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Amalendu Misra: Politics of Civil Wars: Conflict, Intervention and Resolution

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Book Review

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This review addresses three different books that have civil wars as a common denominator. More specifically, these books tackle, among other things, the issue of civil war resolution and termination and refer to the role of third-party intervention in peacemaking and peacebuilding processes. The books are not necessarily policy oriented, but they generate some timely policy lessons. In 2012 alone, it could be argued that the reluctance of international powers to engage in peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping has led to significant human suffering in countries such as Libya, Syria, or Mali. Hence, the importance of any lessons that can be drawn from these three books should not be underestimated. However, at the same time, as I will argue in this review, several of these policy recommendations cannot be accepted without caveats.

Ariel Ahram’s *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* is a book about the determinants of variation in the capacity of a state. Scholars of state security have been influenced by a Weberian concept of the state, which views the state as a monolithic entity and as the only beholder of the monopoly of violence. Ahram argues that the state can take multiple forms, and that there are different possible degrees of devolution in the control of violence. Some states, for example, rely on quasi-official militias, paramilitaries, and warlords. These hybrid state forms are more prevalent in the postcolonial as compared to the developed world, where states were created and consolidated as a response to external threats.\(^1\) State capacity and variation in the forms of the state are relevant for many reasons, but they are particularly crucial in the study of civil war: sometimes, in addition to the involvement of state and insurgents, state-sponsored elements are also present in conflict, and this makes the relationship trilateral. And this obviously changes the approach that we should take toward civil wars, as well as toward peacemaking and peacekeeping operations.
Ahram argues that state-sponsored militias are typically found in what he calls M-form (multidivisional form) military organizations, as opposed to conventional (unitary form) organizations, in which units have low levels of stable cooperation. U-form organizations are better coordinated and are more capable of reacting to external attacks, as compared to M-form organizations. M-form organizations, in turn, are quite useful to provide internal stability. Among late developing states (LDSs), both U-form and M-form organizations exist; Ahram uses historical institutionalism to account for this variation, which he argues cannot simply be explained by the lack of external threats among LDSs. According to Ahram, this variation can be explained by the outcomes of a set of critical historical junctures and their legacies. Specifically, the nature of the decolonization process (i.e., peaceful or revolutionary), combined with the characteristics of the international environment after decolonization (i.e., aggressive or peaceful), determines the extent to which state security is decentralized. Ahram presents a simple theory in which two variables with two different possible values each generate four different pathways to military development. On the one hand, he identifies two possible forms of decolonization: (1) revolutionary decolonization (through insurgency), which leads to M-form armies; if guerrillas were active around time of decolonization, newborn states tended to appropriate the networks of local violence-wielders; and (2) negotiated decolonization, which leads to centralized armies. These states inherited the bureaucratic and military organizational format of the colonial powers. On the other hand, there are two possible levels of external military threat met by states after decolonization: (1) high (i.e., the states face strong external competitors and the threat of war); in previously centralized cases, this makes centralization permanent; in decentralized cases, this leads toward a necessary centralization in order to avoid predation; and (2) low (i.e., the environment is pacific). This allows for devolution to persist, in previously decentralized cases; in already centralized cases, this leads toward indeterminate outcomes.

The observable implications of the theory are straightforward and easily testable. Ahram uses comparative case studies of Indonesia, Iraq, and Iran. He studies the longitudinal evolution of each of the cases, and he undertakes case comparisons that, he argues, allow causal patterns to be identified by employing methods of similarity and difference. All of these countries had weak central institutions at the beginning of the twentieth century, yet each of them followed different courses of military development. Indonesia matches the pathway of revolutionary decolonization and low external threat, leading to the devolution of violence as a stable organizational form. Iraq matches the pathway in which the state directly inherited a European-trained army and consolidated itself over non-state actors; this centralization was reinforced due to a highly threatening regional environment. Iran matches the pathway in which conditions of high external military threat led decentralized militias
Ahram offers the reader a set of policy implications, such as the following: militias do not exist because of state frailty or because states strategically use them to avoid responsibility; they exist as a consequence of a number of conditions linked to the decolonization process and its aftermath. He further argues that policymakers should think about these conditions when addressing the issue of militias—instead of only focusing on improving state capacity. Additionally, he contends that if militias and state officials routinely cooperate with and mutually reinforce each other, the use of militias to enhance state capacity should be considered both legitimate and useful. Regarding policies aimed at providing peace in war-affected countries, Ahram’s approach implies that it is problematic to consider that the national military forces are the only ones in play when there are militias that have their own preferences and interests. I agree with Ahram that the “shortsightedness” of the international community in regarding the national state as a monolithic actor is problematic. This adds to the problem of many peacebuilding missions, which lack an in-depth and bottom-up knowledge of countries. However Ahram’s approach has its own problems: for example, it generates the normative and practical difficulty of identifying the militia groups that are legitimate (and therefore suitable to work with) and those that are not. Unfortunately, this approach could generate perverse incentives by boosting the emergence of militias or para-state forces aiming to achieve international recognition and support. Obviously, these caveats should be considered in depth before any policy is implemented.

