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Violence Against Civilians During Armed Conflict: Moving Beyond the Macro- and Micro-Level Divide

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Abstract

Early research on wartime violence against civilians highlighted a distinction between macro- and micro-level approaches. Macro-level approaches, grounded in the international relations subfield, focus on variation across countries or conflicts, while micro-level approaches, more influenced by the comparative politics subfield, focus on variation within countries or conflicts. However, some of the recent research on civilian targeting does not fit neatly into this dichotomy—such as research comparing subnational units or armed groups across conflicts or research relying on geo-referenced event data for multiple conflicts. We review the literature and advocate moving beyond the language of the micro- and macro-level divide, instead focusing on the determinants of violence against civilians at five different levels of analysis: international, domestic, subnational, organizational, and individual. While acknowledging significant advances in the field, we argue for continued research aimed at developing a more integrated theoretical understanding of the multiple actors and interactive social processes driving violence against civilians.

INTRODUCTION

Internal armed conflict: a contested incompatibility involving the use of armed force between two parties—at least one government and one opposition group—resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one year (Gleditsch et al. 2002). Also called intrastate armed conflict

Civil war: an internal armed conflict causing at least 1,000 cumulative battle-related deaths (Gleditsch et al. 2002, pp. 618–619)

From 1946 to 2019, 221 intrastate armed conflicts took place in more than 100 countries around the world (Pettersson & Öberg 2020). In the last 30 years of internal armed conflict, nearly one million civilians were killed in deliberate attacks by armed groups (Pettersson & Öberg 2020), while many millions more were injured or forcibly displaced. Indeed, civilian casualties occur in all civil wars. However, patterns of violence vary across conflicts as well as across space and time within a single conflict.

A recent wave of political science research analyzes wartime violence against civilians, examining both the causes of violence and its consequences. Early work within this wave highlighted a distinction between macro-level approaches and micro-level approaches. In this conceptualization, macro-level approaches, grounded in the international relations subfield, analyze variation across countries or conflicts, while micro-level approaches, more influenced by the comparative politics subfield, analyze variation within countries or conflicts. In macro-level studies, the primary unit of analysis is the country or conflict, with dependent variables measuring violence in the conflict or country as a whole. Macro-level studies tend to theorize about determinants of violence at the international or national level, emphasizing how the international or national context shapes government and rebel group incentives to engage in violence. In micro-level studies, the primary unit of analysis is subnational, with dependent variables measuring variation in violence across subnational units, such as regions, provinces, or localities; across armed groups; or across individuals. Micro-level studies theorize about the determinants of violence at the subnational level—how subnational or local institutions affect belligerent behavior toward civilians; how the ideology, structure, and processes operating within armed groups influence patterns of violence against civilians; or how variation in the incentives, experiences, and attitudes of individuals affects their behavior during wartime. Some scholars reserve the designation "micro-level" for studies focusing on individuals and use "meso-level" to refer to studies emphasizing armed groups or subnational localities (e.g., Finkel & Straus 2012).

This distinction between macro- and micro-level approaches was for some time an accurate representation of the major divide within the literature on wartime violence against civilians. However, we advocate moving beyond the language of the micro- and macro-level divide, for several reasons. First, innovations and improvements in data availability mean that units of analysis often defy categorization as either macro- or micro-level—such as in research that examines subnational variation in violence but does so across multiple countries or conflicts. Second, not only do units of analysis sometimes defy categorization, but also many studies do not restrict their theoretical discussion to either macro-level theorizing about the international and domestic determinants of violence or micro-level theorizing about the local, organizational, or individual determinants of violence. Third, conceptualizing research as taking either a macro- or micro-level approach may impede the accumulation of knowledge about the causes and consequences of wartime violence against civilians. Viewing research in this way may lead scholars to ignore or put aside theories from the "other" approach. Yet, doing so prevents the development of theoretical insights about the ways in which factors at different levels of analysis interact to produce particular patterns of wartime violence.

Although in recent years scholars have made meaningful advances in the study of wartime violence against civilians, we argue that significant work remains in order to develop an integrated theoretical understanding of patterns of violence against civilians that explicitly acknowledges the multiple actors and interactive social processes driving violence. Rather than privileging one single theoretical account over others, scholars ought to acknowledge that multiple theoretical explanations can coexist—often at different levels of analysis—and ought to explore how these

theoretical explanations interact with one another. Thus, we propose a focus on the determinants of violence at five different levels of analysis: international, domestic, subnational, organizational, and individual.

In this article, we survey the recent wave of research on wartime violence against civilians, with the aim of identifying the primary determinants of violence at each level of analysis as well as assessing the extent to which findings from different streams of research are consistent or conflictual. We focus primarily on the causes of violence against civilians. We also briefly address several emerging areas of research, including work on progovernment militias, civilian agency in wartime, and the consequences of violence against civilians. Our objectives are to gain a more coherent sense of the state of knowledge about wartime violence against noncombatants and to suggest a more integrated way forward for research.

SCOPE, DEFINITIONS, AND TERMINOLOGY

Violence against civilians occurs in the context of many different types of conflict and contentious political activity, varying across categories of contentious political action (e.g., Davenport et al. 2019). In this article, we focus on violence against civilians occurring in the context of intrastate armed conflict, reflecting the dominant approach in the literature. At the same time, we acknowledge that different types of contentious political action often occur simultaneously or in sequence. For example, government repression of a nonviolent protest movement may contribute to conflict escalation, developing into an internal armed conflict, as in Syria. We focus on violence perpetrated by organized groups fighting for political objectives—rebel group forces, government military forces, and progovernment militias—and do not address violence committed by organizations that are not pursuing political goals (e.g., criminal organizations).

Scholars refer to violence against civilians using many different terms, including civilian targeting, civilian victimization, one-sided violence, and terrorism. Definitions of these concepts are not uniform and are often contested, complicating efforts to compare research findings (Stanton 2019). Definitions of "civilian" vary as well, but international humanitarian legal instruments provide some guidance. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, for example, outlaws attacks "against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities" (Article 8.2.b.i) or "against civilian objects, that is, objects which are not military objectives" (Article 8.2.b.ii). According to Balcells (2017, p. 20), a civilian is a noncombatant, and a combatant is a soldier who is in charge of a weapon and/or who works in any job related to the military endeavor. However, civilians are not a monolithic group; even within a single conflict, important variation exists in civilians' relationships and collaboration with armed groups (e.g., Gowrinathan & Mampilly 2019, Petersen 2001, Wood 2003).

In this article, we conceptualize violence against civilians broadly to refer to any acts that, through the use of force, harm or damage civilians or civilian targets, including lethal as well as nonlethal forms of violence. We include research on terrorism occurring during internal armed conflict if the study defines terrorism as involving attacks against civilian or nonmilitary targets.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

Patterns of violence against civilians, or noncombatants, vary considerably both within and across conflicts. Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood (2017) propose a conceptualization capturing variation across space, time, and perpetrator, as well as along four dimensions: repertoire (the form of violence), targeting (the social groups attacked), frequency (the count or rate of violence), and technique (the type of weapon or technology used in carrying out violence). This framework has the advantage of

focusing on observed patterns of violence, without requiring any determination of intentionality on the part of the perpetrator.

