Civilian Victimization and Ethnic Civil War

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December 2019

Abstract

While many studies provide insights into the causes of wartime civilian victimization, we know little about how the targeting of particular segments of the civilian population affects the onset and escalation of armed conflict. Previous research on conflict onset has been largely limited to structural variables, both theoretically and empirically. Moving beyond these static approaches, this paper assesses how the state-led targeting of specific ethnic groups affects the likelihood of ethnic conflict onset, and the evolution of conflicts once they break out. Relying on a new dataset with global coverage that captures the ethnic identity of civilian victims of targeted violence, we find evidence that the state-led civilian victimization of particular ethnic groups increases the likelihood that the latter become involved in ethnic civil war. We also find tentative, yet more nuanced, evidence that ethnic targeting by state forces affects the escalation of ongoing conflicts.

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In recent years, conflict researchers have made a major effort to understand the relationship between civilian victimization and dynamics of civil war. We now have a much better understanding of why armed actors use violence against civilians and the consequences of this type of violence. Focusing on the micro-level, Kalyvas (2006) spearheaded this research program by treating selective one-sided violence as a predictable wartime phenomenon, whose spatial and temporal variation is accounted for by dynamics of territorial control. Following this pioneering work, scholarly attention to the dynamics of civil wars intensified, including the wartime consequences of victimization (e.g. Condra & Shapiro 2012; Downes 2007; Kalyvas & Kocher 2007; Kocher, Pepinsky, & Kalyvas 2011; Lyall 2009).

However, violence against civilians is not only a wartime phenomenon. Victimization also takes place in peacetime, for example when governments resort to violent repression of non-violent challengers. In fact, repression could escalate violence and play a role in the onset of civil war itself. Thus, to assess the impact of violent repression on conflict onset and escalation systematically and on a large scale, it is necessary to study civilian victimization during peaceful episodes as well (Davenport, Armstrong, & Lichbach 2006; Siegel 2011; J. K. Young 2013).

Moreover, the dominant focus on micro-level dynamics in this literature can be limiting in that it tends to overlook more aggregate phenomena. If we want to understand the evolution of conflicts in their entirety, it may not be sufficient to analyze the spatio-temporal distribution of individual conflict events. When explaining conflict onset, this limitation becomes even more obvious. In many countries, state-led repression targets particular groups because of their alleged links to violent or non-violent challengers. Therefore, it is important to account for processes of mobilization or radicalization that take place at the level of such groups.

The Syrian Civil War, which broke out in 2011 right after peaceful protests against the government were violently crushed by Bashar al-Assad, is a good example of how state violence can have an immediate effect on conflict dynamics (BBC 2017). Moreover, other

examples show how victimized groups are frequently identified based on their ethnicity. The conflict in the Niger Delta that started around 2004 was preceded by a campaign of peaceful opposition to foreign oil corporations by local ethnic groups. The Nigerian government, however, decided to respond with violence, and local civilians were ethnically targeted (Human Rights Watch 1999). During the Guatemalan Civil War, although initially the rebels only had marginal support, the government engaged in a campaign of indiscriminate violence against the Maya, which hardened the ethnic cleavage and increased support for the rebels.

In this paper, we study whether states' ethnic targeting of civilians affects the outbreak and escalation of conflicts around the globe. We focus on instances of state-led collective targeting against ethnic groups, in other words, the killing of unarmed civilians by state forces following ethnic identity lines, where civilians are targeted because of their alleged ethnic identity and not because their behavior or participation in political activities. This form of violence is 'group-selective' (Straus 2015), as it targets at the level of groups but it is individually indiscriminate within those targeted groups (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017). We argue that state-led victimization of ethnic groups increases the risk of civil war by enlarging the opposition organizations' pool of recruits ready to take up arms. State violence amplifies the injustice felt by members of these groups by creating new violent-related grievances that are qualitatively different from pre-existing structural grievances, thus creating and reinforcing the idea that violent action is the only path to political change (Goodwin 2001), and increases individual motivation to participate based on outrage and self-defense (Kalyvas & Kocher 2007; Mason & Krane 1989; Wood 2003). We analyze each of the steps in this process, and argue that state-led one-sided violence against an ethnic group increases the likelihood that organizations linked to this group will take up arms against the government, or sustain their fighting effort in case they are already involved in an ongoing conflict. Moreover, we argue that the effect of state violence should be most pronounced for previously peaceful groups. As violence triggers several one-off, path-dependent mechanisms related to

mobilization and organizational patterns, a history of prior conflict lessens the impact of further ethnic violence by the state.

