Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict

Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered

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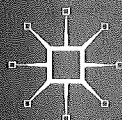
It also introduces the transitional period of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia in order to illustrate the structural impact that regime changes, economic circumstances, and ideological vacuums have had upon the region as a whole during the course of the decline of Soviet hegemony. In Chapter 4, the initial causes of ethnic conflicts and civil wars and the factors influencing their consequent escalation are detailed with respect to both the security dilemmas and the ideological discords which shaped the conflicts in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Chapter 5 provides insight into the region's various ethnic conflicts from the perspective of the interrelationships between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, considered globally, and Russia, Turkey, and Iran – the latter being key regional actors during the researched period. Importantly, the cases of conflict escalation in South Ossetia and, especially, Abkhazia, which took place in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet state are particularly closely scrutinized in this chapter due to Russia's decisive involvement in these conflicts. In Chapter 6, conclusions are drawn which critically examine the relevance of established theoretical approaches as applied to the case studies derived from the South Caucasus conflicts; additionally, efforts are made to augment contemporary theories of ethnic conflict and civil war.

2
Theorizing on the Causes of Civil War and Ethnopolitical Conflict

Recent decades have seen an increased occurrence of civil war and ethnopolitical conflict in certain areas of Europe. Whereas, in Latin America and the Middle East, incidents of ethnopolitical warfare *decreased* by 74 percent and 54 percent, respectively, between 1989 and 1999, incidents of such conflict *increased* by 43 percent in Europe, by 40 percent in Asia, and by 35 percent in Africa during the same time period.[1] In fact, the recent upsurge of ethnopolitical violence within these areas seems to be a continuation of a previously established trend which dates back to the latter half of the 1940s, as a majority of the civil wars fought during the postwar era have been fought in the name of ethnonational self-determination.[2] Indeed, remarkably, since the end of World War II such intrastate conflicts have in fact been more frequent and numerous than interstate conflicts.[3] During the period from 1945 to 1999 alone, approximately 130 intrastate civil wars have brought death to 20 million people and have caused the displacement of up to 70 million people in more than 70 countries across the globe; by contrast, during the same period, only 25 interstate wars have occurred, with a total death rate close to 3 million.[4] In absolute numbers, as of 2003 there were approximately 70 ongoing intrastate ethnopolitical conflicts still in an actively violent stage.[5]

This apparent upsurge of civil war and intra-state ethnopolitical conflict was itself paralleled by a new wave of scholarship in various academic locations across the world, which has cumulatively sought to reflect upon the growing phenomenon of intrastate conflict from within the perspectives of a number of various academic disciplines: this has had the overall consequence of reshaping the focus of conflict studies research in global terms. As mentioned above, this has proven

to be an important turning point which has marked a global shift of scholarly interest from the systemically determined field of interstate conflict, which used to characterize the superpower rivalry of the cold war era, to the intrastate realm of (hitherto largely neglected) civil war and ethnopolitical conflict.[6] Indeed, whilst the emphasis of conflict studies scholarship was previously – during the era of bi-polar Cold War conflict – primarily upon issues of nuclear deterrence, military alliances, and superpower arms races (with a subsequent focus upon economic interdependence and its repercussions in world affairs), a growing body of relatively recent scholarly literature has sought to explain the causes, the dynamics, and the outcomes of intrastate conflicts. Beginning in the 1990s, students of civil war and ethnopolitical conflict have advanced a host of theories which have focused on the impact of postmodernism, globalization, indigenization, regime change, and so forth.[7]

Nevertheless, given the complex nature of the social context which underlies each individual case of civil war or ethnopolitical conflict, as yet no all-encompassing body of explanatory theory has been established to account for such conflicts in global terms, as particular conflicts necessarily emanate from within diverse cultural, (geo)political, and historical backgrounds which allow little scope for generalization. Even though instances of ethnopolitical warfare from across the Balkans, the Caucasus, Asia, and Africa do share some important similarities, their individual particularities make it generally difficult, if not impossible, to draw far-reaching conclusions with respect to underlying causes or processes of development.

As with some other areas of social science research, global, transnational theories of civil war and ethnopolitical conflict – which tend to deal with significant numbers of cases in a quantitative way – have come to dominate the field in recent decades. However, these have lacked clarity in that they largely have tended to remain vague in approach, and in that they have been too broad in scope to be applied with sufficient accuracy to particular country-related case studies. Indeed, quantitative studies generally fail to capture the internal dynamics of civil wars, given that the level of macroanalysis employed by such studies sheds little light on the motives of the parties to the conflict. Arguing for the necessity to combine quantitative *and* qualitative studies, Sambanis observes that, "the gap between micro-level behavior and macro-level explanation is large. It is magnified when the micro-macro relationships are studied solely through cross-national statistical analyses. What is often lost in such studies is information about causal pathways that link outcomes with causes. ... [D]espite large amounts of "noise" in micro-level

data about violent behavior in civil war, we can still make useful inferences about the organization, causes, and consequences of violence at the macro level, but to do so, we cannot rely on a single methodological approach."[8] Additionally, as will be further explained below, there have been fairly serious shortcomings with regard to the selection and operationalization of the data used in such cross-country research, and hence with regard to its general validity. As a rule, the breadth of interpretation intrinsic to quantitative research per se fails to elucidate the kind of clear causal mechanisms which are indispensable for the adequate comprehension of individual instances of civil war or ethnopolitical conflict, given that such conflicts are each unique in time and in space and are each shaped by quite diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conversely, *qualitatively* oriented, small-scale studies – which have tended to be based on a considerably reduced quantity of empirical case studies – have shown a tendency to be too narrow and case-determined to be applied more broadly to ranges of differing instances of civil war or ethnopolitical conflict. As Brubaker and Laitin point out, "The rhetorical weight in case studies tends to be carried by the richness and density of texture; although a major argumentative line is almost always identifiable, the argument takes the form of a seamless web rather than a distinct set of explanatory propositions."[9] However, given the complex social reality of every single case of civil war or ethnic conflict, it is debatable whether a simplified line of theorizing, based on a supposedly causal relationship between a selected number of variables, would be capable of exploring these necessarily multifaceted phenomena in an appropriate manner. In fact, qualitative scholarship does produce important conclusions, some of which have been further theorized: by comparison with quantitative research, qualitative research on civil wars and ethnic conflicts has allowed scholars to track causal relationships based on clear and chronologically determined sequences of events whilst covering conflicts in their entirety.

Nonetheless, the applicability of qualitatively based case studies to cases other than those being immediately scrutinized is essentially contingent upon random coincidence: such applicability has tended in practice to be based on a similarity of variables featuring within the conflicts in question – thus if any more general theoretical or empirical claims are advanced on the basis of such studies, their validity is usually contested. Besides that, the complexity of the social reality pertinent to each single instance of ethnopolitical conflict or civil war makes it difficult to categorize such conflicts plausibly, and even more difficult to arrive at general conclusions. As of yet, the field of conflict studies

as applied to intrastate ethnopolitical conflict is characterized by a general lack of middle-range theories such as would combine theoretical research with high levels of generalization and with research of particular case studies, which is itself grounded in the empirical singularity of particular instances of conflict. This book is an attempt to bridge that gap between empiricism and theory.

Explaining the terms

Men are said to be "social animals." Throughout human history, our ability to survive has depended largely on the ability to cohere into social groups – social groups which provide mutual support within social networks organized along the lines of family or clan. In prehistoric times, physical survival was directly commensurable to in-group cohesion, given the hostile nature of an environment made up of competing tribes, wild animals, and variable weather. This may well have contributed to the forging of the innate human sense of in-group solidarity: humans conceive of themselves not only as individuals, but even more importantly as members of a certain family, clan, territorial unit, ethnicity, religion, nationality, race, and so forth. Indeed, it is not going too far to assert that human self-consciousness itself rests upon the collective categories implied by such social groupings. Yet, to become aware of a collective in-group identity, as such, there must also be an "out-group other": perceived otherness defines the external boundaries of our collective identity as we become conscious of what constitutes "us" as distinct from "them."

Such in-group centrism is an important component of human identity, as we generally attach positive attributes to "us" – while ascribing negative characteristics to perceived otherness. Inevitably, therefore, during the course of human history otherness has been associated with threat: the relative absence of information available with respect to the nature and intentions of the social "other" increases the sense of being potentially endangered whenever we encounter out-group individuals or groups. We are generally anxious with regard to those speaking a different language or adhering to unfamiliar social values: we tend to consider their behavior bizarre, as we do not know what to expect from people with whom we are not familiar. A cognitive process such as this appears to lie at the root of much xenophobia.

In fact, according to theorists of social psychology, human collectives are innately characterized by such in-group favoritism, as we tend instinctively to give preference to and show affinity for our own

in-group, as distinct from any out-group or from anyone viewed as belonging to an out-group. Important aspects of this in-group versus out-group dichotomy were revealed a few decades ago in a series of experiments conducted by Henri Tajfel, the pioneer of social identity theory. Firstly, these experiments showed that it does not require too much effort to establish an in-group: such a group may be established on the grounds of the seemingly most marginal, occasionally trivial, patterns of distinction – such as eye color, preference for painters, and so forth. However, once established, the rules of in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination apply with considerable vigor, even overcoming motives of economic self-interest, as in-group members favor their in-group co-members, even at the expense of personal loss.[10] Significantly, in contrast to the situation regarding our own in-group collective, – in which we are able to differentiate among individual members, taking into account their particular identities – we usually tend to view the members of an out-group as constituting a monolithic entity, whereby we fail to differentiate among its individual members, since "they are alike; we are diverse."[11] This phenomenon is probably due, once again, to the relative lack of available information concerning the nature and motivations of out-group members: in the absence of such information, we tend toward the creation of negative generalizations and to the establishment of hostile stereotypes and prejudices with regard to out-groups and their members.