Some final points: recent research has shown that there are multiple social orders within civil wars and that the relationship between states and militias can be complex and diverse, both between and within countries. I am not convinced that Ahram’s theory takes into account all this variation and, in this sense, I am concerned about his unit of analysis (i.e., the country). There seems to be local-level factors that strongly influence these forms of wartime governance. Additionally, I find it problematic that Ahram considers state-sponsored militias to be more “legal” than insurgents groups. Not only are these groups very often indistinguishable from each other, but state-sponsored militias, such as the Colombian paramilitaries, also act beyond any legal framework. The
consideration of some groups as being more legal than others is not only normatively controversial, but also likely to generate grievances for one of the sides, and this could harm any peacemaking effort. Finally, while the variation in levels of state security is interestingly highlighted in the book, it should be acknowledged that some scholarly literature has already addressed it.\(^4\) Perhaps what is novel about Ahram’s book is not the exploration of this variation in state forms, but the reflection on the need for both states and external actors to accept it and work around it. The achievement of a conventional state is not always possible, and attempting it might entail more costs than benefits. This is particularly the case when promoting state-building and peacekeeping operations: “the alternative to intervening to augment state power, seeking to establish a monopoly of violence where it never truly existed, is to embrace violence devolution and find ways to recruit non-state actors in lieu of defunct or rapacious states.”\(^5\) In short, Ahram argues that living in denial regarding the existence of multiple forms of state, and forcing states achieve centralized forms of state capacity, only leads to flawed peacekeeping operations and to the perpetuation of conflicts.

Timothy D. Sisk’s \textit{International Mediation in Civil Wars: Bargaining with Bullets} is a book about the bargaining processes that lead to peace. Peace processes led by international mediation can bring civil wars to an end, but is this always the case? Even if civil wars today are more likely to end at the negotiating table than on the battlefield, the conditions under which international mediation is successful are not yet well identified. Sisk’s book presents itself as an attempt to analyze de-escalation patterns in contemporary civil wars. I would argue that this book reads as a piece of descriptive inference on negotiation processes more than as a piece of causal inference.\(^6\) Indeed, Sisk does not really provide us with an analytical explanation for why some conflicts reach an end and others do not. Sisk argues that peace processes have to be understood as complex, multiple-level bargaining problems. A peace process consists of a series of phases linked by turning points. This allows for “a fruitful analysis of the strategic choices by parties about when to fight, when to talk, when to threaten and bluff, what type of arguments to make to justify their actions, when to concede, and, ultimately, when to settle.”\(^7\) He also argues that “a phases approach to conflict escalation and de-escalation assumes only that the emergence of violent conflict and its eventual termination have a beginning and, eventually, an end.”\(^8\) This framework is enlightening, but it is more descriptive than analytical.