To test these hypotheses, we rely on the newly collected Ethnic One-Sided Violence (EOSV) dataset (Fjelde et al. 2019), which records the ethnic identity of victims of campaigns of one-sided violence around the globe. Using the ethnic group as our unit of analysis, we address the question of whether targeting civilians along ethnic lines increases the risk of civil war onset or conflict escalation between the government and targeted groups. Our results show that targeting civilians from a particular ethnic group implies a higher risk of civil war onset by armed groups linked to this group in subsequent years. However, the effect is larger for those groups that did not rebel before. Once a conflict is under way, state violence makes a conflict more likely to continue, therefore making a transition to peace less likely. Again, this effect is largely driven by first-time ethnic civil wars. In the case of recurring conflicts, we find no such effect. We conclude that ethnic state violence against civilians can be a trigger of conflict onset and an obstacle to pacification.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, by focusing exclusively on instances of collective targeting, we take into account that there are different types of violent events which might have different effects, something that has been relatively ignored in previous research (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017). Second, addressing the lack of external validity in previous studies on the consequences of state violence, we perform a first global analysis on the effects of collective targeting along ethnic lines at the level of ethnic groups. And finally, we discuss the conditions under which state violence has an effect on conflict dynamics, something that has also been previously underlooked.

Previous research

As the link between civilian victimization and conflict escalation remains poorly understood, we review two related bodies of research that focus on the repression-dissent nexus in the context of domestic dissent, and the effect of victimization on revolutions and civil conflicts.

First, the literature on social movements has traditionally understood repression as an important factor affecting the level of contention within countries (Gurr 1970; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1978). However, there is no consensus on whether repression increases or decreases dissent. Lichbach (1987) argues that dissidents tend to choose between alternative violent and non-violent methods depending on the costs of each strategy. Repression raises the cost of the strategy in use, and thus makes more likely switching to its alternative. Using data from Sri Lanka and Peru, Moore (1998) finds evidence in favor of this argument. Other authors claim that the effect of repression depends on regime type (Gupta, Singh, & Sprague 1993), or that short-term effects are different from long-term ones (Rasler 1996). Overall, however, the evidence on the impact of repression on dissent remains very mixed (for an excellent overview, see Siegel 2011).

Beyond the lack of consensus, these studies say less about the effect of repression on civil war because of their focus on protest events. Davenport et al. (2006) try to overcome this limitation. Going beyond structural explanations of civil war onset, they identify three processes by which dissident-government interactions can escalate into a civil war, and conclude that there are several, alternative paths to civil war, without finding evidence in favor of a specific argument. In a similar attempt, J. K. Young (2013) finds evidence of the link between repression of dissident behavior and civil war onset, which speaks to an actor-based mechanism behind the relationship between weak states and civil war. However, these two studies aggregate the repression and contention variables at the country level, which renders the study of dynamics within particular dyadic conflicts difficult.

A second body of research studies the impact of victimization on the origins and evolution of revolutions and civil conflicts. In a seminal contribution, Goodwin (2001) goes beyond

material and economic factors and claims that violent political oppression by state authorities is a crucial catalyst of revolutionary movements. This helps to explain why some of these conflicts are much more persistent than others, as repression increases the motivations to fight and blocks alternative, non-violent methods of political change. This argument resonates with studies that argue that indiscriminate violence by the incumbent backfires by increasing civilian collaboration and the supply of recruits for the rebels (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas & Kocher 2007; Mason & Krane 1989). Highlighting emotional mechanisms, and showing how grievances build up in reaction to the repressive response of state authorities, Wood (2003) argues that the moral outrage felt by the targeted groups increases support for the rebellion. Similarly, Petersen (2002) analyzes emotions such as anger and resentment in his explanations of ethnic violence (see also Siegel 2011).