Most research on violence against civilians, however, focuses on intentional violence, in which either the individual perpetrator or the armed group leadership—or both—harms civilians deliberately. This stands in contrast to unintentional violence against civilians, also known as collateral damage, involving acts in which neither the individual perpetrator nor the armed group leadership aims to harm civilians, as when civilians are caught in the crossfire or displaced during a military engagement. Wood (2018) further distinguishes types of intentional violence based on combatant motives and the attitudes of armed group leadership. Violence against civilians may be "driven from 'below' and tolerated from 'above,'" i.e., violence as a "practice" (Wood 2018, p. 514); armed group leadership does not order or authorize soldiers to carry out such violence. This category includes violence driven by group-level social processes—including performative processes leading to what Fujii (2013) calls extralethal violence—as well as opportunistic violence that "soldiers initiate to advance their own interests, impulses, or social standing" (Manekin 2020, p. 7).[1] Violence as "organizational policy" differs from these other forms of violence in that an armed group's leadership orders or authorizes violence against civilians (Wood 2018). Within this category of violence, the literature focuses primarily on strategic violence against civilians—violence aimed at achieving a military or political objective—but as Wood (2018) points out, violence as organizational policy can also serve internal purposes within armed groups, such as the abduction of women to become soldiers' "wives." Restraint toward civilians can also be a deliberate strategic choice by governments or rebel groups (Hoover Green 2016, 2018; Stanton 2016; Wood 2009).

Several scholars have focused on distinguishing among repertoires or forms of violence against civilians (Balcells 2017, Stanton 2016). Most studies focus on lethal forms of violence, such as killings, massacres, and bombings, including recent research on terrorist attacks occurring during civil war (e.g., Stanton 2013, Polo & Gleditsch 2016). However, a growing body of work examines nonlethal forms of violence, such as forced displacement (Lichtenheld 2020, Steele 2017) and sexual violence (for a review of research on conflict-related sexual violence, see Nordås & Cohen 2021). Violence also differs in its proximity to civilians; indirect violence involves the use of heavy weapons (e.g., tanks, fighter planes) by armed groups acting remotely and unilaterally, while direct violence involves the use of small weapons (e.g., machetes or rifles) by armed groups acting face-to-face with the victims and in collaboration with local civilians (Balcells 2017).

A significant body of recent work examines the targeting dimension of violence. In some cases, belligerents target specific individuals—for example, those believed to be aiding the opponent—rather than an entire social group. Kalyvas (2006) refers to this type of violence—involving assessment of individual guilt—as selective violence. In other cases, belligerents assess guilt collectively, targeting individuals based on their membership in a specific ethnic, religious, or political group; such violence might be understood as categorical violence (Goodwin 2006, Fortna et al. 2018), collective targeting (Steele 2017), or group-selective violence (Straus 2015). Kalyvas refers to such violence as indiscriminate, whereas other scholars use the term indiscriminate in cases where a belligerent does not target specific individuals or specific groups (e.g., Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017).

Table 1 summarizes different ways of classifying violence against civilians, pointing to key distinctions scholars make between categories of violence. On the challenges associated with

[1]Manekin (2020) distinguishes opportunistic from entrepreneurial violence based on whether the soldier committing violence aims to serve personal objectives (opportunistic violence) or group objectives (entrepreneurial violence).

Table 1 Classification of violence against civilians

Key distinction	Basis of distinction
Violence versus restraint	Repertoires or forms of conflict behavior involving harm to civilians versus repertoires or forms of conflict behavior involving efforts to limit or prevent harm to civilians
Intentional versus unintentional violence	Repertoires or forms of violence that involve deliberate harm to civilians versus repertoires or forms of violence that involve nondeliberate harm to civilians (collateral damage)
Violence as policy versus violence as practice	Repertoires or forms of violence commanded or authorized by armed group leadership versus repertoires or forms of violence not commanded or authorized by armed group leadership
Strategic versus opportunistic violence	Repertoires or forms of violence initiated by armed group leadership to fulfill military or political objectives versus repertoires or forms of violence initiated by soldiers to advance personal interests
Lethal versus nonlethal violence	Repertoires or forms of violence that involve killing versus repertoires or forms of violence that harm civilians without killing (e.g., sexual violence)
Indirect versus direct violence	Repertoires or forms of violence inflicted by armed groups unilaterally using heavy weapons versus repertoires or forms of violence inflicted by armed groups in collaboration with civilians using small arms
Selective versus collective versus indiscriminate violence	Narrow targeting following a selection process at the individual level versus targeting following a selection process at the collective or group level versus broad targeting of civilians without following a selection process

measuring different types of violence against civilians, see the sidebar titled Data Challenges for Research on Violence Against Civilians.

EXPLAINING WARTIME VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

As Valentino (2014, p. 91) points out in his survey of the literature on wartime civilian targeting, most scholars agree that violence is not "irrational, random, or the result of ancient hatreds between ethnic groups." Valentino identifies two dominant narratives: a war narrative, emphasizing how war creates incentives to target civilians; and a political narrative, focusing on why political elites sometimes promote violence. The recent wave of research on violence against civilians complicates and broadens these narratives, identifying a range of structures, actors, and processes

DATA CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

In measuring patterns of wartime violence against civilians, a common challenge confronting research is the unavailability of reliable data. Reporting on wartime violence suffers from multiple biases, including a tendency to focus on urban events, lethal forms of violence, and high-casualty incidents (Davenport & Ball 2002, Krüger et al. 2013). Even in analyses focusing on lethal forms of violence against civilians, data challenges persist; counting the number of civilians killed during war is extraordinarily difficult even for well-documented conflicts such as the Rwandan genocide (Armstrong et al. 2020). Many studies of wartime violence against civilians rely on count data on civilian casualties to make comparisons across conflicts or across space and time within a single conflict. Although a growing body of research draws on country-specific data from archives, nongovernmental organizations, or Truth Commissions documenting subnational variation in violence (e.g., Straus 2015, Cohen 2016, Balcells 2017, Hoover Green 2018), country-specific data sources may suffer from bias or aggregation problems as well (Krüger et al. 2013). New forms of conflict data, such as data from mobile information communication technology platforms, may only aggravate patterns of reporting bias (Weidmann 2016).

Table 2 Determinants of violence by level of analysis

Level of analysis	Determinants of violence
International	International structural context Armed groups' relationships with international actors
Domestic and/or subnational	Armed groups' relationships with domestic populations Territorial contestation Relative military capacity
Organizational and/or individual	Armed groups' organizational characteristics and ideology Economic factors Emotional or psychological factors

at the international, domestic, subnational, organizational, and individual levels that condition the incentives for belligerents to use violence against civilians and sometimes constrain violence or create incentives for restraint. **Table 2** identifies eight strands of argument within this recent wave of research. Each strand of argument emphasizes different determinants of wartime violence against civilians, grouped by level of analysis.

In discussing each strand of argument, we highlight differences in researchers' objects of study—the actors, decision-making structures, and processes that occupy the center of their theoretical arguments and empirical analyses—evaluating the extent to which key findings are complementary.

