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# Strategic Rebellion

Ethnic Conflict in FYR Macedonia and the Balkans

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## Introduction

Ethnic conflict and associated political violence is one of the contemporary world's most significant, and often seemingly persistent, political problems. Contemporary security analysts have counted numerous states directly affected by armed conflicts, while many other regions continue to suffer from conflicts that remain in a state of limbo. Today, the vast majority of societal conflicts contain a strong ethnic dimension and contemporary wars are mainly fought between ethnic or religious factions within the boundaries of a state. A major outburst of such identity-based societal conflicts coincided with the end of the Cold War. Although the frequency of ethnic conflict during the 1980s and 1990s has increased at only about one-third of the level of increase that characterized the 1950s and 1970s, ethnic wars continued to multiply as separatist movements attempted to take advantage of the vast changes in political arrangements that accompanied the transformation of the post-Cold War world system. Ethnic conflicts tend to persist even though the general frequency of violent conflict onsets in the global system continues to diminish in total magnitude. This is largely because societal conflicts are suffused with non-negotiable identity and sovereignty issues, which make these conflicts less susceptible to settlement and more prone to violence (Monty and Benjamin, 2009). Hence, ethnic conflicts tend to continue despite the apparent decline in the frequency of newly erupted conflicts since 1996.

Yet most of these conflicts are neither new nor purely ethnic. Nearly all of the armed conflicts that crossed the threshold to serious warfare in the late 1990s involved an escalation of a long-standing dispute. The recurrence of serious warfare in the late 1990s appeared mainly to happen in areas known for their ethnic complexity and political instability such as the Balkans, Africa and the Caucasus. The ferocity of these ethnic disputes prompted analysts to study the sources and parameters of violent ethnic conflict more carefully. As a result, the study of ethnic warfare became a

hot topic during the early 1990s, as a virtual cornucopia of these seemingly intractable societal conflicts exploded onto the world scene, capturing the public eye.

The continual resurfacing of ethnic conflicts throughout the 1990s provided scholars with an additional incentive to inquire further into the causation and wider implications of ethnic warfare. On the one hand, the dramatic collapse of numerous autocratic regimes across Europe and Eurasia revealed a range of deep socio-economic inequalities among different and often rival ethnic groups. The long-standing grievances held by many ethnic groups were finally exposed, while deprivation intensified and expectations increased. There is little doubt that the oppression and social discrimination endured by subordinate ethnic groups created a sense of deprivation, which in turn strengthened in-group identification and provided a basis for political mobilization along ethnic lines. On the other hand, the removal of previous restrictions set by the collapsing socialist regimes coincided with fresh opportunities in the new strategic environment. Numerous disenchanted ethnic groups, influenced by the changing geo-strategic environment and the economic opportunities this new environment created, intensified their attempts to pursue their separate destinies in a world of elusive prosperity. Indeed, the existence of comparative disadvantages among different groups created new opportunities for power-seeking ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize the aggrieved masses against rival groups. The occurrence, continuation and complexity of many conflicts well into the new century have blurred distinctions between frustration leading to violence and strategic opportunism as motivations of violent conflict. To this day, analysts have reached no clear consensus on whether ethnic groups are motivated by genuine grievance or pure greed.

In the post-9/11 era, the advent of the “war against terror” gave a fresh impetus to the study of ethnic conflict. The subsequent military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq unleashed a new wave of old-age rivalries, which had been laying dormant for decades, while a series of tribal and religious conflicts in Africa (Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria) attracted international attention. The resurfacing of intrastate conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan inaugurated a more complex chapter in the study of ethnic

conflict, one in which ethnicity intertwines more closely with religious and tribal fractionalization. At the same time, the revival of conflict-related atrocities in Chechnya, Ingushetia and the Middle East (Lebanon, Israel-Palestine) demonstrated the ongoing dangers to global and regional stability posed by the persistence of ethnic conflict. There is no doubt that the great majority of conflicts around the globe today involve some degree of organized violence in the form of terrorism or guerrilla warfare, and often contain degenerate characteristics that many regard as criminal. Analysts and policymakers are continually challenged by the new methodologies employed by groups participating in ethnic warfare and they are prompted to survey more carefully the linkage between ethno-nationalism, religion and insurgent violence. International policymakers are equally burdened with the task of devising appropriate and suitable concepts and policies for responding to the phenomena of ethnic warfare. Policymakers have only recently realized that military coercion by governments and international organizations has been costly and inefficient. The cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the earlier cases of Bosnia and Kosovo, clearly suggest that military coercion and forceful diplomacy can generate more problems than solutions. Thus, increased efforts towards the effective containment of ethnic conflicts, using the emerging doctrine of non-military strategic coercion, became part of a global agenda in reducing forms of violent conflict.