More recent studies look at the wartime dynamics of violence from a more disaggregated perspective. Revisiting an older debate about the effectiveness of certain counter-insurgency methods, most of these studies explore how incumbent violence against civilians may affect armed competition and subsequent insurgent attacks in the short run. Several studies find that state violence against civilians does in fact increase subsequent levels of insurgent violence (e.g., Condra & Shapiro 2012), while others have shown that state violence also increases downstream insurgent territorial control (Kocher et al. 2011). However, such effects appear to be contingent on which segment of the population is being targeted (Condra & Shapiro 2012), and on how much insurgents rely on local civilian support (Toft & Zhukov 2015). Moreover, indiscriminate violence against civilians has also been found to dampen insurgent violence in some contexts (Lyall 2009). Thus, the debate is far from settled. While highly insightful and important, this literature has limitations. An exclusive focus on wartime dynamics loses sight of the *onset* of civil wars and is only useful in explaining dynamics of violence once conflict is already underway. Moreover, in many cases, the focus on a few cases limits the generalizability of the findings.

In sum, previous research on the relationship between civilian victimization and conflict intensity still contains several gaps. First, much of the existing literature still suffers from a lack of attention to different types of violence, grouping together events that might not have much in common (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017; Kalyvas 2006; Stanton 2016). We try to address this limitation by focusing explicitly on instances of collective targeting, where violence was targeted at specific identity groups. Second, external validity needs to be improved because conflict researchers rarely study within-country dynamics with global samples. Addressing this gap, we pitch our analysis at an intermediate level of aggregation, focusing on ethnic groups and explicitly highlighting the role of ethnicity by linking together the identity of perpetrators, victims, and insurgent groups. Finally, previous research has been relatively agnostic to the conditions under which state violence has an effect on armed combat, and the historical context in which this effect plays out remains understudied. We address this issue by analyzing how the process leading from civilian victimization to civil war is dependent on the previous conflict history of the ethnic group.

Theory

Our theory's scope is limited to contexts in which ethnic divisions are politically salient, and opposition groups organized, though not necessarily in a formal or institutionalized way. Under these conditions, both mobilization and repression frequently occur along ethnic lines. State repression often has a preventive character or occurs in response to a challenge posed by a non-state actor. The "law of coercive responsiveness" (Davenport 2007) suggests that the use of repressive tactics by governments to control dissent constitutes one of the most stable patterns of violent political behavior. In the context of ethnic politics, this challenge may come from an ethnic group demanding political change, either through peaceful or violent means. Faced with such oppositional pressure, the government needs to decide how to respond. Either it can accommodate the demands of the ethnic group through negotiation

and compromise, or it can reject the group's demands. Depending on the level of perceived threat, information, and its ideological orientation, the government may resort to violence. Frequently, such violence categorically targets the civilian constituency of opposition groups.[1]

We argue that the government's use of violence against civilians will greatly increase the odds of onset and sustained fighting. Although previous political discrimination can also lead to civil war, the government's recourse to one-sided violence increases the likelihood of mutual combat. In these cases, the use of violence against the constituency of opposition groups by state authorities creates a new situation in which violence-related grievances add to what has already motivated the challenge in the first place. As mentioned in the introduction, we focus on violence against civilians who are targeted because of their assumed link of the opposition, usually because their shared ethnicity positions them as their potential constituency. This relationship, however, is not constant in our theory. These civilians are the ones we refer to throughout this section.

The process that leads from state-led civilian victimization to insurgent violence involves three steps, as shown in figure 1. First, facing a challenge by one or several organizations from the opposition (O), the government (G) targets those civilians identified as the constituency of these challengers (C_O), prompting attitudinal responses by victims. Second, as a consequence of violence, members of the targeted group provide O with new resources, which mainly consist of new recruits and civilian support. Finally, the now strengthened rebel organizations strike back by launching or increasing their active fighting efforts against the government.

We are aware that this process could also lead to compliance, in other words, state violence could also have a negative effect on the fighting intensity of the opposition. However, we focus here on a conflict-intensifying effect, as previous literature suggests this is the dominating one. Similarly, instead of a more intense violent response by the opposition,

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[1]On the determinants of civilian victimization prior and during civil wars, see, for example Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay (2004), Kalyvas (2006), Davenport (2007), Valentino (2014), Beiser-McGrath (2019). On types of targeting see Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017).

