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# Cities on Fire: Social Mobilization, State Policy, and Urban Insurgency

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## Abstract

Major theories of civil war emphasize the social and military attributes of rural terrain as key causes of conflict. This focus has led scholars to ignore important urban insurgencies in the Middle East and South Asia. This article makes two arguments about the roots of urban insurgency. First, it shows that robust urban social mobilization is possible and common. This can provide a social base for rebellion in areas that prevailing theories deem unlikely sites of civil war. Second, the article argues that, given social mobilization, urban insurgency emerges when security forces are politically constrained in their use of violence, opening space for sustained violence. A study of the rise of insurgency in Karachi from 1978 to 1996 and discussions of Iraq and Northern Ireland illustrate the plausibility of this argument. State policy and strategy, rather than state capacity, can play a central role in civil war onset.

## Keywords

civil war, insurgency, ethnic conflict, Iraq, Pakistan, Northern Ireland

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Geography will tend to trump preferences in producing control. . . . Urban guerrilla warfare is uncommon—and summarily dismissed by counterinsurgency experts.

Kalyvas (2006, pp. 132-133)

Whole neighborhoods are lawless, too dangerous for police. Some roads are so bomb-laden that U.S. troops won't use them. Guerrillas attack U.S. troops nearly every time they venture out. . . . The sheer scale of violence in Ramadi is astounding.

Pitman (2006)

Terrain is central to major theories of civil war. Scholars emphasize the difficulty of establishing state control in mountain hinterlands and the close ties between ethnic groups and rural homelands as explanations for the emergence of political violence. Urban areas, on the other hand, are viewed as inhospitable environments for insurgency because their atomistic nature makes betrayal more likely, their populations are not fertile territory for identity-based political mobilization, and cities' smaller size allows government forces to easily control them. And, indeed, urban insurgencies are rare. Most guerrilla conflicts are born in the rural periphery far from population centers—the jungles of Vietnam and mountains of Greece are the classic sites of insurgent violence.

But in a set of important conflicts, civil war looks very different from this classical model. Urban insurgency, in the form of sustained violent rebellion by nonstate actors heavily located in urban areas, is the most devastating type of civil conflict in the unstable region between Algiers and Tehran. Since 1970, the capital cities of Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, and Turkey have all experienced civil war, as have the Palestinian territories. Farther afield, insurgency has consumed urban areas in Northern Ireland and Pakistan. Rather than being “characterized by small, lightly armed bands practicing guerrilla warfare from rural base areas” (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 75), some conflicts instead involve insurgents and militias waging protracted wars for urban control. Existing arguments need to be complemented by theories that can account for this phenomenon.

This article makes two simple claims. First, it suggests that social life in urban areas is not necessarily as devoid of identity-based collective action as dominant theories assert. A social infrastructure for mobilization exists in

many cities, providing the underpinnings for sustained resistance to state power and acting as an important background condition for urban insurgency. Second, this article argues that urban insurgency occurs when robust, armed urban social networks mobilize against a government constrained in its use of large-scale violence. A constrained state engages in “coercive governance,” battling against militancy while simultaneously trying to sustain normal social, economic, and political processes and thus opening space for mobilization to escalate into insurgency.

I use a detailed study of Mohajir insurgency in Karachi in southern Pakistan to explore how and why urban mobilization escalated to the level of civil war and extend this analysis more briefly to Iraq and Northern Ireland. These cases are outliers selected to examine the mechanisms that drove a shift from peace to war in areas that existing theories view as highly unlikely sites of conflict. They reveal that urban social structures can be capable of high-risk mobilization and that sustained violence resulted when a politically constrained state was challenged by socially rooted militants. Government *policy*, rather than just state *capacity*, plays a crucial role in driving the onset of civil conflict.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, the importance of terrain in existing theories of civil conflict is outlined. Second, the dependent variable under study, urban insurgency, is defined and its importance justified. Third, a theory of urban insurgency is offered that explains when and how group mobilization escalates into sustained urban rebellion. The fourth section presents a detailed case study of urban insurgency in Pakistan and briefer discussions of Iraq and Northern Ireland. Finally, the article concludes with future research directions.

## Rurality in Theories of Insurgency

Terrain and geography play an important role in major theories of civil conflict. There are two basic mechanisms used in the political science literature to explain why rurality is so important for the onset of an insurgency—group identity and state capacity.

### *Group Identity and Territory*

The simplest explanation for a lack of urban insurgency is that urban dwellers do not demand violent political change. Toft's (2002-2003, 2003) influential recent work argues that most ethnic groups locate their “homelands” in rural

areas. This territory can become emotionally salient and viewed as indivisible, creating a strong demand for insurgency in the traditional ethnic homeland. Urbanized ethnic groups

are often recent arrivals who, unlike concentrated majorities and minorities, lack a strong sense of attachment to the land they occupy. Urbanites who are passionately attached to a homeland are most likely attached to a distant land, rather than to the city in which they currently reside. (Toft, 2002-2003, pp. 92-93)

Urbanized groups are thus unlikely to demand secession or to accept risks in mobilization. They do not feel attachment to urban areas and are unwilling to bear the costs of rebellion for the sake of a piece of territory they have weak ties to—"thus, although their capabilities are the highest of the four group patterns, their legitimacy is the lowest, and without a willingness to act, capabilities are largely irrelevant" (Toft, 2002-2003, pp. 92-93).