Within these eight strands of argument, some scholars focus on strategic violence, others focus on opportunistic violence or violence as practice, and still others address violence more broadly without differentiating based on intent. Among studies examining strategic violence, scholars identify multiple strategic logics of violence against civilians. Many scholars focus on a logic of control, in which violence against civilians aims to induce greater civilian cooperation in the provision of food, shelter, recruits, and intelligence, all of which are crucial to secure and consolidate military control. Although belligerents may prefer voluntary civilian cooperation, they may also use violence to coerce civilian cooperation. A second logic—often referred to as punishment or terrorism—also emphasizes coercion. Here, violence aims not to coerce civilians themselves, but to coerce the opponent. By targeting the opponent's civilian constituents, belligerents seek to increase the costs of the conflict, forcing the opponent to make concessions. A third strategic logic seeks to separate the opponent from its civilian supporters by using violence to cleanse territory of a particular group of civilians, either temporarily or permanently. Other strategic logics include violence intended to provoke government repression, thus aiding recruitment and mobilization of the insurgent's base of support; violence aimed at demonstrating resolve in order to outbid a rival insurgent group; and violence directed at spoiling a peace process (Kydd & Walter 2006).

Technologies of rebellion: the nature of warfare and the technologies used by belligerents in a civil war

Irregular civil war: civil war in which the state has heavy weaponry but the rebels do not and the rebels fight as guerrillas

International Structural Context

At the broadest level of analysis, the international level, scholars focus on how the character or structure of the international system—distributions of power, institutions, and ideas at the international level—shape belligerent behavior during civil wars. Kalyvas & Balcells (2010) show that the Cold War and its conclusion had significant implications for the nature of fighting in civil war—what they call technologies of rebellion. During the Cold War, military and financial backing from the United States and the Soviet Union increased the military power of both governments and rebel groups, with most civil wars fought as irregular, or guerrilla, wars. A decline in superpower backing following the end of the Cold War contributed to a decline in irregular civil war, as governments and rebel groups suffered a loss of military capacity; many

civil wars thus became symmetric nonconventional civil wars. At the same time, the dissolution of postcommunist states contributed to a series of conventional civil wars.

These changes over time in the nature of warfare have important implications for violence against civilians. Many scholars argue that irregular (guerrilla) wars involve the highest degree of civilian victimization because insurgents rely heavily on civilians for support and intelligence, leading to high levels of military contestation and the use of violence to control civilians and territory (Kalyvas 2006). Governments may also use violence to cut off insurgents from their civilian supporters through cleansing, leading to mass killing (Valentino 2004, Valentino et al. 2004). In a cross-national analysis of interstate, civil, and colonial wars, Valentino et al. (2004) find that guerrilla warfare is associated with mass killing, while in an analysis of civil wars, Balcells & Kalyvas (2014) document higher levels of civilian victimization in irregular civil wars (but see Krcmaric 2018 for an alternative perspective). Technologies of rebellion have implications not only for levels of civilian targeting, but also for repertoires or forms of violence against civilians, including patterns of direct and indirect violence (Balcells 2010, 2017) and dynamics and forms of displacement (Balcells & Steele 2016, Lichtenheld 2020).

Symmetric nonconventional civil war: civil war in which both government and insurgents have a fairly low level of military technology and fight frontally

Conventional civil war: civil war in which both sides use heavy weaponry and there are relatively clear and stable fronts

In addition to structural changes in the distribution of power in the international system, changes in international norms and ideas also impact the character of violence during civil war. In the years following World War II, for example, international actors formalized protections for noncombatants with the signing of the Genocide Convention and the Geneva Conventions, arguably helping to strengthen international norms emphasizing respect for human rights and humanitarian standards. The end of the Cold War, too, brought system-level change, with the shift away from ideology as the primary factor shaping external diplomatic and material support for belligerents. As international ideas and norms shift, so do international actors' responses to violence, and therefore, belligerent behavior. Although several studies have touched on these issues (e.g., Stanton 2016, 2020; Fazal 2018), future research might explore in more detail the impact of international structural changes on wartime violence. At a minimum, scholars ought to be aware of the challenges these international structural changes present for analyzing wartime violence over time, and ought to specify the time-specific bounds of their theoretical claims.

Armed Groups' Relationship with International Actors

Arguments emphasizing the nature of the international system tend to focus on broad shifts in the distribution of power among states, the dominance of particular norms, or the constellation of international institutions. Another set of arguments also focuses on international-level factors but draws attention to the interactions between armed groups fighting in civil wars and a variety of different international actors. This set of arguments includes those focusing on external financial and military support for governments and rebel groups, as well as those focusing on the diplomatic involvement of foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations in civil wars.

Some researchers examining external support contend that rebel groups who receive material support from foreign governments—financing, supplies, weapons, or troops—are less dependent on local civilian populations for support and consequently have few incentives to rein in opportunistic violence against civilians or to refrain from punitive attacks against civilians (Salehyan et al. 2014, Toft & Zhukov 2015, Weinstein 2007, Zhukov 2017). In some cases, rebel groups target civilians to signal to foreign sponsors their commitment to continue fighting (Hovil & Werker 2005). Cross-national evidence lends support to these claims regarding external support, showing that foreign economic and military intervention on behalf of rebels is associated with higher numbers of combat-related deaths (Weinstein 2007) and higher levels of civilian targeting (Salehyan et al. 2014). However, the character of the foreign sponsor conditions this relationship;

some foreign actors—democratic states and states with a significant human rights nongovernmental organization presence—are unlikely to support groups that abuse civilians (Salehyan et al. 2014).

External military intervention may also impact government violence against civilians—for example, by exacerbating government perceptions of threat and therefore increasing government incentives to engage in mass killing (Wood & Kathman 2011). This aligns with research showing that the broader international strategic environment shapes government threat perceptions; research indicates that external threats and rivalry create incentives for governments to engage in violence against out-groups within domestic society—for example, to prevent out-groups from becoming a fifth column for external enemies (e.g., Mylonas 2012, Uzonyi 2018).

A second strand of research focuses on the politics of international diplomatic support and international condemnation of violence against civilians. These scholars—mostly marshalling quantitative and qualitative cross-national evidence in support of their claims—highlight the ways in which diplomatic pressures from foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations sometimes incentivize restraint toward civilians. Using cross-national data and case study evidence on forms of government and rebel group violence and restraint toward civilians, Stanton (2016) finds that governments and rebel groups that are vulnerable domestically and, therefore, need diplomatic support from Western international audiences are more likely to exercise restraint toward civilians, largely complying with international humanitarian law. This comports with findings from Jo (2015) using count data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) on one-sided violence to show that rebel groups seeking international legitimacy are more likely to comply with international humanitarian law's prohibitions on civilian targeting, as well as with research showing that rebel groups that formally commit to comply with international laws banning the use of landmines are more likely to adhere to these laws (Gleditsch et al. 2018). Fazal (2018), meanwhile, finds that secessionist rebel groups—because they need support from international actors to gain international recognition—have incentives to adhere to international humanitarian law and to avoid attacks on civilians.

Governments, too, respond to pressures from international audiences, as Stanton's (2016) quantitative and qualitative evidence shows. In a similar vein, DeMeritt (2015) demonstrates that the presence of foreign intervenors can expose the government to greater scrutiny and criticism, increasing the costs of killing civilians, while Krcmaric (2019) argues that the prospect of domestic and international criticism impacts government decision making regarding violence.