Although it has become an overwhelmingly significant phenomenon of social organization in the contemporary world, ethnicity used to be of far lesser importance a few centuries ago, when people primarily identified themselves with respect to their family ties, classes, religions, and their sense of territorial or dynastic belonging. The ascent to prominence of ethnicity as a principle of social organization seems to be as a consequence of the advent, firstly, of secularism (which has been gaining momentum since the end of the eighteenth century); and, secondly, of the rise of popular nationalism as a primary political force – initially in modern Europe, and subsequently elsewhere across the globe.[12]

Currently, the term ethnicity is among the most widely debated within the social sciences. Put briefly, there is a major theoretical division amongst social scientists which separates the "primordialist" approach from the "modernist" (including "constructivist" and "instrumentalist") approach, with respect to the explanation of ethnicity and its role in politics and conflict. The first approach stresses the inborn nature of ethnicity: humans are born into an ethnic group which possesses clearly defined sets of affiliations, whether these be physical appearance,

language, historical mythology, religion, culture, or a combination thereof. Membership of such an ethically structured society is reckoned by descent, and cannot be obtained.[13] Membership of an ethnic group is regarded as being akin to that of some form of extended family: this creates a primordial bond to the ethnic group as far as the individual member is concerned.[14] For primordialists, the nature of ethnic conflict is seen as obvious and simple, since such conflicts revolve around notions of ethnic or national survival and of group cohesion, and these conflicts relate to group interests that are seen as primal and universal. It is also relatively easy for the primordialists to understand why people turn to concepts and values of ethnicity when they feel endangered, and why they might sacrifice their own lives for the sake of their ethnic brethren, who are conceived of as members of a virtual extended family with whom they share powerful ties of blood kinship. In the context of this book, of particular importance is Geertz's assumption that a newly established nation-state and its specific group identity quickly becomes powerful trigger factors with regard to conflict, as this reinforces the centrality of primordial attachments along ethnic lines.[15] The "modernist" approaches toward the study of ethnicity draw a more complex picture. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, such widely prevalent factors as rapid economic development, urbanization, and the spread of literacy, led then-popular modernization theorists to claim that the multiplying frequency of the interactions between peoples of various ethnic backgrounds would have the cumulative effect of diluting age-old (primordial) identities, since increased contacts with "the other" would tend to de-mystify and familiarize "out-groups." Thus, they argued, ethnic identities would eventually come to be replaced by loyalties to civic communities and political organizations void of ethnic, confessional, or tribal self-awareness.

However, the events of the decades that followed showed that an opposite condition held true: it turned out that, at least in some modernizing societies, people adhered ever more closely to their respective ethnic identities, a phenomenon which in some cases gave rise to ethnoseparatist movements. The proponents of primordialism have explained this phenomenon as a form of protest mobilization which is adopted by people in order to defend what they perceive as *their* culture and established way of life. From this perspective, modernization is understood as an attack on a people's (fundamental and innate) ethnic and religious identities, these being seen as the cornerstone of their collective self-consciousness. After all, primordialists would argue, this form of identity has deep social, historical, and even genetic foundations: it comprises

a chain of deeply embedded social and psychological givens that substantially affect our mindsets.

Instrumentalists argue, on the contrary, that what matters is the perception of economic need, and the pursuit thereof: cultural identity plays a role inasmuch as it is evoked by ethnic leaders who are, in truth, driven by the desire to achieve material goals, such as power and wealth. Champions of instrumentalism regard a given ethnic group as constituting nothing more than a political coalition formed ad hoc to advance the specific economic interests of their members – or, more often, their leaders – whose motives and interests may change significantly over time. It is important to note that processes of modernization contribute to increased levels of social stratification, both along the lines of interethnic divisions, and also amongst members of the same ethnic group. Hence, modernization must itself be seen as a source of social inequality – inequality which in turn causes discontent that may be manipulated so as to rationalize ethnic conflicts whose ultimate aims may, in fact, be far removed from the interests of the ethnic groups concerned. Constructivists go further so as to point out the *constructed* essence of any ethnic identity, such that what may appear to be a cohesive group identity based on a common legacy of birth, culture, and history may, in fact, be revealed to be a social construction that is either imposed by outsiders and/or forged by fellow co-ethnic intellectuals (and politicians) in order to achieve ethnocultural homogeneity, which is the necessary foundation of the modern nation-state.[16] After all, relatively recent social identity theory has demonstrated that in-groups may be constructed quite easily, may provide for a strong sense of in-group solidarity, and out-group discrimination, and may also create the conditions for dynamic collective action.

The perennialists attempt to combine features deriving from both of the above theoretical lineages. On the one hand, they acknowledge the modernists' constructivist view of ethnicity as a social construct and also the modernists' instrumentalist view of ethnicity as a form of cultural leverage, which is used by ethnic leaders to forge in-group solidarity and to achieve specific political goals. Yet, on the other hand, perennialists acknowledge the deep historical and psychological roots of those social constructs, those roots which make these constructs so powerfully persistent. This may explain why ethnicity becomes such a crucial layer of individual and collective identity during times of ethnic conflict.[17]

In fact, under certain circumstances every approach seems to be valid to a certain degree. Ethnic groups are collective social constructs drawn from past experiences, but are considerably (re)shaped by modernity,

since what we ordinarily think of as culture, language, or historical memory is, in fact, constructed or codified by intellectuals, reshaped by historical and political circumstances, reinforced by conflicts with out-group members and, most importantly, changes and evolves over time. Yet, once these constructs have been constructed, it usually takes much time and effort to deconstruct or to reconstruct them: in practical situations reinforced by the conditions of ethnic mobilization, people do associate themselves with their ethnic identity, which is conceived of in strongly primordialist terms. The instrumentalist approach, too, plays an important role in explaining ethnopolitical conflict since, as a rule, conflict is in itself a political (public) category, and politics is shaped by elites who often act on the basis of their own understanding of ethnicity or ethnic interests.[18]

As this book demonstrates, a *combination* of these major theoretical approaches turns out to be most effective when it comes to explaining actual ethnopolitical conflict. In the pre-conflict phase, ethnicity is of lesser importance since, in times of peace, individuals tend to associate themselves with a web of other identities such as age, gender, profession, social status, family ties, and so forth, and not primarily with ethnicity, per se. Even though the consciousness of being part of a specific ethnic group and of sharing its collective symbols usually subsists latently, common historical experiences, language, skin color, culture, and the sense of belonging to some specific geographic territory, only become decisive when there is a shared perception that these associations serve to distinguish members of that one group from those who belong to other ethnic groups. Two factors which can directly foster this kind of shared perception are the collective experience of ethnic discrimination, as compared with other ethnic groups, and that of deliberate political mobilization in defense of the group's perceived interests.[19] In other words, even though the symbols of ethnic identity are themselves demonstrably a product of social and historical construction, this does not in any sense make them less important in people's daily lives when situations of ethnic conflict arise, accompanied by the subsequent politicization of ethnicity as the main marker of group identity. This is where I see the relevance of social identity theory, as described above, to the domain of ethnic conflict. Out of a host of definitions of ethnicity which have been used in the social sciences during the past few decades, I work with the one that views ethnicity as a multi-layered assemblage of collective identity – encompassing the belief in a common origin, a shared language, a collective memory, and a collective idea of ancestral land and culture.[20]

In this book, *conflict* is understood as a process in which two or more actors each attempt to advance their own – mutually exclusive – interests, so as to achieve their respective goals, albeit at the cost of their adversary's failure. Conflict is thus regarded as a condition of competition over material and ideational values – a condition which is indigenous to human communities. *Violent conflict* is here understood as a state of affairs in which two or more actors individually attempt to achieve their own particular interests with the help of organized violence – violence which usually involves physical attacks on the adversary's properties, lives, and values in order to dramatically reduce the latter's ability and willingness to pursue his or her own goals. *Ethnic conflict* is understood as a state of affairs in which various human collectives – with at least one party to the conflict organized along the lines of ethnic identity – clash over particular resources and values. In cases of *violent ethnic conflict*, this clash of competing interests acquires violent forms usually manifested in terms of direct attacks upon the members of one or more ethnic community. Another term used throughout this book is civil war, which is understood as an armed conflict within a country, "fought by organized groups that aim to take power at the center or in a region, or to change government policies."[21]

Interestingly, there is a certain degree of conceptual obscurity as regards each of the basic terms mentioned in this chapter, which also turns out to be the case with a host of other social sciences–related concepts which can be shown to be excessively vague and therefore susceptible to various interpretations. For example, a notable degree of conceptual difficulty occurs when it comes to the scrutinizing of the very essence of conflict. As stated above, conflict is understood as constituting some form of disagreement over a certain possession or commodity, which motivates actors to obtain or retain this commodity at their opponent's expense: thus, conflict is necessarily a competitive process in which two or more actors intend to achieve the same goal by means of mutual exclusion. Yet, (active) disagreement over specific commodities is so common a state of affairs in interpersonal relationships that it hardly makes sense to emphasize this form of social interaction. After all, we all compete among ourselves to obtain a better education, job, partners, and so forth and quite often do so while regarding our own achievement of specific ends as being mutually incompatible with the interests of our perceived opponents. Even though defining conflict on the interpersonal level does not seem to be too onerous a task, when it comes to situations of collective conflict in which at least one of the parties identifies itself in ethnic terms, it becomes much more difficult to ascertain

exactly when the conflict in question can be properly defined as primarily "ethnic" in nature.