### *State Capacity and Terrain*

Important theories of insurgency onset and dynamics argue that the military capability of insurgents hinges importantly, though not exclusively, on whether they can find sanctuary in hard-to-penetrate regions of a country. Mountainous and jungle terrain in particular are identified as useful for reducing state capacity. In this vein, Kalyvas (2006) argues that "urban areas are inimical to rebels because it is easier for incumbents to police and monitor the population. . . . Insurgents tend to be uniformly weak in cities" (p. 133). Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that mountainous terrain is a correlate of war onset because of its enervating effects on state coercion—"most important for the prospects of a nascent insurgency, however, are *the government's police and military capabilities and the reach of government institutions into rural areas*" (p. 80).

Kocher (2004, p. 26) echoes these mechanisms to contend that the state-building project integral to insurgency is nearly impossible in the confined spaces of cities, where state material advantages quickly overwhelm guerrillas. These advantages are heightened by the fact that "improvements in military technology have widened the gap between regular armies and irregular forces. . . . Urban areas discourage civil war because they are easier for the state to occupy and control than are rural areas" (Kocher, 2004, p. 24). Hoffman and Taw, writing in 1994, contend that "urban insurgencies have traditionally been the easiest to defeat" (p. ix). Unlike Toft's argument, these

theories place urbanites at the bottom of the military capacity scale and assert that civil war since 1945 has occurred “almost entirely in the form of insurgency, or rural guerrilla warfare” (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 88).

## Urban Insurgency: Definition and Importance

These arguments have much to say about contemporary civil conflict. Yet a puzzle remains. We observe a set of conflicts that resemble one another in important ways and differ from the conventional wisdom along similar lines. These conflicts, whether in today’s Baghdad or 1970s Belfast, are certainly not entirely urban and almost always possess an important rural component. Nevertheless, they all involve political violence that (a) originates and is sustained in urban settings, (b) is waged by organized nonstate actors using irregular tactics, and (c) reaches the level of casualties to be included as a case of civil war.

I also focus on conflicts lasting at least 1 year. This is because rapid urban revolutions or uprisings like those in 1871 France, 1917 Russia, 1952 Bolivia, 1979 Nicaragua, 1956 Hungary, and 1978-1979 Iran are quite distinct from protracted insurgencies. Although urban uprisings are important in forging revolutions (Goodwin & Skocpol, 1989; Gugler, 1982; Skocpol, 1979), this article focuses on how armed groups can *sustain* insurgency in the unpromising war-fighting environment of a city. This type of war is a puzzle given the literature’s emphasis on the rural roots of protracted guerrilla warfare and has received less attention than the dynamics of rapid, mass-mobilizing urban revolution. As Mason (2004, pp. 18-19) distinguishes rural insurgencies on the global periphery from major social revolutions and Dix (1983) between different “varieties” of revolution, I differentiate urban insurgencies both from rural guerrilla warfare and from rapid, revolutionary urban overthrows.

In the post-1968 period, we can identify a number of conflicts largely fought as urban insurgencies—the civil war in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998, the Montonero revolt in Argentina from 1973 to 1977, the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990, Turkey between 1977 and 1980, Somalia after 1991, the first Palestinian intifada between 1987 and 1992, Algeria’s insurgency from 1992 to the present, the Mohajir revolt in Pakistan in the early to mid-1990s, the second Palestinian intifada from 2000 to the present, and the Iraqi civil war since 2003.<sup>1</sup>

This is a small number of cases—as Fearon (2007) notes regarding Iraq, “This sort of urban guerrilla warfare and militia-based conflict differs from the typical post-1945 civil war” (p. 5). But although the number of urban

insurgencies is not large, they have been consequential for human well-being and political stability. Studying urban insurgency can also improve scholarly understanding of civil war by providing a more fine-grained dependent variable (Sambanis, 2004; Weinstein, 2006, p. 17). Urban insurgencies are outliers from the population of insurgent conflicts and distinct from rapid revolutions but form a class of events worthy of study.

## Explaining Urban Insurgency

This section outlines when and how the opportunity for sustained rebellion in urban areas emerges. I argue that high-risk collective action in urban areas is possible because of *robust community structures* that generate identification and mobilization, including religious networks, kinship relations, political parties, and student associations. This social base is an important background condition but too widespread to explain variation in war onset across and within cases. To provide more specific explanations, I examine the interaction of social mobilization with state policies that allow the escalation of grievance, fear, and contentious politics into sustained rebellion. Given political mobilization and motivation on the part of urban identity groups, the opportunity for urban insurgency emerges when state security forces face *political and strategic constraints* on their use of conventional military violence.

### *Mobilization: Urban Homelands and Dense Communities*

Some urban areas are marked by robust, resilient ethnic and religious networks that link ethno-religious groups to cities and provide the underpinning for high-risk violent collective action. These communities and networks can both motivate and facilitate violence. In some cases it is certainly true that “in the city, anonymous denunciation is easier to get away with, giving the government an advantage in its counterinsurgent efforts” (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 80), but it is unclear that this can be justified as a blanket assertion.

This is because urbanization need not lead to the sundering of social ties and the diminishment of collective mobilization. In some situations it has added further mass to a mosaic of preexisting social and organizational forms arranged around ethnic and sectarian communities. Where ethnic, religious, and family ties endure, urban areas can sustain extensive collective action.<sup>2</sup> Robust urban communities can be the result of historic settlement patterns or government policies that accentuate ethnic, tribal, or religious identities. Robust networks are found where these social institutions are both historically rooted over decades and centuries and a major source of collective action

within these societies; where they are very recent or irrelevant to the lives of most people, they are weak.