Armed Groups' Relationship with Domestic Populations

We now turn to research examining domestic and subnational factors driving wartime violence against civilians. A number of scholars establish that the dyadic relationship between armed groups and the local population, that is, armed groups' domestic constituencies, affects whether and how belligerents direct violence against civilians. Some scholars focus on the domestic, or national, level of analysis, emphasizing how national-level variables such as domestic political institutions structure belligerent relationships with domestic constituencies. Stanton (2016) argues that governments that need support from broad domestic constituencies face high costs to violence and thus have incentives to exercise restraint toward civilians. Cross-national evidence supports this claim, showing that domestic political institutions can constrain leaders; democratic governments, inclusive governments, and governments with unconsolidated institutions are more likely to exercise restraint toward civilians (Stanton 2016).

Research shows that rebel groups also consider how domestic audiences will respond to violence. Rebel groups that seek support from a broad domestic constituency face high costs to

violence and thus are less likely to target civilians (Polo & Gleditsch 2016; Stanton 2013, 2016), while rebel groups that rely on local civilian support are less likely to engage in terrorism (Fortna et al. 2018). Consistent with these arguments, Heger (2015) establishes that rebel groups that participate in elections are less likely to engage in violence against civilians because they are more accountable to their civilian supporters than are rebel groups that are not subject to elections. Also emphasizing rebel group responsiveness to domestic audiences, Stewart & Liou (2017) find that rebel groups controlling domestic territory (inhabited by their own political constituents) use governance structures to elicit cooperation, whereas rebel groups controlling foreign territory (inhabited by nonconstituents) rely on violence to extract resources and cooperation. As some scholars have pointed out, ideology often plays an important role in shaping how governments and rebel groups define and govern their domestic constituencies, thus influencing patterns of violence (e.g., Balcells & Kalyvas 2010, Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2014). We return to this issue in the section titled Armed Groups' Organizational Characteristics and Ideology.

Other scholars focus on the subnational level of analysis, pointing to the importance of subnational or local-level institutions in shaping belligerent violence against civilians. Several recent subnational works document a correlation between prewar or wartime electoral configurations at the local or province level and violence against civilians (Balcells 2017), including collective targeting intended to generate displacement (Steele 2017). These arguments emphasize a logic of cleansing, in which armed groups or their local ethnic elites use violence instrumentally to promote political cleansing of localities, or to pursue political goals, which include the elimination of political rivals. Interestingly, while ideological cleavages prove deadly in places such as Spain or Colombia, Bulutgil (2016) finds—with data from Bosnia—that nonethnic societal cleavages create divisions within ethnic groups that dampen support for ethnic cleansing. Also, while Balcells (2017) argues that direct violence is greater in places where groups are intermixed and are of similar sizes, Hägerdal (2017) finds that, in Lebanon, ethnic violence is more restrained in places with intermixed populations; however, unlike Balcells, Hägerdal refers to areas of contested military control in which ethnic intermixing proves useful for intelligence gathering purposes (see also Lyall 2010).

Consistent with the subnational findings, several studies using geo-referenced event data on violence against civilians in African conflicts also find evidence that armed groups' relationships with domestic civilian constituencies affect patterns of violence against civilians. For example, Wimmer & Miner (2019) find that violence is greater when there is more parity between ethnic groups (consistent with Balcells 2017), while Fjelde & Hultman (2014) find that belligerents are more likely to engage in collective targeting of civilians in areas where their opponent's ethnic constituents live (consistent with Steele 2017).

Territorial Contestation

In pioneering research on civil war, Kalyvas (2006) draws attention to the subnational determinants of violence against civilians. He shows that even within irregular wars, violence against civilians varies considerably across space and time, depending on levels of military contestation over territory. Focusing on the dyadic interaction between governments and rebel groups and arguing that violence against civilians follows a logic of control, Kalyvas theorizes that selective violence is more likely in areas of asymmetric contestation, where one group exercises predominant but not full control over territory. In such areas, would-be collaborators are willing to provide intelligence that can aid in eliminating threats, and the rebel group or government can protect these collaborators. However, when one side exercises complete control over territory, the opposing side cannot use violence to induce compliance and control, increasing the likelihood of indiscriminate violence.

Many scholars build on Kalyvas's arguments to explore factors that influence patterns of territorial contestation or incentives for civilian collaboration and, therefore, also affect variation in violence against civilians. Most of these studies focus on subnational patterns of territorial control and contestation and naturally analyze variation in violence within countries. However, researchers have begun to develop measures of subnational variation in territorial control across countries (e.g., Tao et al. 2016), providing a means of assessing the external validity of territorial contestation arguments.

Several studies show that the provision of aid intended to help the government win over civilians exacerbates contestation as insurgents challenge government attempts to solidify control over territory, leading to increased insurgent violence against civilians. Subnational evidence from Colombia (Weintraub 2016) and Afghanistan (Sexton 2016), as well as an analysis of georeferenced event data for 22 African countries (Wood & Sullivan 2015), supports this contention. Distance, too, may influence the nature of territorial contestation; Schutte (2017) shows that indiscriminate violence is more likely as distance from a country's center of power increases. However, subnational evidence from Peru suggests that lack of territorial control is not always associated with indiscriminate violence, as groups might use restraint to win support from civilians in noncontrolled areas (de la Calle 2017).

Finally, an emerging body of work explores how territorial contestation interacts with technology at the subnational level, examining the relationship between technological factors and civilian collaboration with government forces. Debate persists about whether the intelligence-gathering benefits of expanded technology outweigh the advantages such technology provides for rebel group organizing. Subnational data on Iraq indicate that cell phone technology facilitates intelligence gathering, leading to reduced insurgent activity (Shapiro & Weidmann 2015). However, disaggregated data on cell phone coverage and violent events in African conflicts suggest that expanded networks facilitate rebel group communication and collective action, thus contributing to violence (Pierskalla & Hollenbach 2013). A more integrated theoretical approach, weighing the impact of country- or conflict-level contextual variables, might help to explain these seemingly contradictory findings; for example, perhaps the conflict in Iraq differs from African conflicts in ways that might lead to a differential impact of technology.

Most existing research focuses on how technology affects violence overall; future research might also explore whether variation in communication infrastructure affects violence against civilians. For example, if cell phone networks help governments obtain better information, this might reduce indiscriminate government violence against civilians. Indeed, recent research by Gohdes (2020) shows that internet access is associated with government use of more targeted, or selective, violence against civilians in contested areas because governments can gather intelligence from surveillance of digital information. On the other hand, if such technology facilitates violent activity by armed groups, this might exacerbate territorial contestation, leading to increased violence against civilians.

Relative Military Capacity

Another strand of research focusing on the domestic and subnational determinants of violence analyzes the relationship between military capacity and belligerent behavior. Some scholars theorize about military capacity at the domestic level, developing arguments about the military capacity of the government relative to the rebel group in the conflict as a whole; other scholars theorize about military capacity at the subnational level, viewing military capacity as situated within particular local contexts.

