



The New New Civil Wars

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There is a new trend currently underway in the way civil wars are conducted. Dubbed the “new new” civil wars, these conflicts are a source of serious concern for several reasons.

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Something new is happening in the world of civil wars. After declining in the 1990s, the number of active civil wars [has significantly increased](#) since 2003. Over the past thirteen years, large-scale civil wars have broken out in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Chad, Mali, the Central African Republic and Ukraine, while new civil wars [threaten to break out](#) in Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Post-2003 civil wars are different from previous civil wars in three striking ways. First, most of them are situated in [Muslim majority countries](#). Second, a majority of the rebel groups fighting these wars [espouse radical Islamist ideas and goals](#). Third, of the radical groups fighting these wars, most are pursuing transnational rather than national aims. These three patterns are striking and suggest that we are in the midst of a new wave of civil wars that we do not fully understand.

In a new article, [“The New New Civil Wars”](#), I argue that these trends are the result of a new and evolving information and communication (ICT) environment. We now live in a world where citizens and elites operate in [an interactive](#)

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Internet environment, where anyone with a smartphone can easily produce and disseminate material from almost anywhere on the globe.

The role of the evolving ICT environment

Image credit: [Voice of America News/Wikimedia](#).

Instantaneous, global communication is likely to have at least six major implications for civil wars. First, information technology is likely to benefit individual citizens (especially citizens in highly repressive countries) more than political elites in those countries. Dictators and autocrats will face greater difficulty limiting and controlling the flow of information and the messages their citizens receive. Government elites will also have greater difficulty preventing individuals from coordinating their protest activity. Citizens are likely to be better informed about the behavior of government officials, the well being of their particular ethnic or sectarian group relative to other groups, and the level and extent of dissatisfaction in society. The result could be a boon for popular demonstrations and grass roots organizing.

Second, global Internet campaigns are likely to make it more feasible for rebel groups to form, leading to civil wars with a greater number of warring factions. It used to be that rebel entrepreneurs required a base of local support and financing to make mobilization possible. The Internet has changed this.

Internet media campaigns make it easier for rebel entrepreneurs, especially those with limited local backing, to solicit the soldiers and financing necessary to start a war. This is likely to lead to greater external involvement in civil wars and a larger number of warring factions. The evidence seems to support this: the average number of rebel groups fighting in civil wars *has increased over*

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time. In 1950 the average number of rebel groups in civil wars was 8; in 2010 it was 14.

Third, the new information environment also means that rebel groups are likely to have greater incentives to frame their objectives in global terms, something we have observed with the proliferation of Salafi-Jihadist groups. First, the Internet allows warring factions to be more ambitious, ignore international borders, and set their sights on affecting large-scale change by drawing on the resources of a globalized world. Second, the Internet is likely to reward groups such as al Qaida and ISIS with global aims, since they will have a wider audience from which to generate revenue and recruits. Thus, the new information environment has shifted the advantage from homegrown groups with local bases of support to transnational groups with global networks and connections.

Fourth, the Internet is likely to make it possible for rebel groups to sustain themselves longer in war. The decentralized nature of the Internet means that rebel groups will be less dependent on a single source of income or a single patron. If they lose access to one source of income (i.e., coca) or one patron (i.e., Iran), they still have access to millions of potential individual donors.

Fifth, the Internet is likely to make the spread of civil war more likely. Research has found the civil wars produce a contagion effect (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)); once one civil war breaks out, it increases the risk that civil war breaks out in neighboring countries. One of the implications of a Web 2.0 world is that ideas and ideology are likely to spread more rapidly and more widely. This occurs in two ways. The first is directly through the dissemination of information via the web, and the second is indirectly through the recruitment of foreign soldiers.

ISIS and al Qaida, for example, use Internet propaganda to recruit foreign

fighters from around the world. These fighters then receive indoctrination and training, and eventually return home, creating new networks in their native countries.

Finally, the Internet could potentially eliminate the restraints rebel and government leaders have to target local citizens with abuse. Studies have found that rebel groups that are reliant on the local population for support or financing are **less likely to commit human rights violations**. Conversely, rebel groups that receive significant material support from external patrons are **more likely to use violence** toward civilians. Rebel groups in the current civil wars appear to be following this pattern. In Iraq, ISIS and the al-Mahdi Army both enjoyed significant external financing and all have been significantly more likely to target civilians with violence than groups that did not. By freeing combatants from the need to solicit local support, the Internet may also be freeing them to engage in more civilian abuse.

The drivers behind these “new new” civil wars in Muslim countries

So why has there been a rise in civil wars in Muslim countries, fought by multiple Islamist groups, many seeking transnational aims? Globally-oriented groups such as al Qa’ida and ISIS formed and prospered in countries that had previously been some of the most information-poor countries of the world. It was in these countries where the new-found flow of information allowed for an opening for individuals to organize, for rebel groups to link to other groups, and for human capital and war financing to begin to flow.

Combatants in Muslim countries were also quick to figure out how to exploit ICT to their advantage. They discovered that framing their movement based on an identity that was large (Sunni), wealthy (oil-rich), and ideologically extreme

(Salafi-Jihadist) allowed them to utilize the web in ways that brought in more money and recruits than had previously been possible. In fact, the trans-border nature of both the Sunni population and Persian Gulf financing was tailor-made for the Internet age.

This does not mean that other groups in other regions of the world will not learn how to exploit the advantages of ICT. My guess is that any group with a large number of international kin (especially wealthy kin) will pursue similar strategies. Sunnis are leading the way because the benefits of a Web 2.0 world have been easiest for them to tap, but others will follow.

Conclusion

The “new new” wars” are characterized by the rise of rebel groups pursuing extreme ideologies, a rise in the number of transnational actors involved in these wars, and the use of goals and strategies directed at global rather than local audiences. These trends are a precursor to a series of changes that are likely to be seen as actors civil war adapt to a new and evolving ICT environment.

Whilst this piece has outlined the importance of the evolving ICT environment in these “new new” civil wars and theorized about why we are observing the wars in predominantly Muslim countries, much more work needs to be done on this phenomenon.

Looking forward, a major challenge for scholars and analysts will be to understand the full range of implications that emerging technologies will have on every aspect of civil war and to decipher which groups are most likely to

harness this technology, when they are likely to do so, and the conditions under which these new strategies are more or less likely to succeed.

It is not known exactly how this third wave of civil wars will evolve and which additional groups and countries will best exploit these advances. There is also uncertainty regarding which strategies will turn out to be the most successful and how these strategies are likely to change over time. Nevertheless, what we do know is that the internet will play a bigger, not smaller role, in every decision that is made. Ultimately, gaining a more comprehensive understanding of these “new new” wars be a crucial research enterprise in the future.

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