and be prepared to debate its approaches and findings.

Required Readings

The following required textbooks are available at Norris and various purveyors on the web. Other readings are available at the course Canvas site. The instructor will distribute handouts from time to time.

Mary Kaldor (2012) *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* [3rd edition]. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, ISBN 978-0804785495.

Trigger alert: Materials for this course about war may contain graphic imagery of war and political views that some may find objectionable. Reasonable efforts will be made to warn students of such content.

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Northwestern University is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment as possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact AccessibleNU to move forward with the university's established accommodation process (e: accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; p: 847-467-5530). If you already have established accommodations with AccessibleNU, please let me know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of the term, so we can work together to implement your disability accommodations. Disability information, including academic accommodations, is confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT

Students in this course are required to comply with the policies found in the booklet, "Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide". All papers submitted for credit in this course must be submitted electronically unless otherwise instructed by the professor. Your written work may be tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern or to download the guide, visit: <https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html>

PROHIBITION OF RECORDING OF CLASS SESSIONS BY STUDENTS

Unauthorized student recording of classroom or other academic activities (including advising sessions or office hours) is prohibited. Unauthorized recording is unethical and may also be a violation of University policy and state law. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact AccessibleNU. Unauthorized use of classroom recordings – including distributing or posting them – is also prohibited. Under the University's Copyright Policy, faculty own the copyright to instructional materials – including those resources created specifically for the purposes of instruction, such as syllabi, lectures and lecture notes, and presentations. Students cannot copy, reproduce, display, or distribute these materials. Students who engage in unauthorized recording, unauthorized use of a recording, or unauthorized distribution of instructional materials will be referred to the appropriate University office for follow-up.

SUPPORT FOR WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

*Northwestern University is committed to supporting the wellness of our students. Student Affairs has multiple resources to support student wellness and mental health. If you are feeling distressed or overwhelmed, please reach out for help. Students can access confidential resources through the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) and the Center for Awareness, Response and Education (CARE). Additional information on all of the resources mentioned above can be found here: <https://www.northwestern.edu/counseling/>
<https://www.northwestern.edu/religious-life/>
<https://www.northwestern.edu/care/>*

Class Schedule

Part I: Considering the Historical Evolution of the Concept of “Civil War” and the Search for Basic Causes of Civil Wars

March 30: Introduction to the general concept and approaches to the study of civil wars. What is a civil war and how many of them are currently underway? Are civil wars increasing or decreasing in frequency? How do we know?

Stathis Kalyvas (2007) “Civil Wars” in Carles Boix & Susan Stokes, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 416-34. This short essay is available [here](#).

April 4: Consider how the nature of civil wars changed (or not changed) over time. Is the distinction between new and old wars valid? Does it matter for Kaldor’s argument if wars of old have elements of the new embedded within them?

Mary Kaldor (2012) *New and Old Wars* [textbook], chapters “Introduction” and “Old Wars”, 1-31.

Stathis Kalyvas (2001), “‘New’ and ‘Old’ Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?” *World Politics*, 54 (Oct), 99-118, available [here](#).

April 6: A “new war” explained? Kaldor examines conflict in 1990s Bosnia-Herzegovina. What are the analytical consequences of explaining at B-H from a ground-level vs a macro-structural level? How broadly applicable is the “new war” category? Is Mexico experiencing a “new war” civil war or is this a really bad crime wave? What is the difference between “criminal violence” and civil war violence?

Mary Kaldor (2012) *New and Old Wars*, chapters “Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Case Study of a New War” and “The Politics of New Wars,” 32-93.

Stathis Kalyvas (2015) “How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59: 8, 517-540, available [here](#).

Benjamin Lessing (2021), “Conceptualizing Criminal Governance,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 19:3 (September), 854-873.

April 11: Economic explanations of civil war onset and continuation: Is greed and / or lower barriers to rebellion responsible for civil war onset? How rational are individuals’ behavior in the context of civil war violence? Are civil wars centered on control of illicit commerce a new phenomenon?