A robust urban community structure has two effects. First, it allows for the articulation of political demands that are seen as salient and legitimate by mass publics in urban areas. Cities and their environs can be credibly linked to the survival of group identities. In the Middle East, for instance, control of Baghdad, Tehran, Kirkuk, or Jerusalem has a deep symbolic meaning and importance to populations—they lie simultaneously at the centers of economic power and political status (Nasr, 2006, p. 21). Ethnic and religious groups in these cities want to control them and feel entitled to do so. These sprawling, millennia-old cities, laden with historically resonant symbols of religion, empire, and nation, are both the prize and the battleground. “Sacred spaces” like shrines and mosques link populations to urban areas in particularly deep ways (Fair & Ganguly, 2009; Hassner, 2003), as do other enduring symbols of dominance and identity.

Second, the networks underpinning these communities enhance the capability for collective action. Because individuals are tied together through robust institutions and networks, the risks of collective action, although still substantial, are lower than in a truly anomic setting. Ethnic networks have been shown to generate information and monitoring that allow in-group policing (Fearon & Laitin, 1996; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2007), and families, tribes, and religious organizations play a similar role by providing formal and informal institutions that monitor individuals and factions (Gould, 1995; Petersen, 2001; Sageman, 2004). Thus, both the *motivation* and *capacity* for mobilization can be supplied by robust community structures.

We have a rich store of mechanisms explaining group motivations for violence—fear and status competition being the most prominent (Horowitz, 1985; Posen, 1993)—but for these to operate group mobilization is necessary. Robust urban community structures provide a crucial social base for collective action (Gould, 1995; Skocpol, 1979; Tilly, 1978) and thus can underpin militant mobilization in difficult and risky environments.

### *Counterinsurgency Constraints: The State at Bay*

The claim that cities can be crucial arenas of identification and collective action, and thus of intergroup competition and conflict, says little about the ability of mobilized groups to engage in *violent, sustained* collective action. Many urban revolts are nonviolent, marked by mass mobilization and protests. Others are violent but rapid, shattering state power in a matter of days or

weeks, or are quickly crushed by the government. Given a claim to rebellion that is perceived as legitimate and a set of willing participants, how is *protracted* violence produced?

There is a simple, grim way to decisively shatter an urban rebellion that has escalated into an insurgent challenge—using conventional firepower to annihilate the city or cities in which it is based. Cities present easier targets to conventional military forces than the pacification of vast swathes of rural terrain, regardless of their social characteristics (Kalyvas, 2006; Kocher, 2004). Warsaw in 1944 and Hama, Syria, in 1982 were leveled, and thousands died in Budapest as the Red Army imposed its will in 1956. The various battles over Grozny led to the city's destruction through intense urban combat (Oliker, 2001). We see many attempted uprisings, and a few quick revolutionary successes, but the odds are stacked against sustained conflict—the social and physical geography of the city should quickly deliver it to a contender, probably the state.

To understand how rebellion is *sustained* at the threshold of insurgency, we need to look at counterinsurgent policy. Urban insurgencies will be unable to get off the ground if they are quickly and brutally crushed by massive violence. If facing a very weak state, there will be a rapid successful overthrow of state power rather than protracted insurgency (Goodwin, 2001; Skocpol, 1979). Thus, we need to know when a capable state will instead attempt a strategy of “coercive governance” that aims to retain control of a city in the face of a socially mobilized insurgency but without using urban annihilation.

I argue that political considerations can lead a militarily capable government to avoid the massive application of violence in its response to urban mobilization. Even when a state has high capacity for organized violence, it can *choose* to avoid embracing this option. Although urban community structure determines where rebellion is possible, state policy determines when it occurs (Goodwin, 2001). The major constraint on state violence arises from the political strategies of ruling elites who fear the domestic and international consequences of an urban annihilation form of counterinsurgency. Regimes that rely on particular urban areas for support will be restrained in their application of coercion, hoping to contain militancy over time to maintain electoral viability. Governments sensitive to international criticism will similarly try to avoid mass violence, instead calculating that low-level militancy is acceptable in comparison.

These types of political constraints may be particularly severe in *semi-democratic* political systems, which some scholars argue are more likely to

face civil wars (Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, & Gleditsch, 2001; Snyder, 2000), or in *peripheral regions* of democracies where these conditions hold.<sup>3</sup> These regimes often have politicized local security forces, both rely on and are threatened by mass contention, and lack reliable institutions of governance. Insurgents' popularity and links to political elites can provide a check on state suppression. Constrained elites are unable to forestall the rise of dissension but unwilling to ruthlessly crack down on it once escalation occurs.

Political constraints can thus force even militarily capable governments to engage in coercive governance—a mix of large-scale military or police activity with continued governance of the affected area. The government has powerful incentives to maintain control of major population centers and is unwilling to abandon them to armed, mobilized insurgents, yet its elites calculate that they cannot afford to decisively destroy them. The need to both fight and govern makes state security forces vulnerable to attack and harassment because they cannot deploy the levels of firepower and force protection that bring victory in conventional battle. This results in a long sequence of urban warfare encounters rather than a quick and clean law enforcement operation or conventional assault, explaining why, in places like Karachi, the West Bank, Beirut, and Baghdad, urban civil war has been a bloody and protracted affair.

### *Patterns and Caveats*

The interaction of group mobilization with state policy outlined above allows nonstate actors to challenge incumbent political authority. The existence of a social base is crucial to any attempt at serious revolt, but government policies then determine whether violence will escalate. These mechanisms seem to be at work in most cases of urban civil war clustering from Algiers to Karachi. These conflicts have involved dense rebelling communities that mobilize around ethnic, tribal, and/or religious ties and counterinsurgents unwilling to destroy political and economic hubs. The roots of Hamas in the Palestinian territories (Mishal & Sela, 2000, p. 46) and the Groupe Islamique Arme in Algeria both lie in robust urban religious networks, for instance, and Beirut's sectarian ghettos have produced and sustained militancy.