state violence could lead to protest activity, which is a common phenomenon in civil wars (Barter 2012; Kaplan 2017). The occurrence of non-violent events is not incompatible with violence, and state violence could easily cause both outcomes. Thus, although we do not rule this out, we focus here on violence.
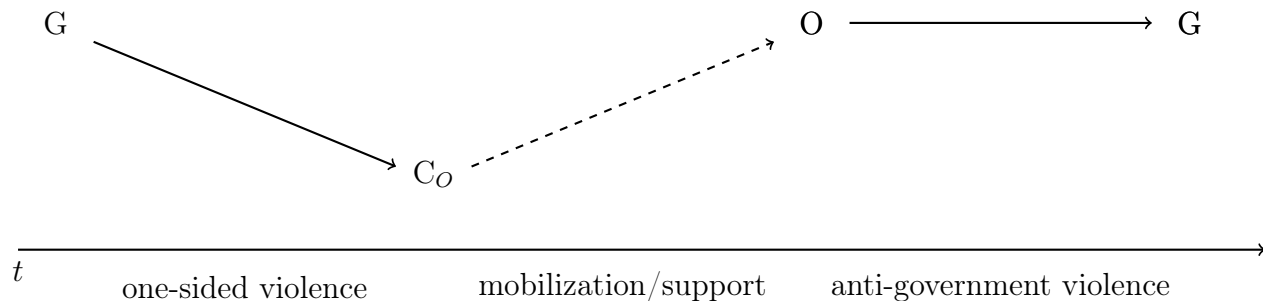

Figure 1: Theoretical framework

This process applies to situations in which a conflict has not yet broken out, as well as to ongoing conflicts. O refers to all opposition organizations that are linked to an ethnic group, and C_O to members of that ethnic group, O's civilian constituency. In a prewar situation, O therefore includes moderate political organizations as well as more radicalized ones. During an ongoing conflict, O refers to all armed rebels groups as well as any possible moderate organization. We posit that violence against C_O by G prompts O to resort to armed combat or to increase the already ongoing fighting effort.

Below we discuss this whole process, paying attention to each of the analytical steps and their corresponding mechanisms. Based on this logic, we then discuss how the effect of state-led violence may vary across armed phases of a conflict. In particular, we argue that the effect of state-led violence should affect insurgent activity mainly during the first phase of a conflict.

How state violence affects the escalation of conflict

When a government uses violence against civilians to deter an opposition movement, many of the victims are not the same individuals as those who challenge or directly fight against

the government. Thus, the process that translates violence against civilians into insurgent violence against the state involves several steps, which are illustrated in figure 1: the government uses violence against civilians who are assumed as supporters of the opposition, which (1) prompts an attitudinal response, (2) generates renewed support and allows for additional recruitment, and (3) increases the incentives of these organizations to switch to violence or intensify their fighting effort against the government in a later stage.

Step 1: Attitudinal responses to state violence

State-led violence against civilians provokes an attitudinal response from those civilians who belong to the targeted group. In our theoretical framework, we assume that the reaction to state violence is most pronounced among co-ethnics of the individuals killed, especially if there are reasons to infer that civilians have been targeted because they have been identified as members of particular ethnic groups.

The main violence-inducing emotions we consider here are anger, moral outrage, and fear, which previous research has already associated with repression, inter-group conflict, and retributive preferences (Bastian B. 2013; García-Ponce, Young, & Zeitzoff 2018; Petersen 2002; Siegel 2011; Wood 2003). In this case, we argue that state violence tends to increase pressure on opposition leaders to engage in armed resistance against the government, because civilian victimization generates new motivations among co-ethnics to fight back (Goodwin 2001) and reinforces the distinction between the in-group and the out-group (Mironova & Whitt 2018). Consistent with this argument, Costalli and Ruggeri (2018, 925) speak of a "detachment mechanism" that explains how "some emotional shocks make individuals available to consider alternatives to the current state of affairs, stimulating their will to change." At the same time, state violence also provokes fear among civilians with social ties to the victims, particularly if the government collectively targets members of entire identity groups. However, the net effect is not straightforward (Aldama, Vásquez, & Young 2017; Siegel 2011).

In the context of an ethnic group demanding political change, the use of violence by state authorities worsens a situation that is already perceived as unjust. An increase in anger will make individuals more likely to support violent mobilization through several psychological effects, such as increasing stereotyping, lowering risk estimates, or distorting information collection (Petersen 2018). Government violence against civilians represents a "moral shock" (Jasper & Poulsen 1995) that deviated from basic rules of legitimate government behavior. Shocks of this kind thus reinforce the process of collective identification that takes place in the context of ethnic movements and conflicts (Khawaja 1993), and could set in motion micro-mobilization processes that facilitate future mobilization (Opp & Roehl 1990).