One of the most relevant points in Sisk’s framework is that, in a peace process, agreement on a political settlement precedes security, not the other way around. The author describes a negotiation process leading to peace as one starting from a “mutually hurting stalemate,” which occurs when two sides, who perceive themselves as symmetric, reach a point in the war in which they cannot win through force nor induce capitulation of the opponent. This is the
point when prenegotiation starts; in this phase, the actors talk in an unofficial and exploratory way. If this phase is successful, it is followed by a “negotiating security” phase. In the negotiation, the role of mediators is crucial; mediators do not need to be impartial, but they do need to have sufficient leverage with all sides to move them toward a settlement. The relationship between each side and the mediator is crucial in this phase; mediators affect the incentive structure of the conflict (i.e., they change the cost and benefit calculations of disputants through the use of inducements, threats, sanctions, and the like). This latter phase ends with a formal declaration of principles or some sort of public commitment between the two sides. After that follows the phase of “settlement negotiation,” in which security issues are debated and, hopefully, settled. This is a crucial phase insofar as the sides may be using these negotiations strategically in order to improve their position in the conflict, without a real intention to end the confrontations. This phase also involves negotiation with postconflict institutions, which are usually power-sharing institutions that promote the inclusion of the main mobilized actors. The last phase is that of implementing the settlement (the actual peacebuilding phase); this phase is likely to be affected by violence perpetrated by the extremists within each of the groups, and it is a particularly difficult period because of the types of issues that it implies (e.g., demobilization, resettlement of refugees, economic reconstruction, and so on). Elections usually follow the settlement, but these are also critical moments as they can ignite new violence either in the preelectoral or in the postelectoral phase.

The above is a brief summary of Sisk’s template for a peacemaking process, or what he calls an analytical framework (again, I am skeptical about this qualification). He uses five cases of contemporary conflicts in order to illustrate his argument: South Africa, Liberia, Burundi, Sri Lanka, and Kashmir. His focus is on the escalation of violence and the peace process used to manage it. As in Ahram’s work, while the comparative case studies are well conducted, I would be more convinced if they had been complemented with a large-N analysis. But, in this sense, it is problematic that there are not a clear set of hypotheses or observable implications to be tested. The book provides a lot of anecdotal data, which is quite enlightening regarding mediation, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. However, at the same time, the reader can become overwhelmed with information. For example, Chapter 1 includes a large number of ideas: it can be viewed as being more of a civil war review than a review of the book’s themes. There are references to the Cold War, the internationalization of conflict, wartime violence, civil war recurrence, and normative stances regarding the role of the UN in contemporary conflicts. At the same time, the work is missing important insights that have been put forward in the peacemaking literature: for example, it does not refer to the role of identity in third-party mediation, which can play an important role and can effectively resolve conflicts when it enhances shared aspects of the disputants’ identities—if initially
less salient. It does not refer to either the type of warfare or the technologies of rebellion, which have a key impact on civil war termination, as well as on duration. For example, in the post-Cold War era, civil wars tend to end in “draws” because of the prevalence of symmetric civil wars in this period, as opposed to the prevalence of asymmetric (i.e., irregular) civil wars during the Cold War. One of the central themes of this book is that mediation is most effective in civil wars today when it is carried out under the auspices of the UN and when there is a strong international coalition of member states willing and able to act together to back UN efforts. This contradicts what other authors have argued regarding mediation and third-party intervention: Gleditsch and Beardsley (2004) and Beardsley (2011), for example, argue that multiple mediators and intergovernmental organizations do not help secure long-term peace. Given that Sisk does not provide us with convincing evidence supporting his assessment, I am not sure that we can trust his argument that multilateral mediation is an optimal approach.

A final caveat: according to lines of action suggested in this book, peacemaking is a highly demanding enterprise. Peacemakers ought to provide not only leverage to actors in the process of settlement, but also a formula for settlement. And there has to be a long-term commitment to allow for settlements to be implemented. All this raises the question of whether it is at all feasible. The international community is currently skeptical about intervention in countries affected by civil wars, especially after Iraq and Libya, which have been very difficult contexts. In a way, this has been proven by the international nonintervention in Syria, as of November 2012. Syria has also confirmed the weakness of the UN. Given the current state of affairs, it is hard to trust that peacemakers will ever take the step to become heavily involved with affected countries. Some recent work has indicated the limitations of mediation and third-party intervention, which can either lead to an extremely fragile peace or to war recurrence; or which can prolong civil war if the third-party is pursuing an independent agenda. Given that the success of intervention is not guaranteed, even if all of Sisk’s recommendations are followed, it is difficult to expect countries to invest in this type of enterprise (and even more so in the context of a global economic recession). Hence, it would be more useful to think of more economic and practicable forms of intervention.

