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Who kills whom? The micro-dynamics of civilian targeting in civil war



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ABSTRACT

Prior research on civilian targeting in civil war has focused on characteristics of either the government or rebel group that make them more or less likely to target civilians. However, no government or rebel group targets a population, but rather individuals within it. To date, no study has explored the issue of why particular civilians would be chosen by one actor versus the other. This study examines the divergent civilian-targeting strategies of governments and rebel groups. We argue that unique identification problems facing each political actor in civil war leads the parties to resort to social stereotypes based on data derived from known enemy subjects killed in combat. We specify and then test a model that accounts for time and space and the demographic characteristics of each victim utilizing a new dataset on the personal, political, and demographic characteristics of individual civilians targeted by the state and rebels in the civil war in Nepal (1996–2006). The findings demonstrate for the first time that governments (and rebels) tend to kill the same types of individuals in non-combat settings as they kill in combat exchanges, and the civilians targeted by each actor differ significantly in the extent that they share certain social traits.

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1. Introduction

One of the defining characteristics distinguishing civil wars from conflicts fought between nation-states is said to be the disproportionate amount of violence directed against civilians in civil war contexts (Wickham-Crowley, 1990; Downes and Cochran, 2010; Valentino et al., 2004; Balcells, 2010; Boot, 2013).¹ And within civil wars themselves, it is argued that an important characteristic of contemporary civil conflicts is the greater magnitude of civilian victimization, as compared to conflicts of the past (Kaldor, 2012: 9). While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the dynamics of civilian victimization in civil war, at the same time, ongoing conflicts like Syria and Iraq demonstrate the limits of information gathering capabilities regarding the extent of civilian deaths. Wide ranging estimates can be found for the overall number of civilian deaths in the Syrian civil war for instance, and the United Nations suspended its operation to continuously

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¹ In this study, we use a broad definition of civilians as non-combatant, who are not armed and engage in fighting. This definition is slightly different from the 1949 Geneva Convention IV (Article 15.b) which defines civilians as “persons who take no part in hostilities, and who, while they reside in the zones, perform no work of a military character.” Since activities such as providing intelligence, food or shelter could be considered work of a military character, our definition is closer to the one outlined in Humanitarian Law, Rule 5 of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) which defines a civilian as anyone not in the armed forces.

update the death toll from Syria's civil war.² So while the dynamic of civilian victimization is widely seen as a unique defining characteristic of civil war itself, especially modern civil wars, data limitations in this domain tend to be quite severe.

The prevailing metric in the extant literature on civilian killings is rough counts of the number of civilians killed, usually within a country-year, based on media reports. Given this type and amount of variation, empirical work on the topic of civilian victimization has been limited to predicting the incidence or severity of civilian deaths by the government or rebel group, across cases, and over time, with a theoretical focus on differentiating between the government and rebel group in terms of the conditions that drive each actor to attack civilians. The civilian population itself tends to be modeled as a monolithic third actor. This can be seen, most explicitly, in [Hicks et al. \(2011:1\)](#) who treats the civilian population as a single entity that governments or rebel groups either attack or do not attack: "A civilian population in war is comparable to a parasitized host in that it possesses a finite resource - the disputed territory - that opposing actors are competing to dominate and use. Warring actors can attempt to shift the dynamics of this competition in their favor by focusing their energies onto controlling or eliminating the civilian population." In terms of findings, a number of studies suggest that incumbents and insurgents tend to target civilians (or not) under similar conditions of relative capabilities and/or under similar conditions of territorial control ([Kalyvas, 2006](#); [Hicks et al., 2011](#); [Hultman, 2007](#); [Wood, 2010](#); [Raleigh, 2012](#); [Fielding and Shortland, 2012](#)).