By contrast, where robust community structures are lacking, because of processes of urbanization that breed anomie, and/or where a state is unconstrained in the use of massive violence, we see few attempts at rebellion, and attempts that do occur are quickly successful or quickly crushed. The contrast between the failed history of urban insurgency in the migrant slums of

Latin America (Kohl & Litt, 1974) and among middle-class European students (Della Porta, 1995) as opposed to its potency in the Middle East suggests that there is important variation to be studied.

This argument should not suggest that urban insurgency is in any way easier or more common than rural insurgency. Escaping into the hills to wage war is far easier than trying to defeat the state in its organizational citadels. The modest point here is that existing scholarship has overlooked an important, if limited, class of cases. A “rural bias” in civil war studies diminishes the relevance and explanatory power of studies that rely on Malaya and Vietnam as paradigmatic templates while Lebanon disintegrates and Baghdad burns.

## Case Selection

We know from existing literature that insurgency tends not to occur in urban areas. Revolts usually begin on the rural periphery (Malaya, Vietnam, Afghanistan), rapidly succeed in cities en route to revolution (France in 1789, Iran in 1979), or are quickly squashed in cities with massive violence (Grozny, Hama, Warsaw). To illustrate the plausibility of my argument, I examine cases that dominant theories regard as *unlikely* sites of civil war. Studying outliers is a valuable way of augmenting or refining existing theories, particularly when they appear to form a distinct class of events (Eckstein, 1975; George & Bennett, 2005). We have a sense of the broader distribution of cases, and so we can examine outliers with an eye to the distinctive features of those few urban revolts that actually emerge as insurgencies. As Rogowski (1995) notes, “anomalies” can lead to new theoretical insights.

This article offers a detailed case study of the onset of southern Pakistan’s ethno-linguistic Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) urban insurgency between 1978 and 1996. It then briefly discusses patterns of urban insurgency in Iraq and Northern Ireland. In examining cases that we know emerged as urban insurgencies, it is not possible to make clear causal claims; rather, the point is to show the plausibility of the argument. All three of these wars have had important rural components, but urban areas were pivotal to the origins and escalation of contentious politics and unrest into full-fledged insurgency. Each conflict has involved a state with a large and capable military (the American, British, and Pakistani armies).

I structure the empirics to examine both the pre- and post-onset situations, studying variation across time that allows comparative leverage for exploring the escalation from urban unrest or grievance into full-blown civil war. I specify the *ex ante*, preconflict indicators of group identity and the political and strategic roots of government constraints. I also take care to study cases that

involve roughly similar types of violence—sustained irregular political violence in an urban setting. These anomalous wars clearly illustrate that the interaction of urban social mobilization and state policy can create space for insurgency in environments where theories based on state capacity or rural homelands would predict quiescence and peace.

## **Pakistan: Civil War in Urban Sindh**

Pakistan is a country riven by militancy, both urban and rural. This case traces the rise of the MQM political party and armed group since the late 1970s, from ethnic party to insurgent organization to political master of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and economic hub.<sup>4</sup> The chaos caused by the MQM's war against Sindhis, Pashtuns, and, ultimately, the Pakistan Army in Karachi and Hyderabad profoundly destabilized Pakistan, contributing to the collapse of both Benazir Bhutto's and Nawaz Sharif's first terms (Nawaz, 2008). I argue that the crucial urban social base for mobilization was the Urdu-speaking Mohajir ethnic community. As Mohajir aspirations clashed with those of other ethnic groups, mobilization took the form of escalating violence. The political and economic centrality of Karachi forced Pakistani political elites to pursue a strategy of coercive governance that allowed the conflict to emerge, creating space for both the onset and endurance of urban insurgency.

### *Pakistan: Urban Community Mobilization in Sindh*

The partition of British India in 1947 created refugee flows in the millions. Included in these population transfers was the movement of huge numbers of Urdu-speaking Muslims from north India into Pakistan. The Muslim middle and upper classes were heavily represented in the flight from India and along with Punjabi Muslims formed the ruling class of the new state. Karachi and Hyderabad in Sindh province were major destinations for these Urdu-speaking refugees, who became known as Mohajirs (Kennedy, 1991, pp. 942-944). The key elements of Mohajir identity are perceived to include "common language, similar culture, common history of migration from India, the hostile and discriminatory attitude of ruling elites, collective sufferings at the hands of various regimes, and the threat of an uncertain future" (Ahmar, 1996, p. 1037).

The Mohajirs form two thirds of the population of contemporary Karachi and have been a majority of the city for decades as well as a presence in other urban parts of Sindh province and in Lahore. Having forever left behind Lucknow, Delhi, and the rest of contemporary India, the cities of Sindh, particularly Karachi, are as close to a homeland as the Mohajirs have had since

1947—"the refugee experience has been crucial in the rise of the MQM" (Haq, 1995, p. 994). A perception of collective identity "has been reinforced in urban areas of Sindh because of the concentration of Mohajirs in these cities, their failure to assimilate in the Sindhi culture, and the obvious hostility between the Mohajir urban middle class and the Sindh feudal oligarchy" (Ahmar, 1996, p. 1037; Samad, 2002).

The propagation of Urdu as Pakistan's national language was a boost to the Mohajir community, as was Karachi's status as the nation's capital and economic center. However, the capital was moved from Karachi to Islamabad in 1960, and the Pakistan Army's growing role in politics created an imbalance in favor of the Punjab, the home of most of the army's officer corps (Haq, 1995, p. 991; Wright, 1992, p. 302). Zulfikur Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) that came to power in 1971 was based in Sindh and attracted huge support from ethnic Sindhis, positioning itself in opposition to the Punjabis and Mohajirs. Bhutto's PPP favored Sindhis after taking power in 1971 and language riots broke out in 1972 (Haq, 1995, pp. 992-993; Kennedy, 1991, p. 944).