Another variable factor is the question of the scope and intensity of competition (or the level of mutual incompatibility of goals and interests), which enables one to speak in terms of "conflict" as such: Does a latent conflict qualify, or must there be some form of conflict in its active phase? And, if the latter option is believed to apply, must it necessarily be of a high international profile, or could a low-key, low-profile conflict also count? Indeed, how is it possible to distinguish clearly between latent and active, or low- and high-profile conflicts? Is the use of violence to be regarded as the crucial marker of conflict, transforming it from a latent phase to an active phase? And, if so, what is the definition of violence and how can it be measured? After all, violence is in practice very much a culturally determined phenomenon which might be understood either as the actual use of physical violence or, perhaps, as the threat thereof. All these questions remain largely unanswered in any definite manner and, given the complexity and contextual determination of the above phenomena, it is very unlikely that any all-encompassing coverage can be provided by the social sciences. Yet, this conceptual vagueness does not confine itself purely to the realm of theoretical discussions, as it also affects the ways in which research on civil war and intrastate conflict is conducted and the ways in which the outcomes of such conflicts are understood; this especially holds true for concept-related, quantitatively oriented research and its findings. In practice, the particular definitions applied to the key concepts used has a powerful determining effect upon the outcomes of any given program of research; since virtually every concept in social sciences is relative, both the guiding definitions used, and the resultant research outcomes, will inevitably be contestable. Nevertheless, in practice there seems little alternative but to accept that a certain degree of conceptual vagueness and semantic intricacy is inherent to social sciences research, at least as regards some of its terminological apparatus.

For example, some contentious interpretations exist with regard to the term civil war. Andersen, Barten, and Jensen point out a range of definitions of the term civil war across various disciplines, as in legal studies civil war is widely understood as a non-international armed conflict; in anthropology, the term civil war is understood as signifying a complex concept, the definition of which depends upon the *context* within which the war occurs; meanwhile, in purely military terms, there are no civil wars as such – there are only wars or armed conflicts to that end.[22]

Notably, most quantitative research in this field, including that led by authoritative scholars such as Fearon and Laitin, as well as by Collier and Hoeffler, works with a notional numerical threshold of a thousand battle deaths per year during each year of the conflict in question as fulfilling an important part of the definition of civil war (as defined by the Correlates of War [COW] project). However, this threshold fails to take into account the notable fact that civil wars, unlike conventional wars, are characterized by the conjunction of military (combatant) and civilian (noncombatant) deaths. Given the essence of civil war, it is extremely difficult to distinguish strictly between these respective categories, as they often merge. Furthermore, over time, civil wars often undergo dramatic variations as far as their intensity is concerned, which will have an affect upon the number of annual deaths recorded. In some years, causalities may amount to more than a thousand battle deaths per annum, whilst in another year of that same conflict, they may fall well below that threshold – raising questions about whether or not to treat data from the less violent year as part of the civil war per se – when it might perhaps be seen as more appropriate to identify casualty data from that period of lower intensity as resulting from civil disorder. Accepting the formal numerical threshold of at least a thousand battle-related annual deaths disqualifies a range of instances that nevertheless do fulfill other key essentials of civil war – however, these instances tend to be defined as civil conflicts and their variables are, therefore, not operationalized in civil war research.

As mentioned above, another uncertainty occurs with regard to possible differences in terms of international legal status, because in some instances of secessionist war, a separatist entity may be formally recognized as independent by some countries, but be regarded as an integral constituent of its parent territory by one of the warring parties to the conflict. An armed conflict may also arise within the political administrative borders of one single state, and thus be initially classified as a civil war, but over time it may evolve into a fully international armed conflict, due to the interference by neighboring states in that conflict. Alternatively, a secessionist civil war may be instigated, or significantly supported, by a neighboring country whose assistance to insurgents may be crucial in maintaining the secessionist movement. In none of these cases would it be self-evidently clear whether the armed conflict in question should be considered a civil war or not; nor whether two different stages of the same armed conflict should be treated as representing different categories of conflict in overall terms. To address concerns such as these, which arise from differences in the perceived

international legal status ascribed to particular instances of conflict, some scholars have sought to define civil war as armed conflict among "geographically contiguous people concerned about possibly having to live with one another in the same political unit after the conflict."[23] Hence, again, various definitions of civil war may be applied by various scholars, and this will inevitably have an impact upon the outcomes of given programs of research: importantly, the COW project, along with some similar large-*n* projects, pay no specific attention to such modalities as these.[24]

Similarly, a lack of conceptual clarity is obvious when it comes to the detailed examination of the term "ethnic conflict." Firstly, owing to the specifics of human cognition and the complexity of the contemporary world order, virtually any interstate conflict will imply the active involvement of some degree of politicized ethnicity, as (ethnic) nationalism plays a crucial constitutive role in the processes of social mobilization during situations of crisis among nation-states (these being primary entities which still, of course, dominate the international scene). Secondly, as mentioned above, the majority of what have come to be regarded as ethnic conflicts have in practice stemmed from social, economic, and political circumstances – with ethnicity being usually involved as a coincident source of social solidarity which is, in turn, used to foster collective action mobilized along the lines of existing ethnic divisions so as to serve ends which come to be defined as "ethnic interests."

In this regard, Bruce Gilley makes the argument that, "For a start, the mere existence of ethnic markers in political conflict cannot be the basis of calling something "ethnic conflict." When the six countries that share the Mekong River fight over its use, this is not "ethnic conflict" merely because all sides are ethnically distinct. If this is the only meaning of ethnic conflict then all we have is a superficial description, not a useful concept. It becomes no more useful than saying that protests were by fishermen or involved looting. If the concept of ethnic conflict is to be useful, it must point to a distinctive causal explanation for given instances of political contention. It must somehow inform us about what is happening beyond superficial appearances. And, as it does this, we must be able to measure whether it is or is not apparent and thus to reject it in some cases, lest it become tautological every time people of distinct ethnicity are on either side of the barricades."[25]

The difficulty of defining the concept of ethnic conflict is something that theorists are well aware of. Cordell and Wolff acknowledge that there has been virtually no single conflict in the world based *solely* on ethnicity: rather, ethnicity has tended to serve as a layer of identity which by no means serves as the sole or ultimate source of violent conflicts. Both authors emphasize the cognitive component of ethnic conflict, since "the goals of at least one party are defined in (exclusively) ethnic terms, and in which [conflict] the primary fault lines of confrontations is one of ethnic distinctions. Whatever the concrete issues may be over which conflict erupts, at least one of the parties will explain its dissatisfaction in ethnic terms." Both authors have claimed that, "its distinct ethnic identity is the reason why its members cannot realize their interests, why they do not have the same right, or why their claims are not satisfied."[26] Cordell and Wolff conclude that "ethnic conflicts are a form of group conflict in which at least one of the parties involved interprets the conflict, its causes and potential remedies along an actually existing or perceived discriminating ethnic divide."[27] Fearon and Laitin have rationalized the concept of ethnic conflict in terms of motivation and aims, as violent attacks have been prompted by animosity towards ethnic foes, and carried out in the name of an ethnic group; while the consequent selection of targets for attack has often been made by reference to ethnic criteria.[28] Working from the assumption that many civil wars of an ethnopolitical vein have in practice sought to achieve some form of territorial secession by insurgent groups or else have been directed at the containment of such secession by state regimes – with champions of ethnic sovereignty regarding their identity as distinct from that of their adversaries in ethnic, political and civil terms – Kaufman adds a further argument, claiming that "opposing communities in ethnic civil conflicts hold irreconcilable visions of their identity, borders, and citizenship of the state. [Unlike adversaries in ideological civil wars] they do not seek to control a state whose identity all sides accept, but rather to redefine or divide the state itself."[29] And, so, "ethnic conflicts are disputes between communities which see themselves as having distinct [cultural] heritages, over the power relationship between the communities, while ideological civil wars are contests between factions within the same community over how that community should be governed."[30]

In fact, recent scholarship illustrates that most ethnic conflicts emanate from a degree of accumulation of socioeconomic or political cleavages amongst the members of two or more ethnic communities, or from the instrumental use thereof by political elites. As stated above, when cast against this backdrop, ethnicity as such plays a rather marginal role, if any, in the initial stage of conflict; yet, what makes these conflicts ethnic is the gradual *politicization* of ethnicity during the course of the conflict in question which, in turn, furthers the fragmentation

(and further radicalization) of communities involved in the conflict along ethnic lines.[31] In the course of conflict, ethnic *polarization*[32] increases dramatically, transforming every single member of the adversary's ethnic group into a public enemy. However *non*-ethnic the original cause of a given conflict may have been, the shift towards ethnic division outlined above entails the eventual creation of a fully fledged ethnic conflict in practice, since "conflicts become fundamentally altered as they rage on, and factors that were at the root cause of a conflict at its outset may no longer be the primary causes in later stages. That is, once conflicts have significantly evolved, the *prior* causes may no longer be the *primary* causes."[33]

In other words, ethnicity per se never establishes a causal relationship which leads directly to the outbreak of conflict. It is not ethnicity in itself that makes people fight each other, but rather that certain values at stake within the conflict in question come to be appropriated by the champions of at least one party to that conflict – and that those values then come to be recast by those champions in explicitly ethnic terms. Thus it is that what begins as a primarily *non*-ethnic conflict evolves in practice into a conflict which understands itself in fully ethnic terms: that is as a group conflict which revolves primarily around the notion of politicized ethnicity, and in which *ethnically* defined goals are pursued by at least one of the parties to the conflict. In practice, the process described here is, among others, inherent to the dichotomy of state versus ethnic group, which explains the frequent occurrence of ethnic conflict within states: that is, as a phenomenon of intrastate conflict which leads to civil war, when members of certain ethnic group aspire to some form of political or territorial secession.

Importantly, ethnic conflict as such has been seldom researched by means of cross-national quantitative studies: as a rule, the vast majority of cognate scholarship has tended to focus on civil wars and intrastate conflicts which have been assumed to *encompass* an adequate number of instances of ethnic conflict. In this regard, Sambanis maintains that approximately two thirds of interstate conflicts have been fought along ethnic lines.[34] Remaining instances of intrastate conflict, such as revolutions, class conflicts, military coups, and economic conflicts over control of resources, have been seen as in essence *non*-ethnic in nature. As Fearon has shown, cross-country statistical research has revealed few differences between the determinants of civil war onset in general and ethnic civil war in particular. Fearon also observes that at least since World War II, the vast majority of ethnic killing has been occasioned either by direct state oppression or by warfare between a given state and an armed group purporting to represent a particular ethnic group (usually a minority group within the given national territory);[35] thus, the majority of ethnic wars have been seen as fitting into the internal conflict/civil war category.

