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Language, Religion and Ethnic Civil Wars

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Many have argued that civil wars are more likely to occur along religious divisions. But evidence indicates that intrastate conflict is actually more likely within linguistic dyads than among religious ones.

In the 1990s Samuel Huntington argued that conflict across civilizational or religious lines would replace the ideological divisions that had defined political struggles during the Cold War period. Opining that Islam has 'bloody borders', he believed that conflicts would be particularly prevalent between 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims'. This led Huntington to further suggest that a future clash between 'Islamic civilization' and the West might occur.

Since September 11th 2001 and the subsequent proclamation of the "War on Terror," Huntington's thesis has gained widespread attention among political leaders and citizens around the world. In 2014, for example, Tony Blair asserted that "religious difference will fuel this century's battles." During the 2016 US presidential campaign, President-elect Donald Trump seemingly subscribed to Huntington's ideas when calling for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims" entering the country to prevent violent attacks on US citizens.

Whereas many social scientists would agree that ideological conflict between communism and capitalism, both between and within states, has declined since the end of the Cold War, no agreement exists about what, if anything, replaced ideology. Most scholars who study internal conflict or civil war would not distinguish between linguistic, religious, and racial markers but rather classify these categories as part of the larger concept of ethnicity. Yet some conflict researchers follow Huntington and identify religious differences as

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particularly conflict-prone. In doing so, important alternatives such as ethno-nationalist mobilization based on linguistic identities often receive too little attention.

Are internal conflicts mostly about religion or language?

In a study that is forthcoming in the Journal of Conflict Resolution, I and my co-authors Lars-Erik Cederman (ETH Zürich) and Manuel Vogt (Princeton University) conduct such a comparison. We analyse the probability of internal armed conflict between linguistically and religiously distinctive groups between 1946 and 2009.

Contrary to Huntington's thesis, linguistic differences show a strong and robust relationship with the outbreak of intrastate conflicts. In fact, we find that linguistic divisions are more conflict-prone than religious differences.

These findings continue to hold when we focus only on the years since 1990 – the period to which Huntington's thesis should be the most relevant. Our results further suggest that in no world region are religious differences more likely to be associated with internal armed conflict than linguistic divisions. We find the strongest support for a greater conflict-proneness of language compared to religion in Eastern Europe and Asia.

Even in the Middle East, we find a slightly higher, if uncertain, probability of armed conflict across linguistic than religious lines. The Middle Eastern finding at least in part results from multiple Kurdish rebellions in Turkey, Iraq, and more recently Syria as well as smaller uprisings of linguistic minorities in Iran.

When focusing only on conflicts that involve Muslim groups, we do not find substantial differences to other world religions. Although the majority of all

armed internal conflicts today take place within Muslim-majority states, the majority of Muslim groups do not engage in violent rebellion. Our analyses also reject the thesis that Muslim groups disproportionately engage in conflict with non-Muslim groups.

Why Linguistic Differences?

Instead linguistic differences continue to be more frequently related to armed uprisings within states. While the brutal civil war in Syria captured headlines over the past years in many Western countries, destructive conflicts across linguistic lines haunt South Sudan, Burma, and Turkey.

Of course, linguistic differences are more widespread than religious divisions. In other words, ethnic groups in any given country are more likely to be divided by language than by religion. Notwithstanding these differences in frequency, our results indicate that linguistic divisions are disproportionately more often related to armed conflict than religious distinctions.

In our forthcoming article, we argue that it is the power of nationalism that makes linguistic divisions more conflict-prone than religious ones. Language gained political relevance in the late 18th century when the French Revolution transferred political authority from absolutist rulers to the people. About the same time that political power became vested in European peoples, the industrial revolution created incentives to further homogenize European nation-states. Mass schooling and mass newspapers laid the basis for imagined national communities.

These developments provided both motive and opportunity for violent conflict across linguistic boundaries. Where members of ethnic groups are barred from

having their children taught in their native language or experience linguistic discrimination in the job market and their interaction with the state, some of them will voluntarily assimilate into the dominant culture, but others develop grievances and may even refuse assimilation.

The elites of such discriminated groups can voice these grievances through publications in their own language and use it to express nationalist aspirations and demands. When the host state is unable or unwilling to address these demands, violent conflict becomes more likely. These dynamics are illustrated by Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war between Singhalese and Tamils, and recurrent Kurdish rebellions in Turkey.

Given the link between industrial advancement and language-based nationalism it is unsurprising that we find higher rates of linguistic conflict in the relatively highly developed regions of Eastern Europe and Asia rather than in Sub-Saharan Africa. Central and Eastern Europe may even be considered as the cradle of linguistically-based nationalism.

The multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires did not fulfil the modern creed of "one people, one state," and violently disintegrated during World War I. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia followed suit in the early 1990s. To this day, Turkey has not come to terms with its Kurdish minority, and once more experiences internal conflict.

Yet the idea of nationalism did not remain contained to Europe. A highly flexible concept, it informed the national liberation struggles of former colonial subjects against the European colonial powers. The lines of division here were usually race and language rather than religion. For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a conflict between Hebrew-speakers of European origin and Arab

speakers, who had lived in Palestine for centuries. Only in the past two decades has it taken on more religious undertones.

Policy Solutions?

Linguistic and religious differences will remain with us for the foreseeable future. However, very few of these fault lines can be expected to erupt in violent conflict. Whether linguistic differences transform into seemingly incompatible nationalist projects, or whether religious divisions into ostensibly intractable positions, depends on how political leaders from different groups interact with one another.

Frequently armed rebellion emerges in politically highly exclusive and discriminatory contexts. Where political leaders with specific linguistic or religious backgrounds are barred from decision-making that affects their groups, conflict is more likely to break out than in states where they have some influence in government circles. Exclusion along ethnic lines creates clear insiders and outsiders, fosters grievances among the excluded, and suggests that there is "no other way out" but violent resistance. Zimbabwe, both under Smith and Mugabe, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and Burma to the present day are examples of ethnically exclusionary regimes. Each of these states also experienced violent rebellion by excluded groups.

In another joint study published in "Peace and Conflict 2016", we show that excluding political elites with different linguistic or religious backgrounds from governmental power is pervasive in the Middle East and North Africa. So is political discrimination that denies the Palestinians in Gaza citizenship rights, keeps the Shia from voting in Qatar, or persecutes Kurds for political reasons in Turkey.

ethnic-conflict-graph

Figure 1 displays the average population share that experiences discrimination for different world regions and years. The data derives from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset available at https://growup.ethz.ch/pfe.

Figure 1 reveals that ethnic discrimination remains staggeringly high in the Middle East although the region has experienced some improvements over the past twenty years. That religious differences in the Middle East erupt into violent conflict may be less of a surprise once this context is taken into account.

Our research thus suggests that avoiding ethnic exclusion and discrimination through power-sharing in multi-ethnic governmental coalitions will reduce the likelihood of armed conflict across both linguistic and religious lines. Elite accommodation in power-sharing coalitions has contributed to greater stability in such diverse places as Bosnia, Nigeria, Burundi, and Malaysia regardless of the type of ethnic differences. Although no panacea, power-sharing is associated with a substantial decrease in the likelihood of internal armed conflicts compared to exclusive environments.

While there has been a trend towards ethnic accommodation since the end of the Cold War, we do not know enough about its origin. Future research needs to investigate the causes of accommodation in greater detail and pay particular attention to appropriate solutions for violent conflict across linguistic lines relative to religious differences.

Image by Christiaan Triebert/Flickr.

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