The present book takes into consideration these major concerns in the study of conflict and challenges dominant explanations regarding the emergence, violent transformation and perpetuation of ethnic conflict. Two major accounts seem to have dominated explanations on the emergence of conflict: these are the theories of grievance and greed (Gurr, 1970, 1995; Gurr and Moore, 1997; Collier, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2006; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). These two major accounts have sparked serious debates between analysts on the motivation and sources of conflict, and until recently many analysts were keen to adopt one exclusively and reject the other. However, new theoretical insights have steadily refined and gone beyond these classical distinctions between greed and grievance (Horowitz, 2001; Kaufman, 2001; Sambanis, 2002; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Paquette, 2002). The systematic study of identity, strategic mobilization, power-politics, group entitlement,

political manipulation and criminalization has certainly stimulated the rethinking of formerly irreconcilable viewpoints regarding the emergence of conflict. However, these studies have still not been able to fully supplement the dominant theories with an adequate alternative account that fully explains the roots of conflict. As a result, classical views of greed versus grievance still predominate, while analysts carry on researching what lies beyond these two competing explanations of conflict.

This book challenges such incompatible interpretations of conflict and argues for a synthetic approach, one that combines the essential theory of relative deprivation (Davis, 1999; Gurr, 1970, 1993) with the realist contours of strategic thought (Ballentine and Nitzshke, 2003; Paquette, 2002; Vasquez, 2000; Horowitz, 2001). The book provides a critique of the greed vs. grievance debate and examines the adequacy of alternative accounts. The analysis also links the basic tenets of the relative deprivation theory with strategic analysis, using fresh empirical data to produce cohesive policy suggestions on ethnic politics and ethnic warfare. This study is intended as an innovative contribution to a field characterized by generic debates between advocates of equally rigid explanations of ethnic conflict.

More analytically, the competing arguments suggest that one cannot fully understand the factors affecting the violent transformation of ethnic conflict without adopting a comprehensive approach. This book presents a selected number of conflict-generating factors and explains how these factors interact with the strategic parameters shaping the decision of ethnic groups to use violence. The major question is whether relative deprivation can sufficiently explain the decision to engage in violence. The book explains that although conflict may be the result of targeted socio-economic and political deprivations, violence may erupt only when strategic opportunities supplement existing deprivations. Hence, the decision to use violence depends not so much on the levels of deprivation as on strategic conditions such as available resources, political organization, and regional constraints and incentives. Therefore, strategic conditions determine the violent transformation of conflict i.e. the decision to move from non-violence to violence.

We therefore present a new theoretical approach that helps to clarify the phases (emergence-escalation-settlement) and parameters of ethnic

conflict. The fusion of relative deprivation with strategic considerations brings into play the notion of “strategic rebellion”. This emerging concept explores the development of an insurgency by underprivileged members of ethnic groups acting under auspicious conditions. Strategic rebellion is a composite term used to describe a calculated violent reaction against a status of long-standing disaffection by a group of people. “Rebellion” suggests an act of disobedience stemming from resentment towards authority, while the term “strategic” points to the calculated or rationalist rather than impulsive or instinctual nature of such an act. In past years, rebellions or revolts were most often associated with unsuccessful attempts to overthrow a regime. Instead, the term revolution refers to the conduct of a usually successful popular uprising, resulting in a major radical change such as the overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the governed. Yet the far-reaching and often devastating consequences of a revolution make the term unsuitable for describing revolts or tactical uprisings that usually bring about changes of a more limited scope. The term rebellion or insurgency is more appropriate for describing the occurrence of violent group responses to a perceived lack of status, without at the same time suggesting any of the ethical premises and normative connotations of a revolution. Nevertheless, this study highlights the idea that rebellions of any scale and type are typically rooted in long-standing grievances regarding a perceived or real deprivation. Parallel to this, the notion of strategic rebellion emphasizes the importance of reason over emotion to indicate the deliberate and calculated character of modern-day insurgencies.

The book also goes beyond the reasons that explain the outbreak of violent conflict and calls into question the expediency of coercion, offering thus an assessment of the parameters shaping the termination of conflict. It suggests that international actors and governments favour the employment of multiple coercive methods in the regulation of violent conflict. Starting with the distinction between military and non-military coercion, the analysis highlights the major turn from the former to the latter and puts forward evidence suggesting that coercion is effective only for the short-term management of violent conflict. The book argues that strategic coercion is a risky and unstable method to settle complex ethno-political conflicts that have turned violent, and points to the idea that coercive