Mary Kaldor (2012) *New and Old Wars*, "The Globalized War Economy," 94-118.

Paul Collier (2000) "Rebellion as a Quasi-Criminal Activity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44 (Dec), 839-53.

Mark Shaw (2015) "Drug Trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, 1998–2014: the Evolution of an Elite Protection Network," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 53: 3 (Sept), 339-364.

April 13: Ethnic mobilization and the role of reciprocal fears of attack responsible for the onset and continuation of civil wars: Can one attribute most civil wars to the manipulations of enterprising political actors or does there need to be an underlying societal narrative of grievance or aggression? When does an ethnic category become "real" and how durable is it?

Charles King (2004) "The Micropolitics of Social Violence," *World Politics*, 56:3 (April), 431-55, available [here](#).

Jack Snyder & Robert Jervis (1999) "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara Walter & Jack Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insurgency, and Intervention*, Columbia, 15-37.

April 18: State weakness as a cause of civil wars: Are civil wars following state breakdown a new and distinct path to civil war? How does a rationalist explanation for state weakness as a cause of civil wars differ from Debos's culturally contextualized explanation? How does Debos define state weakness differently than Fearon & Laitin define this concept? Are "civil wars of state weakness" an African phenomenon or are they more widely observable?

Marielle Debos (2016) "Fluid Loyalties" and "Benefiting from War: The Unequal Share of War Dividends," *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation*, University of Chicago Press, 77-118.

James Fearon & David Laitin (2003) "Ethnicity, Insurgency & Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, 97:1 (Feb), 75-90, available [here](#).

April 20: What is the relationship of state weakness (is "weakness" the right word?) to the ground-level processes of conflict? Is patronage politics and the exercise of authority through networks instead of bureaucracies an example of the weakness of state capacity or alternative to state capacity?

William Reno (2017) "Fictionalized States and Atomized Public Spheres: A Non-Western Approach to Fragility," *Daedalus*, 146:4 (Fall), 139-151.

Steven Heydemann (2018) "Civil War, Economic Governance & State Reconstruction in the Arab Middle East," *Daedalus*, 147:1 (Winter), 48-63.

Memo Due in Class.

April 25:

Midterm Exam—in class

April 27: The variable relationship of global ideas and ideologies in the start & during civil wars. What role does local social context play? When is the liberal idea of globalism a remedy or a cause of conflict? What is the role of intervention in addressing civil war violence and its (possible) unintended consequences?

Mary Kaldor (2012) *New and Old Wars*, "Cosmopolitan Approach" 119-150.

Séverine Autesserre (2014) "Constructing Knowledge of the Host Country," *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and Everyday Politics of International Intervention*, Cambridge University Press, 59-113.

Part II: Micro-dynamics of Violence and the Social Environment of Warfare—and a Focus of Civil War Violence and Counterinsurgency in Iraq

May 2: The critical elements of violence in civil wars—the roles of interactions between actors at central and local levels, and between combatants and non-combatants, and the logic of selective versus indiscriminate violence. The logic of asymmetric information, the local dynamics of violent contention, and the identification problem

Stathis Kalyvas (2006) "A Theory of Irregular War I" and "A Theory of Irregular War II," in his *Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 87-145.

Clay Mountcastle. 2009. "Proving Ground for Punishment: Pope, Halleck and Schofield in Missouri," in his *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals*, (University of Kansas), 21-55.

May 4: Micro-politics of civil war in action: Examine the relationships that exist between insurgents, counterinsurgents, and the people. What is the relationship between narrative / ideology and the reasons why people support insurgents? Do scholars overlook other dimensions of relationships and rebel organization? A gendered view of participation in rebellion.

Mary Kaldor (2012) "New Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," *New and Old Wars*, 151-84.

Meredith Loken (2022) "Noncombat Participation in Rebellion: A Gendered Typology," *International Security*, 47: 1 (Summer), 139-170.

May 9: What is the role of ideas in the conduct of rebellion and civil war? When does behavior reflect ideological connections, political programs, and passions?

Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood (2014) "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond," *Journal of Peace Research*, 51: 2 (March), 213-226.