The rise of the PPP and Sindhi assertion were viewed as a threat by Mohajirs in the urban areas of Sindh. This perception of threat was driven by a variety of motivations—concerns over material gain, resentment of group status loss, and fears about the use of state power were all intertwined. Pashtun emigration in the 1980s led to shifts in the political economy of Karachi, as Pashtuns entered the ethnic division of labor, primarily in the transport sector. "Bhutto's and Zia's policies served to erode Muhajir domination of Pakistan's civil bureaucracy and public sector business elite while increasing the representation of Punjabis and Sindhis" (Kennedy, 1991, p. 946), and "during the 1960-80 period, the Muhajirs experienced a slow relative decline in their political and economic status" (Haq, 1995, p. 992). Rather than urbanization leading to anomie and weakened group identity, in Karachi and urban Sindh it instead *fueled* further ethnic conflict (Gayer, 2007).

This intergroup competition was reflected in the formation of the All-Pakistan Muhajir Students Organisation in 1978, and then by the founding of the MQM in 1984, both under the leadership of Altaf Hussein (Verkaaik, 2004). Professing to be a political party, the MQM was also an armed group with cadres in Karachi, Hyderabad, and other parts of Sindh; it was based primarily in cities as "an almost exclusively urban-based movement" (Haq, 1995, p. 1004). In 1986 the MQM's existence was formally proclaimed in Karachi, and it began to rise electorally, combining a calculated bid for material power with "tremendous emotions" (Haq, 1995, p. 996). The MQM became a serious political force very quickly and by the early 1990s was a pivotal

player in the formation of both provincial and national governments (Kennedy, 1991, pp. 950-953).

Mobilization occurred within the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and consequent mujahideen insurgency (Coll, 2004). The conflict in Afghanistan had huge spillover effects in Pakistan—"the decade-long war flooded Pakistan with weapons of all kinds and ensconced militancy in its political culture" (Nasr, 2000, p. 180). Karachi and, to a lesser extent, Hyderabad became violent tinderboxes during the 1980s.

### *Pakistan: Constraints on Counterinsurgency and the Onset of Civil War*

At this point the pieces were in place for political violence, but the state's reaction remained to be seen. As the MQM grew in power in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it used violence in Karachi and Hyderabad—"the MQM, led by Altaf Hussain, developed a tightly organized political party structured along Leninist lines, complete with a hierarchy of commissars; it had a penchant for torture, kidnapping, and murder" (Cohen, 2004, p. 216). In turn, other ethnic communities armed to protect themselves (Wright, 1992, p. 306). Violence in Karachi began to spiral in the late 1980s—casualty numbers are hard to assess, but the death toll was in the thousands by 1992. Fearon and Laitin code the civil war as having begun in 1993, but this was only the culmination of years of violence. As discussed below, the Pakistani military went into Karachi and other parts of urban Sindh in force in June 1992. When it did, full-blown civil war erupted between the MQM and various Pakistani security forces.

Why did the central state not step in to reimpose order before this point? The major constraint was *political*, and especially electoral. The MQM was an insurgent group but also an important political party combining ballots and bullets, and in the early 1990s it was "the pre-eminent political organization" in Karachi (Ziring, 1993, p. 1180). The MQM had at various points aligned with both the PPP and the Punjab-based Pakistan Muslim League in a Machiavellian cycle of national alliance formation and collapse (Haq, 1995, pp. 998-1000; Siddiq, 2007, p. 87). No politicians at the national level had strong incentives to attack the MQM and its social base, as "by 1991 the MQM had established a virtual monopoly over representation of the Urdu-speaking community in urban Sindh" (Haq, 1995, p. 991). Between 1988 and 1990, Bhutto's PPP did not want the army to target Sindhi street fighters; between 1990 and 1993, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif opposed an army assault on the MQM because of its role in his ruling coalition (Nawaz, 2008). The competitive mobilization

between the MQM and its enemies occurred as the Pakistan Army looked on, creating space for the growth of militancy and the marginalization of police and paramilitary forces.

In 1992, the Pakistani military launched Operation Clean-up, a project that lasted for roughly 2 years. The final provocation by the MQM came when it mistreated two army officers (Ahmar, 1996, p. 1034) and the “military had sought to impose peace in Karachi as the politicians seem unwilling or unable to contain ethnic chaos” (Malik, 1996, p. 675). The Pakistani military, despite its many failings, is a well-equipped and trained fighting force capable of massive violence (Cloughley, 2005; Cohen, 1998). Its entry in force into Karachi led to a

prolonged confrontation in which an urban guerilla war was fought in the streets and lanes of Karachi. The use of rocket launchers against security forces and state installations became common during the peak of the MQM agitation, and the government was compelled to call for law enforcement reserves from other provinces to cope with the better trained and well-armed urban guerrillas believed to be affiliated with the MQM. (Ahmar, 1996, p. 1034)

But this coercive governance approach failed to wipe out the MQM, and in 1994, “as the situation continued to worsen, the army was withdrawn and the paramilitary force, the Rangers, was deployed in an attempt to control the city” (Fair, 2004, p. 120). Rather than launching large-scale violence in Karachi, Pakistan’s political elites pursued coercive governance. No political leader could afford a massive state onslaught against pivotal Karachi. Over 2,000 people died in Karachi in 1994 and well more than 1,000 in 1995, with this violence “causing massive damage to the infrastructure of that city and to the economy of Pakistan” (Ahmar, 1996, p. 1035). The pacification operations in Karachi were an “abysmal failure” (Fair, 2004, p. 103) and coercive governance could not decisively shatter Muhajir mobilization.