An issue that remains to be explored is the possibility that governments and rebel groups may target civilians under similar macro-level conditions, while engaging in divergent strategies at the micro-level. In this paper we focus on the unique challenges facing state and non-state actors in combat and non-combat settings and lay some theoretical groundwork for bridging combat and non-combat fatalities in civil war settings. Prominent in our argument is the role of social stereotyping as a defensive response to two different 'identification problems' in counterinsurgency. Our results suggest that governments and rebel groups tend to target different types of individuals. Further, each actor tends to target the same types of individuals in non-combat settings as they do in combat settings, respectively.

The argument made and analysis performed in the article contributes to several bodies of literature related to inter-group conflict processes and civil war dynamics. First, the article contributes to the literature on the disaggregation of civil war dynamics, analyzing a dataset on individual characteristics of civilians targeted in civil war. In this study we shift the theoretical and analytical focus from perpetrator characteristics to victim characteristics in order to explain why a particular civilian is more likely to be targeted by one actor over the other. Second, the article contributes to debates within the repression literature on selective versus indiscriminate repression. We proceed in the next section with a brief review of the recent literature on civilian victimization and identify a clear gap concerning how governments and rebel groups select individual civilian targets. A theoretical framework is developed around the use of profiling individual civilians; several testable hypotheses are derived from this framework and tested against a new dataset on individual civilian deaths in civil war. We then discuss the empirical analyses and results and the final section summarizes the findings and discusses some future lines of research.

1.1. Prior research on civilian victimization in civil war

Most of the research conducted on the killing of civilians in civil war has focused on the determinants of government perpetrated and rebel perpetrated civilian killings, with a smaller subset of studies examining the conditions associated with selective versus indiscriminate targeting. A number of studies report a strong correlation between greater numbers of civilian casualties and fighting characterized by the predominate use of asymmetrical guerrilla warfare where insurgents are intermixed into local civilian populations, emerging only to engage in surprise attacks before retreating back into anonymity ([Valentino et al., 2004](#)). Civilians tend to be targeted in interstate wars only when one side seeks to annex a piece of territory that is inhabited by individuals who are resisting such an occupation ([Downes and Cochran, 2010](#); [Balcells, 2010](#)).

A second group of studies has focused on the conditions under which governments and rebel groups are more or less likely to attack civilian populations. In this literature, the key factors that stand out are current and prospective military capabilities or the military balance of power ([Hultman, 2007, 2009](#); [Wood, 2010](#); [Raleigh, 2012](#); [Fielding and Shortland, 2012](#); [Hicks et al., 2011](#)) and the degree of territorial contestation (which is endogenous to the military balance power of power) ([Kalyvas, 2006](#); [Downes and Cochran, 2010](#); [Quinn, 2015](#)). [Kalyvas \(2006:288\)](#) examined incumbent and insurgent territorial control across villages in the Greek civil war and found that dominant but incomplete control best predicted the number of government and rebel perpetrated killings. [Hicks et al. \(2011:4\)](#) examined 43 state actors and 183 non-state actors and found that for both governments and rebel groups: "actors that were associated with lower numbers of battle fatalities tended to focus a greater proportion of their lethal behavior onto targeting civilians." [Weinstein \(2006\)](#), [Fielding and Shortland \(2012\)](#), and [Wood \(2013\)](#) find higher levels of violence against civilians when actors are not heavily dependent upon civilian material support. In [Fjelde and Hultman's \(2014\)](#) analysis, both governments and rebel groups kill more civilians in areas inhabited by their rival's co-ethnics. [Raleigh \(2012\)](#) finds that rebel perpetrated violence against civilians is higher when the rebels are attempting to expand their territory. [Fielding and Shortland \(2012\)](#) found that civilian killings by one actor tended to be followed by civilian killings by the other actor. [Quinn \(2015\)](#) finds government and rebel perpetrated civilian killings to be higher in conflicts where the rebels are contesting a greater overall amount of territory and where rebel activity is more dispersed rather than more concentrated.

² "UN Abandons Death Count in Syria, Citing Inability to Verify Toll," *Aljazeera America*, January 7, 2014.

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