Amalendu Misra’s *Politics of Civil Wars: Conflict, Intervention and Resolution* is a somewhat more wide-ranging book than Sisk’s and Ahram’s. In the first chapter, Misra argues that the causes of civil wars go beyond the well-known greed and grievance explanations and that there are additional deep-rooted factors related to identity, which contribute to the overall conflict dynamics. The book starts promisingly and raises expectations of what we are about to read; however, it fails to meet these expectations. Misra discusses many dimensions of the civil wars (e.g., onset, violence, mediation, peacebuilding, and postconflict reconciliation), yet each issue is addressed in a
superficial way, and the insights are very often flawed. For example, one of the numerous points he makes in the book is that corruption, state legitimacy, and nationalism have a crucial role in explaining violent conflict. According to his argument, countries that undergo civil wars are affected by crises of legitimacy, which have their roots in nationalism and ethnic diversity; in other words, more diverse countries have difficulties in building what he calls a “nationalist self,” and this leads to crises of legitimacy and to violent conflict. It is argued that this predominantly occurs in developing countries. This contention is not backed up by the empirical evidence in the book, and it goes against robust scholarly evidence that has argued that ethnic diversity does not explain inter-group violence or civil wars or that ethnic homogeneity does not necessarily imply greater trust. Also, this statement ignores the fact that there are highly developed secessionist movements in countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom, which are both developed countries with strong and well-established state nationalism.

In a way, Misra takes a somewhat journalistic approach to civil wars, making statements that lack solid evidence and missing some of the most important contributions in the field such as Kalyvas’s 2006 book on civil war violence or recent research by Cohen (2010) and Wood (2006) on sexual violence during conflict. No systematic explanation is provided for any of the issues that are explored (e.g., civil war onset, violence, or conflict resolution). Also, the book makes distinctions that have long been proven not to be that useful, such as “old” and “new” civil wars, “developed” and “developing” countries (considering the latter to be less culturally advanced than the former), and “conventional” and “civil” wars (there are civil wars that are fought conventionally, as explained by Kalyvas and Balcells). The book also takes a rather simplistic view on globalization, and it makes risky recommendations such as building homogenous societies in order to achieve a more peaceful world. These type of arguments defending a need for ethnic homogeneity in order to avoid war are not only problematic from a normative perspective, but have also been discredited in the literature.

However, the book provides several interesting insights. On the one hand, Misra solves one of the questions that Sisk’s book left open, which is why countries intervene to promote peacekeeping in other countries. Misra argues that they do it out of fear of spillover effects, which can lead to regional destabilization, waves of refugees, and similar negative externalities. The author notes that peacebuilding is not an easy enterprise, as countries need to go through a reconciliation process and “entertain their catharsis” before they can move on. He also emphasizes the cost of peacemaking and peacebuilding operations, which was a point that was overlooked by Sisk. On the other hand, Misra takes a critical approach with the state-centered view of civil wars, and he argues for the need to take rebels seriously. He also emphasizes the need to get in-depth knowledge of conflicts before making interventions because they can be
double-edged and therefore have many costs for both the intervening and the intervened countries. I believe that this is an important insight and a valid recommendation to make, especially given recent developments in contemporary civil wars and peacemaking operations.

There are some commonalities between the three books analyzed in this review: each of them make clear that an in-depth knowledge of the local conditions is necessary before peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations are undertaken by the international community. However, while Ahram is path-breaking in promoting the recognition of non-state actors by the international community, Sisk and Misra are more conservative in their vision of states and the main actors involved in civil wars. All three books are an example of “old style” political science, in which large-N analyses are absent. Yet, while Sisk’s and Misra’s books contain no theoretical frameworks with testable observable implications, Ahram does offer a clear set of hypotheses that could be tested in a more systematic type of empirical test. All three books provide enlightening and in-depth empirical evidence from a set of case studies, but—because of the research design—this evidence is more efficiently used in Ahram than in the former two cases. Overall, although these books have flaws, they provide some interesting lessons in the field of conflict studies, which should be taken into consideration by political scientists and economists in the field.

NOTES
4. See overview in Staniland, “States.”
8. Ibid., 57.