At the same time, some notable distinctions exist amongst theoreticians as to the internal dynamics of ethnic civil wars, as compared to non-ethnic civil wars. Donald Horowitz argues, for example, that conflicts along ethnic lines are demonstrably more prone to extremes of violence than are the conflicts based purely on ideology or on other political cleavages: he argues that this is explained by the sense of blood (family) kinship – with all of its deep emotional overtones – which is so specifically integral to ethnic conflicts.[36] This argument is furthered by Kaufmann, who sees the key difference between non-ethnic civil conflict and ethnic conflict in terms of "the flexibility of individual loyalties, which are quite fluid in ideological conflicts, but almost completely rigid in ethnic wars."[37] Understandably, these factors have a strong impact on the dynamics of intrastate conflicts, which in turn affect conflict escalation – and its duration – in many ways. Ethnic conflicts are thus believed to be especially violent, protracted, and intractable as they are largely identity-based – unlike internal conflicts which are understood to be fought primarily for economic, private, or ideological motives. In recognition of the crucial role of the political aspects which are intrinsic to the evolution of any ethnic conflict and its resultant implications, the term *ethnopolitical conflict,* will be employed interchangeably with the term ethnic conflict throughout this book.

Typology of conflicts

Conflict vocabulary

Studies of ethnic conflict and civil war to date have revolved around the consideration of two key factors: *motivation* and *opportunity*. Whereas the first of these areas of research seeks to explain what it is that motivates those who challenge the state (as a rule these tend to be insurgents from within the ranks of an ethnic minority), and thus deals with matters which are necessarily subjective and actor-related; the second area of research – that of opportunity – is both subjective, and objective, as it deals with elements which are both structural (regime change or external support, for instance) *and* cognitive in essence (as with the perception of state weakness or of external support by ethnic insurgents during a period of regime change). Scholars have variously placed emphasis upon either motivation, or opportunity: this, in turn, has shaped the focus of

the resultant research, which has either dealt with structural (i.e., objective, non-actor related), or motivational (i.e., subjective, actor-related) processes of conflict onset. Thus, broadly speaking, research hitherto has either sought to highlight the *micro*-level of conflict (i.e., state–insurgent interactions, focus on conflict escalation, etc.), or the *macro*-level of conflict (i.e., aspects of regional, or global security, with a focus on conflict onset).

Whatever the details of the particular research approach adopted, these essential methodological components have remained the same. Moreover, most of the current research on ethnic conflict and civil war recognizes the fact that some interplay of these respective components should be present in order for a conflict to arise; where studies differ is with respect to the extent and scope of the causal mechanisms represented by motivation and opportunity. Yet, after all, both concepts seem to be interrelated in practice, as the scope of opportunity may serve to increase the motivation for those interested in changing the established status quo in their favor, while a high degree of motivation (and, hence, commitment to fight and accept sacrifice) often predetermines what can be regarded as a suitable opportunity.

The amount of research centering on motivation and opportunity which has been carried out, particularly since the early 1990s, is enormous; therefore, for the purpose of this study, attention will be devoted to the analytical models developed by three leading groups of researchers: Collier and Hoeffler, Fearon and Laitin, and Cordell and Wolff.

Collier and Hoeffler have produced the *greed versus grievance* formula, in which greed encompasses a set of arguments pertaining to both motivation and opportunity – all of which are viewed through the (economically defined) prism of a cost-benefit analysis: that is, should the potential rewards of joining an insurgency exceed the potential risks of doing so, then a civil war is likely to occur. Grievance here encompasses a variety of arguments which center on perceived injustice (and the consequent desire of ethnic dissidents to redress this), often regarded in terms of what is considered as ethnic discrimination, and drawing from the notion of *relative deprivation* as elaborated by Gurr.[38]

Fearon and Laitin are the authors of the *insurgency model*, in which emphasis is placed upon the notion of opportunity, as this prevails over motivation (particularly grievance) as the main driving force of an insurgency.[39] In this regard, Cordell and Wolff have recently developed an analytical framework which recognizes the crucial role of three interwoven sets of factors, that is: *motives*, *means*, and *opportunities*. This framework thus seems to draw on the greed versus grievance

model as developed by Collier and Hoeffler, and also upon Fearon and Laitin's insurgency model, which emphasizes the notion of opportunity. According to Cordell and Wolff, a civil war occurs in a situation marked by the presence of these three sets of factors, of which two (motives and means) are actor-related, while the remaining third factor is rather of a structural essence.[40]

On the micro level of conflict, Dessler proposes a typology with respect to the causes of conflict – a typology which is pertinent both to the conflict itself and to its practical dynamics.[41] In his terminology, *channels* are the background causes of armed conflict, mirroring the basic elements of social, political, and economic structures. In the typology I have outlined below, these background causes are addressed within the section entitled Structural Accounts. *Targets* in Dessler's typology are understood as the various mobilization strategies, encompassing both the specific objectives of the key political actors in any given conflict – that is to say, ethnic and/or regime leadership as such – and the *rationalization* of their collective actions, both in terms of perception and behavior. These factors are covered in the section which I have entitled Perceptional and Instrumentalist accounts. *Triggers*, in Dessler's terminology, are the factors which condition the timing of an armed conflict in terms of its outbreak: their relevance is not with respect to the reasons why a given conflict broke out, but rather with respect to why it broke out at a particular point in time. Triggering factors are instrumental in narrowing the choices of the actors involved by virtue of their strengthening the pattern of social polarization along ethnic lines. In my understanding, triggers cause outbreaks of violence which link the latent phase of conflict with the phase of sporadic violence (see below). The fourth factor is represented by what Dessler calls *catalysts*, which in his understanding affect the intensity and duration of armed conflicts: these would be factors such as terrain, weather, and the role of external agents or forces.[42]

Periodization in ethnopolitical conflict and civil war[43]

For the purposes of this book, I develop in general terms, three major phases of ethnic conflict – phases which are themselves based on the level, and regularity of violence used: phase A: frozen or latent conflict corresponding with the mobilization phase of ethnic conflict; phase B: sporadic or low-scale violence corresponding with the radicalization phase; phase C: large-scale violence, armed conflict, or civil war.[44] All of the three phases are marked by a certain degree of ethnic (self-) consciousness; in phase A exists ethnic fractionalization, which

becomes radicalized as the conflict undergoes escalation, phase B, and acquires the state of ethnic polarization with the advent of civil war, phase C. The state of frozen conflict is characterized by a "no peace, no war" situation: there is a general lack of violence, but a certain degree of interethnic anxiety persists, which is kept at a low profile because of the overwhelming strength of the regime and/or the dominant ethnic group, and/or the hesitation of potentially insurgent groups to turn to violence. By contrast, the phase of sporadic violence includes hit-and-run assaults that break out from time to time between the members of warring ethnic groups, or between an ethnic group campaigning for self-determination, on the one hand, and state authorities on the other. It is important to note that these instances of violence are initially episodic. It is at this stage of internal conflict that efforts at conflict resolution by either party to the conflict, or by an international mediator, may relatively easily break down the escalating cycle of violence. The phase of sustained large-scale violence that is usually regarded as civil war is the state of regular armed conflict between the members of the various warring parties to the conflict: this will, as a rule, be systematic violence undertaken by both state authorities, and by an insurgent group.

As I show in this book, the stage of frozen or latent conflict is a structural situation which may last for years without necessarily turning violent. What drives a latent conflict into the stage of sporadic or low-scale violence is usually some triggering factor which serves to strengthen ethnic polarization and to intensify the defensive posture of different warring groups towards each other. Such triggering factors will typically take the form of one or more extreme acts of violence[45] perpetrated by members of one warring group upon members of the other. While these two initial phases of conflict are, as a rule, characterized by a certain degree of spontaneity as far as interethnic violence is concerned, the shift to the third and final phase of large-scale violence, or civil war, is usually occasioned by a conscious decision taken by one of the sides of conflict, whom I term *agents of violence*. In accordance with the typology here outlined, I will propose a general scheme of periodization in ethnic conflict reflecting its escalation, the stages of which correspond with the proposed scheme: latent conflict – sporadic violence – civil war.

Reflecting the above and also what further will be explored below, a scheme of conflict escalation is here proposed, consisting of three major phases: the phase of latent conflict, the phase of sporadic violence, and the phase of civil war.

Phase A: Mobilization – latent conflict

Against a backdrop of perceived discrimination, calls for linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, or political rights, or for outright self-determination, are voiced by specific dissident groups within a larger population – such groups usually comprise a specific ethnic minority. As a rule, attempts are then made at reversing the established status quo in a situation characterized by the emergence of opportunity: that is, a situation in which considerable changes take place in terms of the host country's sociopolitical conditions – changes such as those occasioned by the establishment of a new state, by regime transformation, or by the perceived weakness of that country in terms of its reduced military, socioeconomic, and/or political capabilities. Simultaneously, nationalist claims are made by the dissident ethnic community's intellectuals in order to legitimize their claims.

Emancipatory demands voiced by the ethnic minority members are then received with suspicion by the country's ethnic majority – that is the politically dominant group which controls the core of the central state apparatus. The degree of concern over the ethnic minority's demands is itself contingent upon the prevailing nature of interethnic relationships – the popular consciousness of previous or present-day grievances will play an important role in this regard. Pro-regime intellectuals will (re) construct historically related narratives so as to rationalize their claims upon the disputed territory, justifying their case, and morally discrediting that of the dissidents. Consequent protests by the members of the titular ethnicity will then obtain more expressive and vocal forms – possibly accompanied by the mobilization of radical elements. At this initial phase of conflict, anxiety is expressed verbally rather than in the form of overt violence. Phase A is paralleled by the beginning of a gradual polarization of both communities along ethnic lines, even though, at this stage, conflict is far from dominant within public discourse.