Sarah Parkinson (2021). "Practical Ideology in Militant Organizations," *World Politics* 73: 1, 52-81, available [here](#).

May 11: What are the limits of violence and the limits of control through fear? Atrocities and the metrics of control: Do some violent extremists miscalculate in their enterprise? Note the distinctions between suicide fighters and suicide bombers and the different tactical and strategic uses of violence. What happens when the state's armed forces lack access to (or refrain from using) tools of violence that may be assessable to insurgents?

Stathis Kalyvas (1999) "Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria," *Rationality and Society*, 11: 3, 243-285, available [here](#).

Robert Pape (2003) "The [Strategic Logic](#) of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review*, 97: 3 (August), 1-19.

Review 18 USC § 2441 ([War Crimes Act](#))

May 16: States behind rebels? What is the nature of subversion when elements of the rebel forces are embedded in government institutions, versus subversion among political outsiders? How do the people figure into these different categories of conflict? What is the relationship between electoral violence, insurgency, and civil wars?

Paul Staniland (2021) “The Politics of Threat Perception” and “How Armed Orders Change,” *Ordering Violence: Explaining Armed Group-State Relations from Conflict to Cooperation*, Cornell University Press, 17-55.

Memo Due in Class

Part III: The Organization of Armed Groups and the Logic of Violence— Consideration of some Contemporary Developments--Warfare in Multiple Dimensions?

May 18: States, organized crime, separatists, and civil war violence reexamined: Civil war and separatism as an instrument of proxy warfare. Civil wars and inter-state politics merge: influence conducted through criminalized transnational commercial networks?

Danilo Mandi (2021) “Separatism Meet Mafia,” *Gangsters and Other Statesmen: Mafias, Separatists, and Torn States in a Globalized World*, Princeton University Press, 3-36.

Pauline Bax (2022) “Russia’s Influence in the Central African Republic,” International Crisis Group, available [here](#).

US Department of the Treasury (2023) Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization, available [here](#).

May 23: Narratives and mobilization: The fragmentation of the strategic narrative and the enhanced capacity of new and old actors to communicate their narratives to global audiences. Who controls the narrative and what does this mean for states that intervene in civil wars? Has the intensification of global connections changed how insurgents craft mobilizing narratives, and if so, how does that process reflect on Kaldor’s argument about ‘new wars’?

Emile Simpson (2012) “Strategic Narrative,” and “Ethos, Vision and Confidence,” *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first Century Combat as Politics*, London: Hurst & Co., 179-226.

David Kilcullen (2009) “The Accidental Guerrilla,” in his *Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1-38.

May 25: The logic of wartime violence in the contemporary social context. Has the logic of violence changed as the context of violence (social impacts of state collapse, global

insurgent connections, urbanization) changes? Why do contemporary jihadist rebels organize in rural areas instead of in cities? What elements of the logic of violence are consistent across history and what elements are particular to our time?

Nicholas Krohley (2015) "The Sanctions Era: Shifts in Civil Society and the Rise of the Sadrist Movement," in his *Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and the Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 35-57.

Hosham Dawod (2018) "Iraqi Tribes in the Land of Jihad," in Virginie Collombier & Olivier Roy, eds., *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, London: Hurst & Co, 15-32.

May 30: Civil wars of the future in the context of great power competition.

Dominic Tierney (2021) "The Future of Sino-US Proxy War," *Texas National Security Review*, 4: 2 (Spring), 49-73, available [here](#).

Stephen Watts, et al. (2023) Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Overarching Findings and Recommendations, RAND [16 pgs.], available [here](#).

Final Papers due in class

Final Exam: There is none. As this course is conducted in a seminar format, your paper & memos will serve in place of a final exam.

Academic Year Wrap-up schedule notes:

WCAS Reading period, Wednesday, May 31 to Sunday, June 4, Exams from Monday, June 5 to Friday, June 9. Grades are due Tuesday, June 13 at 15:00.

WCAS Convocation is Sunday, June 11, 09:00-11:00. Seniors, be there or be square!