Although the violence decreased after 1995, this did not reflect the end of the MQM; instead, it was the result of a tacit bargain between the state and the organization, both of which were bloodied after years of fighting. In 1996, Malik described the military as “bewildered by its inability to install order” (p. 690). Political and economic constraints demanded a coercive governance approach that created a grim space between policing and war that allowed the emergence of a brutal urban guerilla conflict.

Violence and ethnic tension have continued in Karachi and Sindh. The MQM has continued to win elections as the clear representative of Mohajirs

in Sindh, and it holds control of Karachi (Khan, 2007). Indeed, despite years of urban warfare in the 1990s, “the MQM remains strong” (Cohen, 2004, p. 217). The unwillingness of Pakistani politicians to commit the army earlier and as part of a coherent strategy opened the crucial space for the MQM to mobilize and arm, and half-hearted, politicized security efforts failed to reimpose order despite Pakistan’s relatively high levels of pure military capacity. Politically constrained state policy and a robust Mohajir community combined to cause an urban insurgency.

## Urban Insurgency in Iraq and Northern Ireland

Can we find similar patterns in other outlier cases? Here I briefly examine two other anomalies—the urban insurgencies in Iraq and Northern Ireland. Although there are obviously enormous differences between the two wars, there are similarities—though Iraq has been a vastly bloodier war, the early period of Northern Ireland’s conflict was also marked by anarchy and extreme violence in Belfast and Derry, and both the American and British armies initially found themselves in complex political environments about which they knew very little. In these two wars we see robust urban community structures forming the basis for insurgency, and politically constrained states unable to either annihilate or co-opt urban social mobilization.

### *Iraq: Tribes, Mosques, and Politicized State Building*

The aftermath of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq has seen an intense civil war in the country. Sunni insurgents, Shia militias, the Iraqi state, and the American military are locked in a complex struggle that has diminished in intensity but continues to be violent. Scholars agree that this conflict meets the standard definition of a civil war (Fearon, 2006; Sambanis, 2006), but one of the most striking aspects of the war is its deviation from classical insurgencies—this is not a war waged by lightly armed bands of men in the mountains or jungles. Rather than the state holding the cities and fearing the countryside, the locus of the most important fighting has been Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Shia cities in the south. As Fearon (2007) notes, Iraq more closely resembles Turkey’s urban war of the late 1970s and the 1975–1990 Lebanese civil war than it does a rural Maoist war. The mountainous Kurdish north, with its history of rebellion, has remained quiescent because politics, not mountains, have played the key role in explaining revolt.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that the urban social base for war has been provided by a set of ethnic and religious networks on both the Shiite and Sunni sides of the sectarian

divide. The reversal of ethnic fortune and security dilemma following the 2003 American invasion led to competitive ethnic mobilization. A set of immediate post-invasion mistakes by occupying forces and the political strategies of both American and Iraqi Shiite leaders led to a strategy of coercive urban governance suiting American ideological preconceptions and Shiite political ambitions.

In both Sunni and Shiite communities, urban areas have formed the core of Iraq for decades, and in some areas for millennia. The shrine cities of southern Iraq are of enormous symbolic importance to Shiites, whereas for Sunnis Baghdad represents the legacy of the Abbasid caliphate and the clear Sunni dominance of Iraq since the 1920s. Emigration flows to cities from farmlands and deserts have been accompanied by the endurance of tribal and ethnic identities (Baali, 1966, p. 361; Tripp, 2002, p. 184). Indeed, "with rural-urban migration, village solidarities crept into adjacent towns and larger cities, where the process of detribalization has been very slow" (Jabar, 2000, p. 29) and "village migrants clustered in poor, substandard satellite towns . . . where they reproduced rural customs and practices" (Marr, 2004, p. 167). Religious institutions established a major presence in Iraq's cities on both sides of the sectarian divide.

Saddam Hussein relied heavily on tribal ties to construct and maintain his rule (Tripp, 2002, p. 264), and he further heightened Shiite-Sunni divisions to keep himself in power, particularly after the First Gulf War (Marr, 2004, p. 263). This policy placed rural ties in urban areas—"the security apparatus hailed from villages and small provincial towns . . . by surrounding himself with his own and closely related tribes in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein acted in a classical tribal fashion" (Baram, 1997, p. 21).<sup>6</sup> Robust ethnic communities emerged in ethnically divided cities, and religious institutions were powerful in both the Sunni west and Shiite south (Nakash, 1994).

The American invasion in 2003 caused a profound reversal of ethnic fortune that provided motivation for both Sunnis and Shiites to mobilize (Hashem, 2006, p. 346). In the early days of the American occupation, Sunni mosques preached resistance and Shiite mosques urged Shiites to carefully but forcefully seize this remarkable opportunity (C. Smith, 2003; Waldman, 2003).<sup>7</sup> In Anbar province, tribe- and family-based networks activated as American forces moved in (Nasr, 2006, p. 200). As the summer of 2003 progressed, violence flared in the rural and urban areas of Anbar province.

The social basis of urban mobilization was found in the tribal and ethnic ties binding Sunnis—"the tribally based insurgents around Ramadi, Fallujah, and Hit developed operational security based on cultural and social norms" (Hashem, 2006, p. 166). Herring and Rangwala (2006) argue that "the sect has become the basis of the new political community" (p. 152). There were

sufficiently robust communities in place for a significant portion of the Sunni population to organize war against the world's only superpower (Hashem, 2006, p. 131).