Phase B: Radicalization – sporadic or low-scale violence

Galvanized by the unfolding conflict and triggered by specific acts of cognitively significant interethnic violence, which are either grave in themselves or else popularly seen as such, the increasingly polarized, fearful, and mutually distrustful warring ethnic communities draw further apart from one another, until low-scale and sporadic violent excesses, such as riots, begin occurring, as members of the warring ethnic communities start attacking each other. Often, routine incidents

with minimal or no ethnic content in themselves, come to be regarded through the prism of ethnicity. Prompted by the perceived need to mobilize a self-defense, both ethnic dissidents, and members of the "titular ethnicity," will begin to establish ethnic militia units, which are paralleled by the establishment of alternative (secessionist) government bodies, or by the radicalization of existing ones.

This stage is crucial for the conflict's further development. In cases where the dissidents amid the ethnic minority come to the conclusion that the regime is weak, whilst they and/or their external supporters are regarded as sufficiently strong to be able to effectively confront the state, they may well opt for an intensification of their insurgent efforts. In fact, the notion of proper opportunity, stemming from a perceived power asymmetry between the center and the periphery, is crucial in this regard for the decision-making of both regime and dissident forces.

Attacks upon the state's administrative and/or military targets may then follow, with the aim of assuming control over the claimed territory. Simultaneously, members of the adversary ethnic community may be assaulted and/or expelled, which would in turn foster the phase of sporadic violence. Demands will become radicalized: it will no longer be social rights the insurgents seek, but rather some form of secession. In the meantime, attachment to ethnic symbols will increase dramatically on both sides, fostering further polarization along ethnic lines. Should the state authorities prove quick enough to employ effective large-scale repression against the dissident community, this may either right away choke the embryo of insurgency to death or, alternatively, further kindle its conflagration, depending on the strength of repressions and on the insurgents' and their sympathizers' commitment to their goals, even at increasingly high cost.

The escalating conflict in the country's periphery will brig about a radicalization which will develop along the lines of ideational clashes, and security-related concerns. Intellectuals from the majority group will increase their engagement with the "wars of historical claims," with those of the dissident group taking a more aggressive form; racist and nationalist rhetoric, along with deepening ethnic discrimination, will become a standard phenomenon. Hostile images mirroring each other will be constructed by both parties to the conflict; ethnic polarization acquires dramatic proportions, and those advocating a balanced approach toward the opponents and their demands will be marginalized and regarded with increasing suspicion and mistrust. During this and the following phase of conflict, involvement by external actors or powers may have a decisive influence upon the further developments within the conflict zone, as this may dramatically reverse the balance of power in favor of insurgent groups or else create a perception among insurgency members that this is about to become the case they will then regard this moment as a window of opportunity and key to their ultimate success.

The country's territorial integrity now seems to be under attack: this will amplify ethnic radicalization. Attacks on ethnic kin will be reported from the periphery territories which are semi-controlled by ethnic adversaries; this will, in turn, increase attacks upon members of the adversary's community. In a situation in which channels of intercommunity communication become increasingly scarce, even small excesses, with or without ethnic pretexts, will acquire ethnic overtones. This, along with anxiety that their country is being torn apart, will increase the majority's security fears, thereby strengthening its members' commitment to take serious action in order to ensure the country's unity and stability and to defend their ethnic majority countrymen. Efforts made by the members of the ethnic minority to attract international support will further deepen concern about their being a fifth column of an outside power.

Phase C: Sustained large-scale violence – civil war

If the state authorities fail to effectively neutralize the insurgents at the stage of sporadic violence, large-scale violence may emerge, as properly organized and motivated ethnic dissidents will make full use of their military capabilities – as well as of external support – which will bring both sides to the outbreak of civil war. In both cases, massive use of force will be carried out by agents of violence, that is, by centralized insurgency leaders.

The stage of civil war is characterized by the maximum possible degree of ethnic polarization. Only self-determination is now acceptable for the insurgent groups and their ethnic kin, as they believe their very identity and physical survival is at stake, following incidents of civil war related killings and massacres on the battlefield and beyond: continued existence within the borders of the oppressive state now seems inconceivable. By contrast, a strong motivation of the forces led by the ethnic majority will be to annihilate the dissidents or else drive them out of the country at any cost, since as long as they exist within the country, they will endanger the state's unity and territorial integrity in that they would seek interference in the country's affairs by outside powers. Additionally, their secessionist aspirations would serve as a disruptive example for the rest of country's ethnic minorities.

On both sides of the barricades, the dehumanization of what is considered the ethnic enemy is widespread: members of the adversary ethnic community will be routinely physically attacked. For some, initial political demands will now cease to play a major role, since the conflict is more about the self-perpetuating spiral of violence: retaliation for killed relatives, friends, and comrades gains momentum amongst both the insurgent and government forces. Ethnic cleansing and massacres will become widespread.

The main assumption behind this periodization typology of conflict escalation is the consideration that civil wars rarely erupt out of nothing. As a rule, they are the outcomes of long-festering conflicts which eventuate due to the interplay of certain structural factors, to their use by elites, and to the self-generating spiral of violence which occurs once a certain level of conflict is achieved. Below, I propose a typology of the causes of civil war and ethnopolitical conflict: I distinguish between structural or conflict-onset based sets of conditioning factors, on the one hand, and perceptional and instrumentalist, or conflict-escalation-based and/or process-based sets of factors, on the other. Subsequent pages will show that it is necessary to draw a line between structural factors that may be present for years *without* necessarily resulting in the eruption of civil war and those factors which do lead to civil war. I regard structural factors as being of importance insofar as they entail initial *precondi*-tions for civil war initiation: therefore, I term such factors conflict-onset factors. The second set of causes, whose consideration then follows, encompasses a set of major theories that to a certain degree also focus on conflict-onset – yet their relevance is particularly high when it comes to conflict escalation. Unlike structural factors, these theories have a stronger ability to illustrate causal relationships in a way that enables us to grasp the internal dynamics of conflict escalation.

Conflict-onset based theories

Until recently, quantitative studies have dominated the available research on (ethnic) civil wars, at least as far as the roots of such conflicts are concerned. According to a recent survey, less than a fifth of the qualitative studies which have been devoted to civil war have dealt with the causes of civil war in one way or another, whilst the vast majority of such studies have focused on conflict escalation and outcomes.[46] Still, as outlined above, it has become increasingly obvious over recent years that large-*n* econometric studies are *ad defi*-*nitio* incapable of explaining civil wars in their full complexity for, as a rule, such conflicts are a culmination of latent processes of conflict

evolution rather than single-case events which under certain circumstances result in sustained violence. Later, I will argue that quantitative studies generally attend to what I call background factors: in my typology, they correspond with structural accounts. Indeed, the relevance of quantitative studies becomes relatively high when it comes to the explanation of the key factors which frame conflict onset. Consequently, I will point out some of the weaknesses of quantitative research and will argue for the necessity of carrying out *qualita*-*tive* research on civil wars in order to better grasp the full contextual complexity of ethnic conflicts, while also illustrating causal mechanisms. I propose that civil wars and ethnic conflicts are *processes* rather than events – and that to understand them, we need to focus on social interactions within those conflicts.[47]

Structural accounts

Level of economic development

A low level of economic development is widely believed to increase the likelihood of intrastate conflict. According to existing quantitative research, poorer societies are on average more prone to internal conflict than are wealthier ones. For instance, Fearon and Laitin show that a reduction in per capita income by 1,000 USD results in a 41 percent increase in the likelihood of civil war.[48]

This observation, however, may be explained in a variety of ways. Firstly, economically highly developed states usually have highly urbanized populations which are believed to be more dependent on the central state, both in terms of the maintenance of a stable food supply and with regard to household economic security: such factors are believed to decrease the risk of insurgency. Also, urbanized societies are believed to be more susceptible to state coercion, by contrast with (relatively more self-sufficient) rural areas, with their territorially dispersed populations.[49] Secondly, as shown by Fearon and Laitin, the governing regimes in countries with low levels of per capita income will tend to lack the means to effectively control peripheral (rural) areas which, in turn, facilitates the advent of insurgency, while simultaneously increasing its prospects for success. Richer states, by contrast, are generally better equipped to carry out more effective counterinsurgency policies, as they, *inter alia*, have access to a superior governmental and military infrastructure as compared to poorer states.[50] Thirdly, Collier and Hoeffler argue that higher national income is important because it creates greater *opportunity costs* – that is to say the economic opportunities that citizens, generally young males who form the core of any

insurgency, forgo when they join that insurgency.[51] It may also be added that the generally higher levels of growth, prosperity, and development present within wealthier societies, coupled with the prevalence of democratic institutions, has the net effect of reducing the overall likelihood of civil war. Put bluntly, rich people are usually less willing to risk their lives and their prosperity in the service of an (uncertain) insurgency cause; while the existence of democratic forms of governance do provide for an established legal framework, from within which grievances may be addressed in a peaceful way, as will be scrutinized below.

