

**AGENCY AND GOVERNANCE IN THE CONTEXT
OF CIVIL CONFLICT**

POLICY BRIEF No.2

LOCAL VIOLENCE AND THE
NATIONAL PROCESS OF WAR
TERMINATION IN LEBANON

JUNE 2013



Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID



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Research Grant RES-167-25-0481

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JUNE 2013

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Summary

Despite the range of questions researchers can examine through micro-level research on civil conflict, higher-level processes like the onset and termination of conflict hold deep importance for policy-makers. Through a set of surveys querying civilians, local elites, and former combatants about the local experience of conflict during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), this project subjects the often-positing link between local conditions and outcomes like onset and termination to empirical scrutiny.

Introduction

The majority of current empirical research on civil conflict investigates micro-level processes. Through this emphasis, empirical research has contributed to a better understanding of individual choices made under conditions of conflict, whether on the part of civilians or combatants, highlighting the importance of agency and the impact of local conditions (see Justino, *et. al.* 2013). The shift in research towards a focus on the micro-level also comes with the implicit assumption that analysis of conflict processes at this level also yields insights about the onset and termination of conflict. In other words, war can be understood as the aggregation of local, individual choices that are the core of this research program. For example, if youth join armed groups due to a lack of other opportunities, then the more widespread is economic and social dislocation and disenfranchisement, the higher the probability that a civil war will ensue.

To what extent do local conditions during conflict reflect the higher level political process through which conflicts often end?¹ Can war end (or its recurrence be avoided) despite individual-level factors that have remained unchanged? This project aims to strengthen the impact of micro-level research on conflict by investigating these questions. The project examines, in depth, local conditions in Lebanon during a period immediately before, during, and after the end of the 1975-1990 civil war. Three surveys, of civilian households, of local leaders, and of former combatants, collect data on local conditions during these periods. The during-war and post-war periods can then be compared to understand whether local conditions generate the transition to peace or whether ending civil conflict is in fact a fundamentally political process.

Developing the argument

Recent years have seen an important shift in studies of conflict. Instead of examining broad correlates of aspects of civil war (onset, duration, termination) at the country level (see, e.g. Collier and Hoeffler 2004), scholars have made strides by detailed sub-national studies investigating processes at the heart of civil war, for example recruitment, displacement, and governance. This project complements the main thrust of this sub-national research agenda by investigating the link between local processes and war termination. Is war termination in fact an inherently macro-level process, something affected at the national political level, rather than the product of the aggregation of local conditions? There is a specific policy-oriented motivation for such an investigation. With the shift to sub-national studies, policy has also focused on affecting change at the local level. By answering the research question, this study allows policy makers to revisit a key assumption of existing conflict-reduction programs. Should that assumption be unwarranted, the research clearly indicates alternative initiatives that can fruitfully be pursued instead.

¹ Negotiations constitute one type of such a process, but so too do political decisions to continue to pursue a military strategy or to surrender.

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A foreboding omen for the future, or simply a snapshot?
*In Lebanon, young fighters from the Progressive Socialist Party pose together following fighting against the Lebanese Forces in 1983.
(From the collection "Lives at War," assembled by the author).*

The project studies conflict termination and local manifestations of conflict in the case of the civil war in Lebanon, 1975-1990 (Hanf 1993 contains an authoritative account of each of the various phases of the war). It uses a sub-national design to address whether local factors are related to the national level termination of the conflict. The project consists of three inter-related surveys about three principle areas of interest: the nature of the interaction between civilians and combatants, including armed group provision of governance; the local presence of armed groups; and the frequency of violence locally.

The three surveys investigate these areas across periods spanning war years before the end of the conflict, the transition to peace, and the first two years of peace. Each of the surveys draws on respondents from a population with access to networks of information about the local experience of war that are complementary to those of the populations surveyed by the other two surveys. First, a survey of approximately 1,500 households documents warfare at the local level through the eyes of non-combatants. Second, a survey of approximately 130 local leaders queries individuals with formal or informal positions of responsibility in the community, and who had closer ties to the armed groups, whether these were due to a sympathetic relationship with those groups or a by-product of the need to function given the armed groups' presence. Third, a survey of approximately 130 ex-combatants investigates the process by which the conflict stopped at the local level from the perspective of the armed actors themselves.

These surveys provide a comprehensive analysis of warfare at the local level in order to establish that the local process of conflict does not constitute war itself. Although the war's end in 1990 brought fundamental changes to life in Lebanon, the local presence of armed factions, sometimes the experience of violence itself, and the underlying social and economic characteristics of localities were often persistent across the war-to-peace divide.

Although this project challenges the conventional wisdom implicit in the conclusions often drawn from micro-level research on conflict, it strengthens the micro-level empirical program in two ways. First, it is demanding that an additional set of actors be the focus of future research – political/military actors at a higher level [note that some research has already pointed to these of

course]. Second, it sets limits on the implications of research on conflict processes. Both these results also have implications for policy, as detailed below.

Policy Implications

The project suggests, first, that political/military leaders should be the focus of additional micro-level research, and second, that local, individual decisions do not necessarily aggregate to conflict termination or recurrence.

The first implication is a necessary counterweight to an increasing focus on low-level fighters and civilians in research on conflict. Systematic consideration of the factors structuring the choices of mid-level commanders and political leaders of armed groups is necessary to understand how local patterns of conflict may come to constitute continuing war, or may persist independently of the political trajectory of the war itself.

In that vein, the second implication of the project suggests that a slew of development programs aimed at preventing conflict recurrence (see Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis 2010 for a comprehensive summary of research on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs) must be re-evaluated in light of the potential for local conditions and the actions of individual combatants to be independent of conflict outcomes. Taking the example of conflict recurrence, the project pushes policy-makers to review whether empirical evidence substantiates that conflicts recur due to the pre-conditions for conflict becoming inflamed to the point of a conflagration bursting out. To the extent that the empirical record does not support such an assessment, the project suggests the potential for a fruitful shift from investments in development aid as a conflict prevention and amelioration strategy to investments in political institution-building for those same ends. Given the possibility that the pre-conditions for conflict may essentially be a matter of course in fragile countries, the way out of internal conflict may lie with the design and construction of robust institutions that channel disputes into a legitimate political process even as those pre-conditions for conflict persist.

Key references

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