As this urban Sunni mobilization emerged, a simultaneous Shiite mobilization occurred in and to the south of Baghdad (Nasr, 2006, p. 198). The militias of Moqtada al-Sadr and of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq quickly arose to fill the institutional vacuum left by Saddam's fall (Herring & Rangwala, 2006, p. 53). Mosques were crucial loci for mobilization—they provided information, moral and normative credibility, and a coordinating point for collective action (Herring & Rangwala, 2006, p. 271). The shrine cities of Iraq's south were objects of contention, with their powerful combination of symbolism, wealth, and population, and confrontations between militias were almost immediate (Filkins, 2003; Sachs, 2003). Moreover, Baghdad's Shiite enclaves turned into militia fortresses, with armed groups establishing and deepening *de facto* control of urban areas (C. Smith, 2003).

These two processes of mobilization began to clash in an extraordinarily brutal way by the late summer of 2003: "the institutions of violence were dominated by the organizations and networks with most power in society—political parties, tribes, and mosques" (Herring & Rangwala, 2006, p. 158). However, the presence of fear and resentment between mobilized urban ethnic groups is insufficient to explain the onset of the Iraqi civil war—we must further know why the state did not impose order. In past Iraqi uprisings, urban insurgents, even if they had access to weapons, were met with mass killing and population displacement. Saddam Hussein had used an urban annihilation strategy to rapidly quell Shiite urban challenges in 1991—"in Basra, for example, there was shelling of houses and buildings, and thousand of bodies were left in the streets. The most difficult battles, in Karbala and Najaf, went on for days" (Marr, 2004, p. 251). The insurgent themselves "recognize that Iraq's terrain is quite inauspicious for the creation of internal sanctuaries in inhospitable or inaccessible areas" (Hashem, 2006, p. 179).

Why did urban annihilation not occur in Iraq? There have been two primary constraints on counterinsurgent forces, both encouraging a coercive governance approach to Iraqi cities. The most important constraint has been political, on the part of both American and Iraqi leaders hoping to forge a political settlement to their liking. Baghdad is the capital of the country, and for obvious reasons Shiite politicians have been uninterested in destroying the country's pivotal city. Iraq's Shiite rulers appear to be in favor of a slower process of ethnic cleansing of the city rather than overwhelming mass killing (Dehghanpisheh & Kaplow, 2007; Fearon, 2007).

Counterinsurgency was also highly politicized. The Shiite militias are closely tied to the government, providing them with extensive political cover

from American and Iraqi attack and allowing them to escalate a dirty sectarian war (Partlow, 2007), in a remarkable echo of the MQM's links to Pakistani party politics. The southern cities are central to Shiite politicians' support base and an object of contestation between different parties, which has encouraged the descent of cities like Basra into militia politics (International Crisis Group, 2007). The Shia parties of Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and al-Sadr skillfully combined ballots with bullets, thus reducing the state's interest and ability to forge central authority. Moreover, American political aims have emphasized reconciliation at a low cost, making full-bore urban assaults, as in Fallujah in 2004, an unviable general method of nation building. Coercive governance has thus been the professed aim in U.S. strategy.

Second, American forces' inept initial security policy allowed insurgents to entrench themselves free from interference (Herring & Rangwala, 2006, p. 208). The U.S. military's previous emphasis on intense conventional warfare left it poorly prepared for tasks of governance in a divided society (Nagl, 2005), and ideological blinders among top-level American policy makers blunted adaptation (Gordon & Trainor, 2006, pp. 498-507). The aim of key U.S. political and military elites was to quickly draw down forces from Iraq, not to stay for Phase IV stability operations. Chaotic American policy combined with the political strategies of U.S. and Shiite elites to open space for the insurgents and militiamen of Anbar, Baghdad, and the south to establish organizations, adapt and learn, and build intelligence networks—*despite* the massive military power of the U.S. Army in Iraq. American and Shiite policy thus “left almost every city in Iraq under the real control of an ethnic group rather than the government” (Packer, 2005, p. 336).

The “surge” in Iraq has diminished violence in the country's urban areas, but this is *not* because central state authority has been uniformly imposed. Instead, the key cities have been subdued either via large-scale military offensives (Fallujah in 2004, Basra in 2008) or by essentially ceding power to former insurgents. The urban insurgent networks continue to function, as both opponents to and adjuncts of central authority. The intersection of robust communities and a politicized, underplanned American and Iraqi coercive governance strategy opened the door for a brutal and destabilizing urban insurgency that has shattered Iraq.

### *Northern Ireland: Families, Neighborhoods, and Urban Insurgency in Belfast and Derry*

The onset of “the troubles” in Northern Ireland was almost entirely urban, centered on Belfast and Derry. These cities are marked by enduring family

and community networks stretching back centuries and have traditionally been key symbolic sites of political contestation and domination in the province. The war that developed in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1998 was spurred and sustained by urban sectarian divisions and deeply rooted networks of social mobilization that kept a low-level, but quite brutal, insurgency alive in the face of one of the world's most capable states. The social base provided by these traditional republican family and neighborhood networks escalated into insurgency because of the British decision to pursue a coercive governance strategy that attempted to both impose severe costs on the republican insurgents *and* continue governing the afflicted areas.

Sectarian rioting by Protestant extremists and a biased local government response in 1969 spurred the rise of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Derry and Belfast. Among Catholics, traditional family networks in urban areas were rapidly mobilized by traditional Irish republicans from the sectarian ghettos of Northern Ireland's two major cities. The Provisional IRA emerged based on a clear, historically rooted urban social base:

The founding membership of the Provisionals was from families with long ties to the IRA, dating back to the 1920s, and in some cases back to the Fenians of the 1860s. This core provided the nucleus around which the IRA had survived after the 1940s. (O'Leary, 2007, pp. 205-206)

The Provisional IRA used the ghettos of West Belfast and Derry as its primary recruiting bases, drawing its command cadres and organizational core from the deep republican networks that had endured in these areas, often passed on through family ties, since the 1910s. Historical continuity characterized the emergence of the Provisionals, showing the potential for robust urban social mobilization even in high-risk situations—"the Provisionals were born in Belfast and sustained by the city's bitter sectarian politics" (Moloney, 2002, p. 80). The rural areas of South Armagh and East Tyrone would only become important *after* 1972, the year that marked the high point of violence in Northern Ireland. The Provisional IRA was "an urban movement, drawing its support largely from the inner-city areas of Belfast and Derry" (M. Smith, 1995, p. 94), and Belfast was "the war's most important front" (Kelley, 1988, p. 371).