Within this strand of research, scholars disagree about the extent to which belligerents' relative military capacity impacts patterns of violence against civilians. A common claim is that violence

against civilians is a weapon of the weak, employed when belligerents lack other means of securing civilian cooperation or pressuring their opponent. Emphasizing a logic of control, some scholars argue that weak governments and rebel groups have difficulty providing services and protection that will elicit voluntary cooperation and instead use violence to coerce civilians into cooperating (e.g., Wood 2010). Highlighting a logic of punishment or terrorism, others posit that weak rebel groups lack the capacity to engage in direct military confrontations with the government and thus turn to attacks on civilians as a way to raise the costs of the conflict, forcing government concessions (e.g., Arreguín-Toft 2005). Using cross-national data, some scholars find evidence that militarily weak rebel groups are more likely to target civilians (Wood 2010) and nonmilitary targets (Polo & Gleditsch 2016), while others use event data to show that rebel groups are also more likely to attack civilians following battlefield losses (Hultman 2007, Wood 2014). Polo & González (2020), meanwhile, propose an alternative theoretical mechanism, positing that rebel groups confronting military losses attack civilians as a means of provoking government repression, to mobilize support for the rebellion.

However, other scholars challenge the idea that violence against civilians is a weapon of the weak, arguing that many forms of direct and indirect violence against civilians—for example, large-scale bombing of civilian areas or ethnic cleansing campaigns—require significant resources and logistical capacity (e.g., Stanton 2016, Zhukov 2017). In addition, other factors interact with military capacity to shape belligerent calculations regarding violence. Fielding & Shortland (2012) show that military capacity can vary across space and time at the subnational level. Drawing on data from Peru, they argue that although the Peruvian government was militarily strong and benefited from foreign assistance, challenging terrain made it difficult for either side to provide services or protection to civilians. Without the capacity to induce voluntary cooperation, both sides turned to violence against civilians. Subnational evidence from German-occupied Belarus during World War II similarly shows that military capacity varies within conflicts; moreover, weakening a belligerent by cutting off its access to external sources of support can reduce the belligerent's capacity for punitive violence and force the belligerent to rely on the local population for resources, reducing violence against civilians (Zhukov 2017).

Cross-national analyses of different forms of government and rebel group violence, meanwhile, also offer a more complicated view. Stanton (2016) finds that although militarily strong governments are more likely to engage in cleansing, they are not any more likely to adopt other strategies of violence toward civilians. Cross-national studies of rebel group terrorism—defined as attacks against civilian populations aimed at coercing the opponent—show that weak rebel groups are no more likely than strong rebel groups to engage in terrorism (Asal et al. 2019; Fortna 2015; Stanton 2013, 2016).

Armed Groups' Organizational Characteristics and Ideology

Scholars emphasizing the organizational determinants of violence against civilians focus on the dynamics and ideology of individual armed groups—how groups recruit, socialize, and train their members; how organizational norms regarding the use of violence develop and persist; how armed group leaders enable or constrain violence; and how groups' political ideology can shape organizational processes, norms, and ultimately, behavior. A number of scholars argue that nonstrategic forms of violence against civilians result from a lack of organizational control over members, the absence of norms urging restraint, or other social processes. Some of these approaches are Hobbesian insofar as they "rest on the assumption of a human propensity for violence which will express itself unless curbed by organizations" (Kalyvas 2012, p. 667), while other studies emphasize the ways in which armed groups often break down social norms that otherwise inhibit violence. Thus, although the primary locus of variation is the armed group,

many of these studies also incorporate ideas about how and why individuals participate in violent acts as well as theorize about how organizational characteristics and ideology are linked to armed groups' relationships with local communities. Although a few studies use cross-national data to examine organizational characteristics that are measurable at the level of the group—such as group ideology or recruitment patterns—most studies examining organizational dynamics draw on subnational qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Weinstein's (2007) path-breaking book posits that the resource endowments of armed groups determine organizational characteristics, including structures of command and control. Organizations with access to external resources—either from a foreign government or the exploitation of natural resources—attract low-commitment members and have difficulty controlling the use of violence among members. In contrast, low-resource organizations draw on local networks to attract high-commitment, ideologically motivated recruits; these organizations build ties with local communities and control members' use of violence, contributing to greater restraint toward civilians. Weinstein (2007) tests his theory with qualitative evidence from four case studies, a cross-national dataset, and survey data from Sierra Leone (Humphreys & Weinstein 2006). Some scholars have challenged Weinstein's claims that resource-rich groups are more violent. Lidow (2016), for example, uses evidence from Liberia to show that rebel groups backed by external actors, such as diaspora communities and foreign governments, can offer cash payments and credible future rewards to their top commanders, helping these groups to protect civilians and remain unified.

Following Weinstein's work, some scholars emphasize the influence of armed groups' organizational structure on behavior, but they do not make claims about resource endowments as the central factor determining structure. Manekin (2020), for example, argues that, in organizations lacking effective command and control, longer soldier deployments among civilians from an opposing group are associated with increased opportunistic violence, as social norms and moral inhibitions tend to break down. Importantly, Manekin shows that processes of organizational control are also essential in the production of strategic violence, serving to define appropriate forms and targets of violence. Others, such as Hoover Green (2016, 2018) and Oppenheim & Weintraub (2017), highlight the importance of political education and training in inculcating restraint and, therefore, reducing opportunistic violence against civilians. Hundman & Parkinson (2019), for their part, point out that sometimes soldiers disobey and that this is highly determined by the nature of their social networks.

Several scholars point to armed group ideology as a key factor driving both organizational structure and behavior (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2014, Leader Maynard 2019). An armed group's ideology can constrain violence by restricting forms of violence or limiting targets of violence. Some studies show that Marxist rebel groups are less likely to use violence against civilians. Balcells & Kalyvas (2010), for example, argue that Revolutionary Socialist (i.e., Marxist) insurgents are less likely to victimize civilians, owing to their doctrine, while Hoover Green (2016, 2018) presents cross-national evidence and subnational evidence showing that Marxist groups like the FMLN in El Salvador prioritize political education, leading to less opportunistic violence. Similarly, Thaler (2012) shows that a commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideas drove restraint among government actors in Angola and Mozambique, though restraint waned as these governments' ideological commitment declined.

In some cases, ideology might lead armed groups to establish organizational structures and policies encouraging violence rather than restraint. And ideology can also enable or promote particular forms of violence or violence against particular targets. Valentino (2004), for example, draws on extensive qualitative evidence to show that leaders' ideologies—including communist and ethno-nationalist ideologies—drive government mass killing, while Kim (2016) argues

that revolutionary leaders are more likely to commit mass killings. Several scholars argue that exclusionary ethnic or national ideologies or narratives are key factors driving extreme violence such as ethnic cleansing and genocide (e.g., Straus 2015). Others, such as Kaufmann (1996), contend that ethnic conflicts, in general, tend to be more violent, but this proposition has been challenged by subnational work on Vietnam (Kalyvas & Kocher 2009). Toft & Zhukov (2015), for their part, contend that nationalist groups are less violent than transnational (e.g., jihadist) groups because they are more rooted among and dependent upon local populations.

Finally, a recent set of works contends that killing civilians emerges through practice, norms, or other socialization processes that develop within armed groups (Mitton 2015, Wood 2018). Drawing from interviews with rebel commanders in Sierra Leone, Mitton (2015) documents how rebel recruits were systematically brutalized and came to perform horrifying acts of cruelty as routine. Cohen (2013, 2016), meanwhile, draws on rich qualitative evidence from Sierra Leone and El Salvador, as well as cross-national quantitative evidence, to show that for groups reliant on forced recruitment, gang rape serves to socialize group members and build group cohesion. Gates (2017) similarly argues that within groups that forcibly recruit members, socialization processes often contribute to the development of a "culture of violence" encouraging violent behavior toward group members and civilians.