However, this general rule is not without its exceptions. Aside from the two significantly differing lines of interpretation outlined above – state capacity to police its territory versus opportunity cost – there is a data problem. For instance, data used to support this claim are based on broad nation-wide statistical analyses that fail to take into consideration the sub-state, or regional, level. In some (peripheral) areas where insurgencies erupt, the level of economic development is significantly lower than the national average; furthermore, in some other instances, which tend to be epitomized by a considerable degree of social discrimination along the lines of ethnic (religious or tribal) identity, the members of a dominant ethnic group will turn out to occupy higher socioeconomic and political positions within society, at the expense of a weaker ethnic group which has an inferior standing. Therefore, each group's actual level of economic development may vary significantly: a factor which usually escapes the focus of country-wide statistical analyses, including GDP-focused ones.[52]

Facilitating a rebellion? Natural resources, diaspora, and geography

According to Collier and Hoeffler, there is a direct correlation between increasing revenues of wealth from natural resources and the outbreak of civil war – even though once a relatively high level of wealth is achieved, natural resources begin to reduce the risk of civil war initiation. Moreover, if a country's revenues from exports of primary commodities make up around one third of its GDP, it becomes more prone to falling into the trap of civil war than does a country with no such exports.[53] However, recent scholarship has made the claim that the more broadly the term "natural resources" is defined, the less such resources can be seen to be related to the outbreak of civil war: it turns out that oil, natural gas, and mineral resources in general are *more* likely to cause internal conflict.[54] This argument is supported by Fearon and Laitin who, contrary to Collier and Hoeffler, claim that it is oil abundance,

rather than a primary reliance on commodity exports, that causes civil war.[55]

Similarly, the hypothesis that resources cause violence has been challenged by an opposite hypothesis, which posited that escalating violence causes resource exports to become a more important source of income since, within conflict-affected societies, industrial, service and manufacturing sectors of the economy suffer from inevitable setbacks, which – coupled with a flight of capital – leads to a growing dependency upon revenues from natural resources. Thus, the overall share of raw resources exports relative to GDP may in fact rise with respect to the national economies of war-torn societies.[56] Therefore, there is a certain degree of likelihood that conflict in fact causes raw resources to *increase* in overall importance.[57]

Along with support flowing from large and influential diasporas, a reliance upon natural resources in order to initiate – and maintain – a rebellion is at the core of the greed versus grievance model proposed by Collier and Hoeffler.[58] According to them, grievances arising from perceptions of social inequality amongst (potential) insurgents in fact play only a minor role, relative to greed, in stoking civil war – as insurgents are primarily motivated by rational and self-interest considerations (such as their ability to gain personal financial assets through looting, etc.). All in all, according to Collier and Hoeffler, what motivates insurgents most is their collective belief that the paramilitary actions they are about to take will pay off in economic terms.[59] Hence, according to this analysis, the primary cause of civil war is not the objective extent of deprivation (which is in any case always relative and difficult to measure), but an economically formulated premise that "rebels will conduct a civil war if the perceived benefits outweigh the costs of rebellion."[60]

Nonetheless, it is still not entirely clear whether the true factor that primarily causes civil war is a given regime's general reliance on (mineral) resource exports or whether it is the desire of ethnic insurgents to take command of the economic resources accruing from those mineral exports. If the former holds, then it may be assumed that the regime's overreliance on oil or large-scale natural gas revenues fosters the establishment of social inequality along ethnic lines, thereby widening the gap between the ever-richer centre and the poorer periphery, or that such revenues provide the regime with sufficient financial sources to be able to cope with insurgency through military means. One might also claim that an overreliance on easily attainable oil exports, for instance, might gradually reduce the state's capacity to strengthen its internal taxation infrastructure and administrative bureaucracy, thus preventing it from

developing balanced political, social, and economic leverages across the whole of the country. Alternatively, if certain mineral resources are located in a peripheral area which is claimed by members of a distinct ethnic community, who are in turn effectively denied access to the benefits accruing from the mineral exports in question, then this may force insurgents to take up arms in an attempt to secede from the center so as to ensure that they can capitalize upon that mineral wealth.

As for the mountainous terrain argument: some studies have demonstrably failed to establish a clear link between the occurrence of civil wars in states which happen to possess mountainous terrain, or the occurrence of insurgencies in separatist areas which likewise possess mountainous terrain. However, according to Fearon and Laitin, the presence of mountainous topography is crucial as it provides a necessary shelter for insurgent activities.[61] Importantly, defining a state as mountainous entails certain risks, as it is not clear how to measure the prevalence of terrain in relative terms.

Demographic factors: ethnic diversity, size, and proportions

Contrary to popular belief, recent scholarship has shown that states with a higher level of ethnic heterogeneity do not in fact experience civil wars any more often than less ethnically diverse states. In fact, an opposite observation holds true, provided that the dominant ethnic group makes up less than 45 percent of the entire population, since this ensures a mutual balance amongst the representatives of various ethnic groups, such that there is a lack of overwhelming ethnic dominance. Based on a large body of quantitative research, Collier and Hoeffler also illustrate that when the dominant ethnic group exceeds the threshold of 45 percent it inclines much more readily to the use of its demographic superiority in order to suppress numerically smaller ethnicities. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of ethnic insurgency as demographically weaker (minority) ethnic groups find themselves discriminated against – and so seek redress for perceived injustices.[62]

According to Fearon and Laitin, as well as Collier and Hoeffler, the presence of large-scale populations within a given state increases the risk of civil war: a proposition which is supported by a host of cross-country studies.[63] This may be explained by an assertion that demographically numerous states which happen to be poor and occupy large geographical areas are intrinsically more difficult to administer effectively: as shown by Halvard Buhaug, there is a correlation between more populous, geographically large countries and the incidence of civil war, provided these wars

are waged over issues of self-determination – that is, for control over specific territory.[64] Besides this, the likelihood of civil war immediately increases if there are large numbers of unemployed young males, who potentially may be recruited into an insurgency movement.

Nonetheless, these findings – surprisingly – contradict Tanja Ellingsen's earlier quantitative research on ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity and civil war, according to which the presence of middle-sized minorities increases the risk of civil war, whilst the presence of large-scale minorities has little or no impact on the level of occurrence of civil war.[65] Another counterargument points out the existence of many forms of diversity (ethnic, sub-ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial, etc.), and there have been ongoing debates among researchers as to how best to operationalize the measurement of such factors within statistical studies. Importantly, one might suggest that it is not only such factors as nation-wide majority-minority ratios that should be taken into consideration, but the majority-minority ratio within (potentially) secessionist areas. It might be feasible to hypothesize that once an ethnic minority within a country comes to comprise the majority within a certain territory, this may under certain circumstances increase the likelihood of rebellion and, thus, of civil war.

Regime type and regime change

Weak regimes are on average more likely to provide room for internal conflict since they are not in a position to effectively control the whole of the territory that they formally administer. This is especially so with respect to territories which are remote from the administrative center: importantly, many secessionist movements organized along the lines of ethnic identity emerge in peripheral areas which are inhabited by members of a distinct ethnic group. According to Fearon and Laitin, newly established nation-states are particularly susceptible to civil war during the two-year period following their independence, since such states lack the appropriate resources to effectively administer the whole of their territory – a situation which may be regarded as an opportunity by regime challengers, thereby leading to insurgency initiation.[66] Political instability caused by a change in the nature of a given regime, either from democracy to autocracy, or vice versa, also dramatically increases the risk of internal conflict, as transient regimes are more prone to civil war than are established regimes.[67]

A transition towards democracy is believed to be particularly dangerous as it leads to less-severe reprisals for the public expression of social discontent.[68] A similar assumption holds for mixed regimes (or

anocracies, as Fearon and Laitin term them), which are neither entirely authoritarian nor democratic and can produce opportunities for expressions of disloyalty to the ruling regime and for the organization of insurgency.[69] Conversely, wholly authoritarian or democratic regimes suffer considerably less from manifestations of civil unrest. Unlike complete democracies or autocracies, mixed regimes neither offer their citizens means of free participation in the country's public life nor do they ban any sign or manifestation of political opposition in public. At the same time, unlike authoritarian regimes, mixed regimes are not in a position to use large-scale violence to suppress internal opposition. Intriguingly, according to some recent scholarship, democratic regimes seem to be no less immune to the eruption of internal conflict than authoritarian regimes.[70]

According to Mohammed Ayoob's findings, there is a clear link between weak and inexperienced political elites and civil war, as the former lack the skills or legitimacy to effectively police the entire range of the state's territory or to effectively anticipate anti-regime insurgency. Initially applied to the newly established postcolonial nations of Africa and Asia, this doctrine seems to hold true for some post-Soviet areas as well, as it reflects the existence of controversial legacy of drawing administrative borders between particular entities defined as nation-states, as well as the general propensity by the regimes within these regions to use military force to settle internal disputes.[71]

Notwithstanding certain contradictions, such regime-instability and regime-transition factors belong to less contested theories regarding the causes of civil war. However, there is some disagreement over how to precisely define specific regimes as well as over the causal relationship between the above factors and the incidence of civil war in practice.

Social inequality accounts

Socioeconomic and cultural discrimination have been widely regarded as among the major factors leading to civil war and ethnopolitical conflict. Such situations are quite common amongst societies which are composed of two or more ethnic groups, one of which holds an exclusive position of ethnic dominance. Members of a "titular group," comprised of an ethnically dominant community which usually prevails in demographic terms, tend to consolidate under their exclusive control the most important political, social, and economic tools within their respective countries; this is done at the expense of a smaller group or groups which are either denied access to such privileges, or are effectively ousted from participation in the country's social and political life. In some instances

efforts are made to undermine the identity of the discriminated group, which may include refusal to recognize their distinct ethnolinguistic and cultural identity, a ban on education in their native tongue, or punishment for carrying and/or exhibiting ethnic symbols, such as the ethnic/national flag, anthem, costumes, and so forth.

Surprisingly, there are numerous cases worldwide where such situations of ethnic discrimination have *not* led to the outbreak of ethnic insurgency. This may be partly explained by reference to the above outlined theory of the authoritarian regime, as such regimes provide little space for public manifestation of discontent, which manifestations, in fact, become extremely risky endeavors for those involved. Similarly, in some cases it can be difficult to define what constitutes ethnic discrimination as such: in Spain's Catalan and Basque regions, for example, some form of ethnopolitical tension persists due to the willingness of a segment of the populations within those regions to aspire to full independence from Madrid – even though (unlike during the period of General Francisco Franco's rule) there is hardly any kind of active socioeconomic or cultural discrimination displayed toward Catalonians or Basques by the federal center as of today.