But given the massive power of the British state, why did this urban contentious politics escalate into militancy? Kocher (2004) attributes the rise of insurgency primarily to the British Army's policy of allowing no-go zones in these cities (also see M. Smith, 1995, p. 110). This clearly shows the constraints

operating on the army—urban annihilation was totally unacceptable for both domestic and international reasons, even though the British Army clearly had the *capacity* to deploy massive violence. But this restraint led to serious *insurgency*, as opposed to rioting and localized crime, because the republican militants could generate manpower from their urban community networks. British strategy avoided urban annihilation while being forced to confront a mobilized, committed set of insurgents.

Even after the retaking of the no-go zones in 1972, only the heavily armed army could patrol the sectarian ghettos; the police continued to need army support. West and north Belfast especially were “the main battle-ground in a highly irregular type of urban guerrilla warfare” (Kelley, 1988, p. 253). Belfast would remain “the cockpit, the principal battleground of the conflict. . . . The IRA had its biggest numbers of volunteers and armed actions in Belfast” (O’Brien, 1993, p. 196). The city would also see the greatest concentration of violent deaths in Northern Ireland. Even into the 1990s, “the [republican] movement’s leaders know that maintaining a strong control of the city’s nationalist areas is essential if their campaign is not to be reduced to another futile border war like that of the, 1950s” (1997, pp. 303-304).

Republican social networks provided deep support for the IRA, making it difficult for the British to crush mobilization by simply increasing the level of law enforcement in the way a normal criminal or rioting problem would be dealt with; “sectarian loyalty meant that there was always a large enough reservoir of sympathy and support in the north to ensure its survival” (Bishop & Mallie, 1987, p. 287). This level of sustainable, violent social mobilization in the ghettos of Belfast and Derry was sufficient to hold normal policing at bay, requiring coercive governance in these areas (English, 2003). Coercive governance satisfied no one but was the only politically acceptable route for the British government to take—the state was determined to maintain control but could neither engage in large-scale violence nor penetrate the social base underpinning republican insurgency. Without both republican urban social networks *and* the British coercive governance strategy, civil war would not have developed.

## Conclusion

The argument in this article is modest—there is a small but important class of civil wars that are different than standard theories would predict, and these conflicts appear to have similar causes. The cases identify a set of mechanisms that add to our understanding of the complexity and heterogeneity of modern

civil wars. By exploring this heterogeneity, the argument and evidence refine and expand existing theories. Although different in many respects, the conflicts in Pakistan, Iraq, and Northern Ireland emerged when robust urban mobilization escalated into insurgency because of political constraints on the counterinsurgent state's response. Each of the major armies involved in these wars was powerful and operating in supposedly favorable urban terrain, yet civil wars still broke out.

This article finds that a state's policy and strategy, not just its military capacity or terrain, can play a crucial role in explaining the onset and nature of civil conflict. As Bates (2008) notes, "I can find no way of analyzing the origins of insurrection without starting with the behavior of governments" (p. 6). Theories must incorporate state decision making and strategy if they are to understand patterns of antistate rebellion. The grim outcomes studied in these cases suggest that governments must find more discriminate ways of managing urban mobilization that lead neither to massive violence nor to politicized strategies of urban coercive governance.

The next step in research is gathering more fine-grained comparative data. This article has selected the dependent variable as a plausibility probe, but more persuasive empirical research needs to compare cities and urban areas with violence to those without violence.<sup>8</sup> Cross-regional comparisons will also be essential—the clustered pattern of urban wars in the Middle East and parts of South Asia is striking, whereas other urban areas of poor or ethnically divided countries have not experienced this level of political violence. Historical patterns of urban as opposed to rural settlement, variation in state migration policy, and the specific characteristics of ethnic and religious institutions all offer important paths for future research.

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## Notes

1. This list is drawn from the data set of civil wars in Fearon and Laitin (2003, p. 76); the second Palestinian intifada and Iraq war are too recent to be included in this data set but meet the scholarly definition of a civil war. The coding of the first Palestinian intifada depends on whose casualty figures one accepts.
2. In Middle Eastern cities, “tribal or kin-based forms of leadership and patronage, however, often develop” (Zubaida, 2001, p. 22).
3. See Vreeland (2008) for a persuasive critique of a focus on anocracy. Overviews of different possible relationships between repression, on one hand, and political and economic dynamics can be found in Davenport (2007) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001).
4. *Mojahir* (also written *muhajir*) means “refugee” in Arabic and Urdu, and *qaumi* means “nation.” The MQM later changed its name to Muttahida Qaumi Movement, with *muttahida* meaning “united.”
5. The city of Kirkuk is the major flashpoint between Kurds and Arabs. A vivid discussion is in Packer (2005, pp. 341-362).
6. Baram (1997) presciently notes that “this trend threatens when it permeates into the cities to become the undoing of the workings of the state because it encourages the formation of a very large number of kin-based pressure groups” (p. 21).
7. An example of Shiite mosque mobilization can be found in C. Smith (2003); of Sunni mosques and mobilization, Waldman (2003).
8. A sketch of what such comparisons look like is in Lawson (1982, pp. 24-28).

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