Economic Factors

Whereas Weinstein and others posit that economic factors, such as access to external sources of financing, affect patterns of violence through their impact on armed group organizational structures, other scholars contend that economic *motivations* or incentive structures more directly drive individuals to participate in rebellion and violence. While most of these arguments emphasize individual determinants of violence, some also highlight organizational determinants of violence insofar as they ascribe economic motivations to the group.

In general, these approaches employ a narrow conceptualization of violence against civilians. Violence is considered a mere side effect of the mobilization of armed groups, the recruitment of new members (due to the lack of alternative economic opportunities), or rapacity. For example, according to Dube & Vargas (2013), an increase in the price of labor-intensive commodities is associated with less violence in Colombia, as higher wages increase the opportunity cost of joining a rebellion. However, this implausibly assumes that if the price of labor-intensive commodities declines, people do not have alternatives to joining a rebellion. More people joining a rebellion also does not necessarily mean increased violence because the logic of violence is separate from the logic of recruitment. In addition, spatial variation in violence may not be correlated with localized opportunity costs for rebellion because individuals might join a rebellion in one locality and perpetrate violence in another. Several of these studies take advantage of exogenous shocks (e.g., changes in international prices of certain commodities) to identify the effect of economic factors on violence; for example, focusing subnationally on Sierra Leone, Rigterink (2020) finds that when diamond prices increase, violence concentrates in resource-rich areas because of increased returns to looting. Thus, following earlier works (e.g., Azam 2002), Rigterink sees violence against civilians as the by-product of competition for and looting of resources.

Research using geo-referenced data on African conflicts finds that areas with more agricultural resources experience more incidents of violence against civilians, as governments and rebel groups compete for access to food resources (Koren & Bagozzi 2017). The highest levels of violence occur in drought-affected areas where civilians resist predation (Bagozzi et al. 2017). Yet, using similar geo-referenced data, Wimmer & Miner (2019) find that the presence of lootable resources is not associated with higher levels of violence against civilians.

Emotional and Psychological Factors

Finally, focusing on individual determinants of violence, many scholars contend that understanding the role of emotional and psychological factors is crucial to understanding individual participation in violent acts. Other scholars focus more on how emotions and psychological processes operating within social groups or armed groups contribute to violent behaviors.

Emotional and psychological factors on their own rarely explain violence against civilians. These factors usually operate in combination with other factors mentioned above (e.g., strategy, opportunity) and they are related to group-level processes (e.g., socialization) also mentioned above. Moreover, the connection between emotions and violence is complex. In research on the Rwandan genocide, McDoom (2012) establishes that emotions matter for the polarization of attitudes, but material and structural opportunities mediate their expression as violence.

Empirical research has identified particular emotions linked to violence against civilians, including shame, disgust, resentment, and anger. Mitton (2015) posits that shame and disgust were key emotions explaining communal atrocities in Sierra Leone. In her cross-national, group-level study of mass violence in Europe, Bulutgil (2016) documents that ethnic cleansing is more likely when the targeted group has experienced an increase in their status or has collaborated with the enemy; she interprets this as evidence in support of arguments emphasizing resentment following status reversals (Petersen 2002) or revenge in response to past violence. Resentment, according to Weidmann (2011), was also the driver of ethnic violence in Bosnia. Balcells (2010, 2017) finds that anger accounts for wartime violence in the noninitial periods of a civil war, as this emotion incites individuals to denounce others as well as to kill to exact revenge for previous violent events.

Abundant research attempts to explain how individuals decide to participate in violence. Some of this research, such as Fujii's (2009) work on the Rwandan genocide, emphasizes the importance of social ties, social pressure, and social norms. Fujii (2013) also explains "extralethal violence" emerging through performative processes that produce satisfaction for perpetrators. Other research highlights psychological processes relating to the victims (e.g, dehumanization, deindividuation) and to the perpetrators (e.g., moral disengagement, tolerance to deaths). For example, these processes are behind brutal acts of violence by Israeli soldiers in Gaza (Elizur & Yishay-Krien 2009), and they drove intracommunal violence in Croatia and Guatemala, where violence was more prevalent in "amoral communities" (Dragojevic 2019). At the same time, Luft (2015) argues that, instead of a cause, dehumanization can be a consequence of violence as individuals cognitively adapt to killing others by not seeing them as people.

Moreover, psychological research by Haer et al. (2013) indicates that some individuals have intrinsic rewards (i.e., appetitive aggression) and thus are more prone to perpetrate acts of cruelty. Appetitive aggression can be developed through socialization early in life (as in child soldiers) within a combat force. Finally, Littman & Paluck (2015) argue that groups can promote violent behavior among members by strengthening group identification and removing psychological obstacles to violence (i.e., by making individuals less averse to violence).

EMERGING RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

Although the recent wave of literature on wartime violence against civilians focuses primarily on the behavior of governments and rebel groups, two emerging strands of research highlight the complexity of civil wars by pointing to the importance of other actors within the domestic arena, with one strand focusing on progovernment militias and another strand focusing on civilians as independent, multifaceted actors in conflict. Both strands of research, by theorizing about the behavior of domestic actors, fit broadly with the set of research that examines armed groups'

relationships with domestic constituencies and focuses on domestic and subnational determinants of violence.

Among scholars researching progovernment militias, a common claim is that governments outsource violence to militias—allowing or encouraging militias to commit abuses against civilians—while shielding the government's regular military forces from responsibility for violence (e.g., Carey et al. 2015). Evidence in support of the outsourcing hypothesis is mixed. Cross-national analyses show that the presence of progovernment militias is associated with an increased likelihood of mass killing (Koren 2017). However, analyses of more disaggregated cross-national data distinguishing between the behavior of regular government forces and militia forces do not find evidence that militia violence substitutes for violence by regular government forces. Instead, regular government military forces and progovernment militia forces collaborate in targeting civilians (Stanton 2015) and in committing acts of sexual violence (Cohen & Nordås 2015).

Consistent with arguments emphasizing belligerent relationships with domestic populations, research shows that some types of progovernment militias—in particular, militias that are closely tied to the communities where they operate—are less likely to target civilians. Using subnational data on Chechnya, Lyall (2010) finds that during counterinsurgency operations, pro-Russian Chechen militia forces were more selective in their use of violence and more effective in reducing insurgent violence than Russian forces—likely because Chechen militias had an advantage in gathering intelligence and eliciting civilian cooperation. At the cross-national level, Stanton (2015) finds that when progovernment militias recruit their members from the same constituency as insurgents, militias are less likely to target civilians as this would mean attacking their own community. Clayton & Thomson (2016) argue that civil defense militias help governments obtain better information, thus reducing the need for violence against the wider civilian population. However, the presence of civil defense militias can interfere with insurgent relationships with civilians, leading to increased rebel group violence.