Importantly, quantitative research has failed to address, in a concise fashion, findings on interethnic inequality, as there is general lack of evidence with regard to differences in the level of economic wealth between the members of various ethnic communities: this kind of information usually remains out of the focus of statistical analyses which are carried out with a focus on cross-national averages.

General shortcomings of quantitative research

As illustrated above, the sort of macro-level econometric analyses which are provided by quantitative research leave too much room for interpretation as regards the actual (micro-level based) motivations of warring parties and, so, taken overall, fail to establish apparent causal relationships. Besides, Collier's and Hoeffler's standard explanation of the motivations of insurgents appears to be too rationalistic and economically orientated, as it fails to consider the importance of *psychology and ideology* in shaping loyalties, mobilizing society, and recruiting fighters into armed resistance (in cases of ethnic civil wars, ethnonationalist ideological appeals play a tremendously significant role).

However, this is not the only weakness of quantitative studies. Other factors include disputable data validity (and reliability), measurement difficulties, and an emphasis on conflict onset coupled with a general inability to track the active dynamics of conflicts as they evolve. Thus,

the very way in which key concepts are defined – concepts such as that of a given political regime, that of ethnic diversity, or even (as shown above) the question of what constitutes a war or a riot – may have a significant impact on the outcomes of statistical research because these concepts will determine the practical selection of data to be measured. Aside from this, cross-national quantitative research generally operationalizes large nation-wide data sets, whilst neglecting the *sub*-national level of analysis – whereas, in fact, as illustrated above, patterns of social inequality occurring *within* a country (patterns which remain untouched by such nation-wide analyses) may increase the risk of civil war initiation. As we see from instances of studies which have focused exclusively upon the level of overall economic development, oversimplified measurement gives rise to research results whose relevance is problematic, as such results will tend to overlook a country's internal divisions – those very divisions which are embedded within the ethnically oriented sphere of social stratification. Additionally, the available statistical data from the vast majority of countries only dates back approximately as far as 1945 – which further limits the scope, range, and efficacy of quantitative research. Moreover, data yielded by poor, weak, or war-torn states are often questionable because, on the one hand, such states do not prioritize the collection of accurate statistical data; while on the other hand, they tend to lean toward providing "filtered" (i.e., propagandized) data which give a better image of internal developments in their respective territories so as to avoid international critique, sanctions, intervention, and the like. An additional argument undermining the viability of quantitative studies is their above-mentioned inability to track the actual processes of civil war. Quantitative studies tend to focus upon the moment of the eruption of civil war as an isolated event: their focus on *conflict onset* results in a failure to explain sequences of events which persist or develop through successive conflict stages; such studies fail to work with time.

Conflict-escalation based theories

Dennis Sandole distinguishes between two critical aspects of conflict: *conflict-as-startup* (in my vocabulary, conflict onset), and *conflict-as-process* (conflict escalation).[72] In fact, as argued above, a given social situation may be characterized by the prevalence of factors which in theoretical terms equate to conflict onset, yet conflict may persist in its latent phase for years without necessarily erupting into sustained violence: thus, the causal relationship between both aspects of conflict is not axiomatic. In practice, it is the gradual development from a latent or non-violent

phase, to the stage of sporadic violence, then to the stage of large-scale violence that induces civil war – and the regularities and modalities of that development are what tend to remain out of the focus of much contemporary civil war research.

Importantly, when violent conflicts do break out, they often follow their own internal dynamics, thereby establishing a self-perpetuating cycle of violence. At some point during a given conflict, the initial causes that brought about the initiation of that conflict cease to play a crucial role, as conflict itself becomes a self-stimulating phenomenon based on the principle of social interaction; as a rule, actors, their motivations, and their social environment all change over time. In many cases, the interplay of actions and reactions begins the spiral of violence, thus increasing the warring parties' security dilemma. Under these circumstances, the dynamic processes of conflict escalation may overwhelm – or significantly reshape – the statically understood conditions of conflict onset; macro-level structural factors do serve as (potentially) necessary preconditions to conflict, yet they fail to account for the micro level of conflict, which has its own logic and rules.

In his work addressing the onset of revolutions, Charles Tilly outlines what he has termed *collective action theory*; this is the power competition – between political elements split along the lines of those who have the decision-making power and those who lack it – that is the core and motor of political action. Crucial in this context is the shift from individually defined interests to collective decisions which necessarily require a convergence of shared interests on both sides; the success of political action is contingent on the involved groups' ability to organize and mobilize those interests, and subsequently, on the ability of organized political elements to facilitate collective actions.[73]

Perceptional accounts

Ancient hatreds

Perceptional accounts have long been confined to the realm of the sort of primordialist approaches, centering on the notion of ancient hatred, that gained momentum in Western public circles during the course of the violent conflicts that broke out in Southeast Europe and the post-Soviet regions during the final years of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. According to the proponents of this approach – which two decades ago dominated the work of Western journalists and experts in (post-) Communist affairs – the outbreak of violence in those parts of the globe had to be understood as the logical outcome of the dissolution

of totalitarian states, which in turn provided for a "defrosting" effect which allowed for (previously safely contained) ethnic antagonisms to flare up anew.[74] Torn apart by the collective memories of "ancient blood," and driven by newly arisen, mutually exclusive, claims to ethnic and territorial self-determination,[75] different ethnic communities had little chance of avoiding conflict: conflict widely attributed to the heterogeneous nature of their own communities, and (an argument rarely openly expressed by Western elites) by the peculiar sociocultural nature of the ethnic groups concerned, such that the conflicts in question came to be viewed as indicative of their own innate predisposition to aggressiveness and violent behavior. The cases of the Bosnian war and the Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia conflicts were especially prone to be used in support of this thesis of the "civilizational otherness" of the peoples living on the margins of Europe. This thesis was further developed in an attempt to rationalize the general inability, or unwillingness, of the Western powers to effectively interfere in these conflicts and thereby served to sustain the newly developed rhetoric of a new (Western) international morality: promoting global peace, stability, and human rights. In this regard, Stewart Kaufman reminds us of the significant practical implications which narratives of this sort had upon policymakers during the early 1990s: American president Bill Clinton made a notorious remark, after reading Kaplan's book, to the effect that any outside intervention in the Balkans was bound to fail, as the conflict itself was driven by uncontrollable "ancient hatreds."[76] In this context, the South Caucasus conflicts attracted considerably less attention from Western policymakers, as the region was largely dismissed as the "backyard" of post-Soviet Russia, itself a newly acquired strategic partner.

Overall, the ancient hatred approach is now less widely supported within the field of contemporary ethnopolitical conflict research. In fact, even though the collective memory of what comes to be known as ancient hatreds does play a certain role when it comes to conflict escalation, such hatreds rarely in themselves create the conditions for an ethnopolitical conflict. The narratives associated with such ancient hatreds are rather (re)constructed by the elites within respective ethnic groups in an attempt to foster in-group solidarity and loyalty, thereby increasing the level of social mobilization along ethnic lines.

Security dilemma

Some researchers have emphasized the significance of previous collective experiences of grievances and wars as an additional factor which contributes to an increased likelihood of ethnopolitical conflict. This is because

the collective memory of such experiences can often increase mutual ill will and mistrust between the respective ethnic groups.[77] According to advocates of this line of explanation, ethnic groups involved in such situations of mutual mistrust are likely to view one another's ethnonationalist mobilizations as (potentially) dangerous, thereby fostering counter-mobilizations, which in turn stimulates the mutual sense of being threatened by the members of the other ethnic group. In such a situation, a spiral of mutually reinforcing mobilization occurs, as each ethnic group attempts to increase its own military capabilities, the better to face the perceived threat; under certain circumstances one of the groups involved in such a situation may opt for a preemptive attack. Put together, this matrix of mutually hostile group perceptions significantly increases the risk of armed conflict – a risk which may then be further boosted by what Posen calls the "windows of opportunities" which are created by the dissolution of central authority within multiethnic states: in such cases, the historical record of significant ethnic hostility may also play a role.[78]

Related to such security dilemma-related accounts are two lines of explanation which stem from game theory. Weingast claims that when in-group members are warned by their ethnic elites that they are targets for extermination, they quite rationally mobilize in order to effectively preempt such a scenario: after all, even if the likelihood of their leaders' prognosis is low, the heightened awareness of the fact that their very physical existence might be at stake would serve to increase the level of social mobilization amongst in-group members.[79] To advance Weingast's argument, one might add that there may not necessarily be sufficient appeals of political leadership which have the potential to ameliorate prevailing ethnic tensions and mobilizations – even at the cost of a preemptive attack; whilst aggressive rhetoric voiced by the members of antagonistic ethnic groups may act so as to serve that same end.

In this regard, Fearon and Laitin elaborate on Deutsch's assumption that ethnic solidarity comes about as a result of high levels of communication, as they argue that in situations characterized by low-level, intergroup communication "an ethnic incident can more easily spiral into sustained violence, if members of each group, not being able to identify particular culprits, punish any or all members of the other group."[80] This kind of situation is likely to result in conflict, since a lack of information exchanged between respective ethnic groups as to the true nature and intent of each deepens the mutual perception of a security dilemma, thereby allowing for a range of generally negative interpretations of even episodic (violent) excesses.

Symbolic (identity) politics

Situated at the crossroads of perceptional and instrumentalist accounts is the theory of symbolic or identity politics, which combines elements of both these bodies of theory. In situations of ethnic conflict, ethnicity – regarded by members of each ethnic community concerned as being primordial, non-negotiable, and crucial for their group's existence – plays a pivotal role, one which increases over time, following the radicalizing pattern of ethnic mobilization. Conflict is therefore easily characterized as identity-based: ethnic conflicts rarely manifest as being the sort of *interest*-based conflicts which are negotiable once a mutually acceptable economic solution is figured out. Ethnicity and ethnocentrism, with all their attendant cultural ramifications, lie at the heart of symbolic politics theory.