A second area of emerging work urges a reconceptualization of the category of "civilian," disaggregating this category to analyze violence against different types of noncombatants as well as highlighting the agency of civilian actors during wartime. Drawing attention to the multiplicity of civilian or noncombatant actors present in civil war settings, one set of studies examines targeting of different types of noncombatant actors—for example, research on armed group violence against aid workers during civil war (e.g., Narang & Stanton 2017) and research on how armed groups differentiate their use of violence even against their own civilian constituents (e.g., Gowrinathan & Mampilly 2019). A burgeoning area of research delves into the behavior of civilian actors during wartime, demonstrating that civilians have agency and respond differently to armed groups and to the experience of violence (Arjona 2016, Schubiger 2021). Related research shows that the presence of local civilian institutions can mitigate government, rebel group, and paramilitary violence against civilians (e.g., Kaplan 2017).

A third area of emerging work examines the consequences of violence against civilians. Within this body of research, again, thinking at different levels of analysis can be useful; some scholars focus on how individuals, social groups, and local communities respond to the experience of victimization and violence, and other scholars focus on how wider domestic and international audiences respond to violence. Many studies explore the impact of violence on civilian loyalties and behavior (for a theoretical discussion, see Kalyvas 2006). Evidence from studies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Peru, and Ukraine suggest that civilians do punish belligerents who target civilians—by blaming or withdrawing their support for these belligerents (Lyall et al. 2013, Pechenkina et al. 2019), collaborating with or providing tips to opposing forces (Schutte 2016, Shaver & Shapiro 2016), or voting for an opposing political party in elections (Birnir & Ghodes 2018). However, these same studies also show that civilian responses to violence are not uniform, much as research on

civilian agency shows that "civilians" should not be seen as a monolithic actor. For example, civilian backlash against violence is higher in response to violence committed by belligerents perceived as outsiders (Lyall et al. 2013) and in localities that directly experienced violence (Birnir & Ghodes 2018, Pechenkina et al. 2019). Counterintuitively, Schubiger (2021) argues that civilians sometimes respond to government violence by mobilizing against insurgents to signal their opposition to insurgents and avoid further state targeting.

Cross-national studies show that backlash from domestic audiences can have significant consequences for conflict outcomes. Citing this logic, scholars find that insurgent groups that use terrorist tactics are less likely to achieve their political objectives (Abrahms 2012) and less likely to secure a military victory or negotiated settlement (Fortna 2015). Terrorist violence can also undermine the government's trust in insurgents, spoiling peace negotiations and prolonging conflict (Kydd & Walter 2006). Countering these claims, several studies examining a broader range of violence against civilians find that rebel groups that target civilians are more likely to participate in negotiations and obtain political concessions (Thomas 2014) and, up to a point, more likely to secure negotiated settlements (Wood & Kathman 2014). Lyall (2009), for his part, finds evidence that violence against civilians can be effective under certain conditions, showing that government use of indiscriminate violence led to short-term declines in insurgent violence in Chechnya.

International responses to wartime violence impact conflict outcomes as well. As Stanton (2020) shows, when rebel groups exercise restraint toward civilians in the face of government atrocities, Western international actors are likely to intervene diplomatically, helping the rebel group to secure favorable political terms of settlement. Macro-level evidence also indicates that the United Nations is more likely to deploy peacekeeping missions in conflicts involving high levels of violence against civilians and that these missions are effective in protecting civilians (Hultman et al. 2013). However, analyses of subnational data find that while peacekeepers mitigate rebel group violence against civilians, they have little impact on government violence (Fjelde et al. 2019). Meanwhile, recent research finds that humanitarian assistance can sometimes mitigate backlash following violent incidents (Lyall 2020).

Research shows that legacies of violence endure for many years after conflict ends. Wartime violence contributes to the polarization of local identities, as moral outrage encourages individuals to align themselves with the opposing side (Wood 2003, 2008). Drawing on evidence from Spain, Balcells (2012) suggests that experiences of civilian victimization are transmitted across generations, impacting individuals' political ideology and the ideology of their family members. Balcells finds that individuals respond to violence by rejecting the ideology of the perpetrating group; this effect is strongest when victimization is severe. Costalli & Ruggeri (2015) similarly find that Italian regions that experienced high levels of Nazi-fascist violence against civilians were more likely to support left-wing parties in postwar elections. In addition, recent work shows that exposure to wartime violence is associated with increased ethnic polarization and support for ethnic parties in Bosnia (Hadzic et al. 2020) and lower tolerance of members of the opposing ethnic group in Sri Lanka (Rapp et al. 2019). However, Bakke et al. (2009) do not find evidence of ethnic polarization or division. Moreover, a flourishing body of research draws on evidence from surveys and field experiments to show that exposure to violence is associated with prosocial behavior, such as increased political engagement (for a review of this literature, see Bauer et al. 2016).

Like many studies focusing on the subnational, organizational, or individual level, numerous studies of legacies of violence focus on a single country. Analyzing broader conflict-level factors might help to address concerns about whether the findings apply to other countries and other conflicts, as well as to reconcile contradictory findings in the literature. For example, researchers might consider whether the outcome of the conflict—who won the conflict, the nature of the

political settlement, or even the types of post-conflict transitional justice policies (Voytas 2020)—impacts how victims of violence engage politically.

All of the studies referenced in this section include civilian targeting among the forms of wartime violence they consider. However, apart from a few exceptions that focus explicitly on civilian victimization, these studies examine exposure to harm more broadly and do not differentiate between harm that occurs in the context of a military battle—for example, the deaths of family members who are soldiers—and harm resulting from civilian targeting. Thus, future research might consider whether different forms of violence have different impacts on social and political attitudes and behaviors.

CONCLUSION: MOVING BEYOND MICRO- AND MACRO-LEVEL APPROACHES

Research on wartime violence against civilians has developed rapidly over the past 15 years, with theoretical advances and empirical innovations driving the field toward more sophisticated analysis of the causes and consequences of violence against civilians. Early research on this topic was distinguished by two major approaches: macro-level approaches focusing on variation across countries or conflicts and micro-level approaches focusing on variation within countries or conflicts. However, conceptualizing the study of wartime violence against civilians as a contrast between macro- and micro-level approaches no longer accurately reflects the state of research on this topic. Indeed, many of the findings of the new wave of research on violence against civilians are complementary, offering theoretical insights and empirical tests of the factors shaping violence against civilians at different levels of analysis.

In the next wave of research on wartime violence against civilians, scholars ought to highlight this complementarity more, working to integrate theoretical insights from approaches operating at different levels of analysis (see the sidebar titled Integrating Insights from Cross-National and Subnational Research). An integrated approach to the study of violence against civilians would focus on how the determinants of violence at different levels of analysis interact with one another, pushing the field toward greater accumulation of knowledge.

INTEGRATING INSIGHTS FROM CROSS-NATIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL RESEARCH

What would it look like to integrate insights from subnational and cross-national approaches? We use research by Balcells (2017) and Stanton (2016) to illustrate. Balcells documents subnational variation in civilian targeting in Spain; in areas with high prewar political competition, belligerents used violence to eliminate civilians sympathetic to the opponent. Yet, overall, Spanish Republicans exercised greater restraint than did fascist forces. One explanation for this group-level variation is the disparate ideology of these two armed groups. Stanton's arguments can also help to account for this pattern, highlighting that belligerents seeking support from broad domestic and international constituencies exercise greater restraint than belligerents with narrower constituencies. Fascist forces—not democratic and backed by other fascist regimes—had fewer incentives for restraint than their democratic Spanish Republic counterparts. Meanwhile, using a cross-national approach, Stanton shows that rebel groups facing autocratic opponents exercise restraint toward civilians to appeal to international audiences for support. However, her case studies reveal that even restrained rebel groups—such as Acehnese and Timorese rebels in Indonesia—sometimes forcibly expelled migrants. Balcells's arguments might help to explain this subnational variation, drawing attention to perceptions of civilian loyalties and demonstrating that violence is most likely in areas inhabited by civilians seen as sympathetic to the opponent.