Drawing on the findings of social psychology and of intergroup relations research (most notably the social identity theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner partly outlined above), Kaufman posits that multi-ethnic societies are marked by a certain degree of interethnic competition which is embedded in the prevailing hierarchy of dominance and subordination. In these societies, ethnic identity plays a more prominent role, since it is common for people to identify themselves with their ethnic fellows and their associated ethnic symbols: hence, otherness comes to be defined in ethnic terms, while ethnicity-based primordial attachments become all the stronger. Ethnocentrism thus occurs as a natural form of in-group cohesion, while members of (potentially) alien ethnicities are regarded with suspicion and various forms of ethnically motivated discrimination become widespread. The notion of politicized ethnicity, with its relevance as a source for group conflict, is further supported by research carried out by Lieberman and Singh, according to whom the institutionalization of ethnic group boundaries can, on the basis of emotion-laden social comparisons, offer a political basis for the mobilization of recruits to join in ethnic conflict.[81]

Symbolic, or identity politics, theory contains a strong instrumentalist motive as well. In order to rally popular support, leaders can lean toward using powerful, emotionally laden symbols and mythological narratives, which have a strong appeal amongst ordinary people: thus, to achieve group cohesion and to advance collective action, leaders often make use of hate speech and will manipulate existential rhetoric which evoke such specters as the threat of national extermination. Fear and suspicion, as well as ethnic symbols and myths, all resonate powerfully

amongst already galvanized people, who will readily resort to violence when it comes to rivalry over territory or governance.

Instrumentalist accounts – manipulative leaders

Instrumentalist approaches revolve around the rationalist notion of manipulative leaders. According to this viewpoint, political leaders will sometimes deliberately provoke the sense of being ethnically threatened amongst the members of their ethnic group in order to augment their power.[82] As Michael Brown has observed, "For many politicians, tearing their countries apart and causing thousands of people to be killed are small prices to pay for staying in or getting power."[83] In fact, recent history has witnessed a number of instances of political elites making use of ethnonationalist arguments so as to rally popular support: consciously forging, at times of existential threat arising from ethnic conflict, a sense of ethnic solidarity – and of devotion to themselves as the sole representatives of their respective ethnic communities. This attitude has been shown to be instrumental in the pursuit of communal homogeneity, thereby also suppressing internal political opposition: personal adversaries and ideological dissent being perceived as detrimental to the unity of the ethnic group concerned, and as posing threats to its prospects for physical survival. Efforts to consolidate power within a given ethnic community are usually paralleled by the (re)establishment of hostile images of the adversary ethnic group as being culturally or racially inferior and innately dangerous. Ethnonationalist (mis)use of competing historical narratives is also common in this sort of situation, as ethnic leaders seek to trace the roots of the prevailing conflict with ethnic adversaries back into the historical past, thereby re-stimulating enduring ethnic prejudices. Consequently, emotion-laden ethnic polarization increases considerably at such times, adding to the strengthening of already hostile ethnic images; "combined, these forces create a devastating brew of ethnic rivalry and violence."[84]

Overall, there is a consensus among the academic community that, in one way or another, the role of manipulative ethnic leaders is instrumental in stirring up ethnopolitical violence. Yet, it remains doubtful, case-bound, and hard to determine, whether political elites directly initiate conflicts or merely contribute to their escalation; or, indeed, whether such elites may in fact find themselves in a social environment which forces them into acting in an ethnically incendiary way – that is, in a way dictated by the particular emotional and cultural circumstances created by the expectations and prejudices of their own ethnic

kin. Besides, there have been instances of ethnopolitical conflict in which the political elites concerned have largely *refrained* from playing an active role in stirring up hostilities.[85]

Opportunity in power asymmetry: a missing causal link between ethnic riots and civil war?

As explained above, in my understanding the crucial question in ethnic conflict and civil war studies remains the matter of the evolution from episodes of sporadic violence to the outbreak of large-scale hostilities, which usually precedes civil war per se: yet, the precise mechanism of that transformation is marked by a general lack of regularity. In fact, as summarized by Davenport, Armstrong and Lichbach, there are three main theoretical approaches which deal with that mechanism, and each is anchored in mutually exclusive sets of theoretical assumptions. According to the first of these – *the inflammation hypothesis* – civil war is caused by increased state repression, which prompts insurgents to increase their efforts to secure their rights, defend their lives and/ or achieve their political goals. Reprisals by state authorities often tend to become less selective as regards the actual targets of violence (this because, while carrying out repression, it proves difficult for state authorities to clearly distinguish between insurgents and their [uninvolved] ethnic kin).[86] These reprisals are believed to outrage local populations *without* effectively eliminating secessionist movements among them: indeed such state violence may actually serve to increase the level of popular support for insurgency, which eventually leads to civil war. This hypothesis corresponds with what Collier and Hoeffler have termed the grievance hypothesis.

According to another theory – the *incapacity hypothesis* – which shares certain similarities with the above-mentioned inflammation hypothesis, large-scale hostilities occur when state authorities prove incapable of applying sufficient levels of repression. Within this line of explanation, the governing regime's weakness toward (potential) insurgents results in an inadequate level of state repression, which then empowers insurgents to increase their dissident activities because they see an opportunity to achieve their political goals, until those activities attain the level of full-scale civil war. Clearly, this hypothesis is itself founded on the opportunity argument, since the insurgents' decision to take action is determined by the perceived incapacity of the central state authorities to effectively hamper their efforts.

The *ineffectiveness hypothesis* proposes that large-scale conflict is a result of a situation in which governments apply coercion, but fail to achieve their ends because of the insurgents' military and political superiority. According to this proposition, both repressive behavior and dissident activities are undertaken at a high level of intensity; however, and most importantly, despite the high costs of their collective action, the insurgents nevertheless choose to increase their subversive efforts until full-scale civil war results.[87]

Each of the three mechanisms outlined above is – almost proportionally – evidenced by reference to case studies from different parts of the world, a fact that is preconditioned by virtue of the extremely rich and diverse social contexts which attend each civil war onset and escalation. Common to all of these apparently mutually exclusive theoretical propositions, I argue, is the adversaries' perception of a relative *power asymmetry* that favors them over their adversaries; this is what prompts them to take collective action in a situation that is considered an opportunity. Hence, in this book, I utilize the notion of opportunity in relative power asymmetry to address these situations.

Moreover, given the existence of free will in humans, it appears doubtful if conflict theory can ever anticipate the outbreak of actual civil wars or ethnopolitical conflicts – or indeed shape the pathway of escalation leading from less violent forms of contention to more violent ones. After all – as I claim in this book – the chief factor that transforms sporadic forms of conflict into full-scale civil war is the *conscious commitment* of the parties to taking concentrated collective action when they come to the collective conclusion that such a course of action is necessary to achieve specific political ends.

In civil wars of an ethnic makeup, it is the role of political elites to organize, mobilize and lead masses into violent conflict: political elites – whether of an insurgent group or of a state – serve as active agents of violence. Leaders are instrumental in transforming spontaneous waves of violence into sustainable campaigns of organized violence: as stated, the commonly accepted threshold of civil war violent intrastate conflict entailing a thousand battlefield deaths per annum. This threshold is hardly attainable unless sporadic violence is institutionalized by political elites – agents of violence. In other words, in contrast to the sporadic and rather disorganized incidents of intercommunal violence which usually precede civil war, established large-scale violence is a direct product of a conscious decision of an actor or actors to turn to conflict – whether these be state authorities or insurgents or both. A decision – which is

itself shaped by human cognition that may emanate from a wide range of cultural predispositions, preferences, prejudices, interpretations of the situation, and so forth, – is taken by elites, that is, particular individuals, or by narrow groups of individuals: a decision which social sciences fail to predict. When viewed against this background, civil war appears to be but one potential outcome of a variety of possible outcomes of contentious interrelations between state and dissent – but it is far from being the only possible outcome.

In other words, civil war is an outcome of a conscious use of large-scale violence by the political elites of either party to the conflict in order to achieve political victory by inflicting military defeat upon the opponent. In this regard, the perception of proper opportunity is of decisive importance, as it prompts either regime or secessionist forces to take concentrated collective action which aims to exploit that opportunity. I designate "opportunity" as constituting a rational calculation on the part of an actor or actors of the existence of a *relative power asymmetry*: such an asymmetry comprises a recognition of one's opponent's weakness relative to one's own strength, along with the recognition of a seemingly favorable political constellation. Nonetheless, what a given actor of violence considers to be a rational calculation may in effect stem from a *miscalculation* as well as individual bias, based upon a range of cognitive shortcomings; this considerably reduces the predictability of civil war initiation in practice.

3
The South Caucasus: A History of Identities, an Identity of Histories

For Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians, as well as for their neighbors within the post-Soviet area, their gaining of independence in 1991 was an unexpected gift, even if many of them had long been dreaming of it. For the leading politicians of the day within the Communist republics, accustomed as they were to managing a fairly modest domestic agenda – as well as for the dilettantes in the ranks of the newly formed national (post-Communist) elites – there emerged a problem with which neither they nor their predecessors had any experience: that of building a new, fully functional nation-state from the ground up. At the time, however, few of the politicians concerned were fully aware of the magnitude of the task which confronted them. Given the euphoric expectations which abounded during the first few months of independence, there arose an oversimplified perception of the complicated local and international context within which that independence had been gained, and this misperception came fully reflected in the definition of both internal and foreign policy goals. Emotions and desires, rediscovered feelings of "historical hatred" and "blood relations" – these were the factors which came to be decisive for not only domestic politics, but also for relations with international neighbors, even if the old guard continued to take Moscow's wishes into account. Policy priorities, therefore, emerged in parallel with the ways in which, after 70 years of existence within the framework of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijanis and Azerbaijan, Armenians and Armenia, Georgians and Georgia, went about trying to (re)build a nation-state and to (re)discover their place within the world's family of nations.