At the broadest level, research shows that the international and domestic context shapes armed group decision making and behavior, leading to the adoption of strategies of violence or restraint. Studies focusing on the domestic and international determinants of violence often use cross-national qualitative and quantitative evidence to highlight broad patterns in wartime violence against civilians, pointing to correlations that hold across many cases of civil war. However, these studies often overlook subnational variation in violence and thus risk minimizing the role of local-level factors and organizational dynamics in contributing to violence. In addition, cross-national studies are often unable to directly test some of the local-level causal mechanisms driving broader patterns of violence.

Approaches emphasizing the determinants of violence at the subnational, organizational, or individual level, meanwhile, give the locus of agency to individuals, armed groups, or communities rather than more abstract entities such as ethnic or political groups, and in doing so, they bring theoretical explanations closer to the violent events they seek to explain. However, just as approaches focusing on conflict- or country-level determinants of violence often fail to theorize about or test local-level processes driving violence, similarly, subnational approaches often fail to theorize about or test the influence of national- and international-level factors on violence—though some qualitative case studies do seek to grapple with such contextual factors (e.g., Straus 2015).

An integrated approach to the study of wartime violence against civilians would bring the theoretical insights from approaches at all levels of analysis into direct conversation with one another. For example, when concern about backlash from international and domestic audiences or armed group ideology urges restraint on the part of government or rebel group forces, how do belligerents respond to escalation in contestation over territory or to battlefield losses? To what extent might the local-level imperative to eliminate threatening civilians outweigh countervailing pressures from external supporters or other international actors to limit violence? When armed groups' ideology enables or promotes violence against civilians, can international or domestic factors still constrain violence? How do norms and socialization processes operating within armed groups interact with the broader strategic context to shape violent behavior?

In theorizing about how the determinants of wartime violence interact, scholars must be precise in laying out the implications of their theoretical claims and matching these implications to appropriate empirical tests—specifying whether and to what extent each theoretical claim would predict variation in violence at the level of the country or conflict, the subnational unit, the organization, or the individual. Moreover, scholars ought to be explicit about whether their theoretical contentions predict increased (or decreased) strategic violence against civilians, violence serving organizational purposes, opportunistic violence against civilians, violence emerging through practice or socialization, or some combination of these. Scholars ought to work to match their empirical evidence to these theoretical claims—for example, using data that exclude looting-related civilian deaths when testing arguments regarding strategic violence. Admittedly, data constraints present serious challenges in this regard, but scholars should be forthcoming about the extent to which their data allow for tests of their theoretical claims.

Recent strides in the development of disaggregated data across countries may facilitate such precision. Many scholars now use geo-referenced event data on incidents of violence against civilians, compiled for multiple countries by sources such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and the UCDP, while other scholars have mined social media to develop new and innovative conflict data. These data sources represent a significant advance in research comparing violence against civilians across multiple countries and allow for more accurate empirical testing of arguments that predict variation across space and time in civilian targeting. For example, Fjelde et al. (2019) argue that UN peacekeeping deployments impact strategic decision making

by belligerents, raising the costs of engaging in violence against civilians; their analysis of spatially disaggregated data shows that the location of UN peacekeepers is associated with a decline in violence in neighboring localities. Many of these approaches aggregate data within geo-located grid cells, gaining the advantage of comparable units of analysis across countries. However, it is important to note that these data may not be appropriate for testing certain arguments; these units of analysis do not correspond to politically meaningful administrative units such as districts or provinces, creating obstacles to testing arguments regarding the incentives driving local-level political actors to engage in violence. Also essential to understanding patterns of wartime violence against civilians is attention to the particular social, political, and ethnic groups targeted with violence—the nature of collective targeting of civilians. Many quantitative data sources do not capture this dimension of variation. However, recent attempts to build disaggregated data on the ethnicity of civilians targeted with violence across conflicts help to address this deficit (e.g., Fjelde & Hultman 2014, Cederman et al. 2020), while subnational analyses comparing collective targeting across conflicts offer another promising way forward (e.g., Balcells & Steele 2016).

Many scholars have also made effective use of rich sources of data on subnational variation in violence for particular countries. However, without explicit comparisons across countries, it is difficult to assess the extent to which domestic- and international-level variables might affect the observed relationships. Moreover, the intensive data requirements of studies examining subnational variation in violence also mean that some conflicts tend to be overrepresented. For example, US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq has meant the availability of data on violence in these conflicts (e.g., event data from Sigacts), while archival evidence on violence has contributed to a focus on historical cases such as Greece, Spain, and former Soviet republics. In Latin America, the presence of local researchers collecting data on violence, as in Colombia, and the establishment of truth commissions in post-conflict El Salvador and Guatemala have contributed to extensive study of these conflicts. As a field, we ought to think more systematically about how data availability influences our understanding of wartime violence against civilians. For example, the overrepresentation of Afghanistan and Iraq may bias scholars toward studying only rebel group violence, as violence perpetrated by government actors is absent from the datasets.

Another promising area of innovation in the study of wartime violence against civilians—helping to address concerns about the generalizability of subnational findings—are projects seeking to aggregate the results of multiple subnational studies, either by placing these results in comparative perspective or by pooling multiple sources of subnational data to discern patterns that hold across many countries. Bauer et al. (2016), for example, compare findings across nearly 20 studies regarding the impact of exposure to violence on political participation and trust. Meanwhile, the xSub project integrates numerous sources of subnational data on violence, allowing for cross-national tests using subnational data (Zhukov et al. 2019); the danger in this case is merging data that have been assembled with very different standards. Another means of bringing generalizability to subnational research is using subnational findings to derive and test expected implications for cross-national patterns (see examples in Balcells & Justino 2014).

Despite these theoretical and empirical advances in the study of wartime violence against civilians, more work remains. Scholars can still do more to build an integrated understanding of patterns of violence against civilians by explicitly acknowledging and considering the multiple actors and interactive social processes driving violence at different levels of analysis. In doing so, scholars ought to think carefully about factors operating beyond their theoretical lens or factors they cannot test given their methodological approach, and whether these omitted factors might shape patterns of violence in their case or set of cases. Thus, a more nuanced explanation of the causes and consequences of violence against civilians demands research that continues to move beyond the micro- and macro-level divide, both theoretically and empirically—research that considers how

the national and international context interacts with local-, organizational-, and community-level factors such as patterns of territorial contestation, the geography of political and ethnic identity, armed group ideology, and the organizational dynamics of armed groups.

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RELATED RESOURCES

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED): **https://acleddata.com/**
Empirical Studies of Conflict (ESOC): **https://esoc.princeton.edu/**
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) data: **https://www.prio.org/Data/**
Resources and Conflict Project: **http://civilwardynamics.org/**
Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP): **https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/**
UCDP Dataset Download Center: **https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/**
xSub: **http://cross-sub.org/**