In addition, in the context of nascent insurgencies, governmental violence demonstrates that any alternative, non-violent path to political change is being blocked and that fighting is the only way forward: "Like political exclusion, indiscriminate state violence against mobilized groups and opposition figures is likely to reinforce the plausibility, justifiability, and (hence) diffusion of the idea that the state needs to be violently 'smashed' and radically reorganized" (Goodwin 1997, 19). Even during a civil war, anger and outrage-based reactions to violence are likely to still take place and thus increase the motivation for further fighting. Past research shows that government-led violence against civilians will exacerbate grievances during war, thus increasing civilian support for insurgent groups (Condra & Shapiro 2012; Goodwin 2001; Lyall, Blair, & Imai 2013; Wood 2003).

Step 2: Recruitment and support

The attitudinal response to state violence makes civilians more likely to turn to the opposition movement, both in terms of active recruitment and civilian support. This response may take place either because anger and outrage lead to an increased desire for revenge and an increase in the motivation to fight (Goodwin 2001; Wood 2003), or because joining the rebels is a rational strategy to stay safe (Kalyvas & Kocher 2007; Mason & Krane 1989). Anger, moral outrage, and fear induced by state violence thus boost support to the opposition, and increase

civilian demands for a violent response against the state, from which the most radical groups within the opposition benefit the most.

While the path from anger and moral outrage to radicalization and active participation is relatively clear, the role of fear is more complex. Previous research has argued that state-led collective victimization alleviates the free-riding problem of insurgent collective action (Lichbach 1995), as joining the rebels could actually *reduce* the risk of being killed by government forces (Kalyvas & Kocher 2007; Mason & Krane 1989). Fear could also hold people back, however, especially in an uncertain context where it is not clear how to avoid victimization (for experimental evidence for such an effect, see L. Young 2017). If the degree of collective targeting of state-led violence is too high, civilians may try to stay at home and maintain a low-key attitude to avoid victimization. During an ongoing war, we expect the participation-inducing effects of fear to become more relevant, as violence usually reaches new levels and civilians may have a harder time trying to avoid being identified as supporters of the opposition. Moreover, wartime violence drives processes of local polarization that make it even more difficult and dangerous for civilians to stay neutral in times of ongoing war (Schubiger 2013a; Weidmann & Zürcher 2013; Wood 2008). Moreover, state violence might prompt the diaspora or foreign actors to increase resources for the rebels.

Previous research has highlighted successful cases of state repression against emergent opposition movements, particularly when targeting opposition organizations during the early stages of a challenge. Lacina (2014) shows that the threat of repression can deter the onset of mobilization, as elites expect a harsh response by the state. Sullivan (2016) argues that government repression can be successful when targeting covert mobilization activities by opposition organizations. Finally, Lewis (2017) shows that nascent armed groups that have not yet managed to gain mass public support are particularly vulnerable to state repression. These findings, however, do not fully apply to a case of state-led collective victimization, where the government is likely facing an organized challenge that might already have public support or has links with a potential ethnic civilian constituency. Moreover, targeting civil-

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ians based on collective cues is fundamentally different from selective repression of covert activities, and thus we should not expect its effects to be the same.

In short, fear does not always lead to demobilization, but, like moral outrage and anger, might motivate individuals to fight. Based on in-depth interviews with 200 Syrian refugees, Pearlman (2016) describes how regime violence against unarmed protesters helped turn "*silencing fear* that encourages submission" (2016, 24) into *surmounted fear* that "empowers the fight for political voice" (2016, 26). Quoting one of her interviewees from Daraa, Pearlman (2016, 26) writes: "Something took shape in the minds of young people. It was as if they were sleeping and a new culture woke them ... [People asked themselves]: 'Why can't there be change here? ... Why should we allow a small group of people to rule us? We can pay the price.'"'

As demands for political change and for active responses to state violence increase, competing opposition movements need to present themselves as the main challengers to a repressive government in an attempt to channel civilian support. In a context where civilians demand responses to state repression, more radical opposition organizations will likely be more successful in attracting civilian support and new recruits as opposed to more moderate ones. Thus, violence-induced civilian demands and the mobilization process carried out by organizations might explain support flows to radical organizations, and the sidelining of moderate ones, increasing the overall tendency of an organized, violent response. This variation in recruitment flows, which takes place as civilians choose which organizations to support, also impacts the internal structure of the rebel movement. Below we discuss these by-products at the organizational level.

Step 3: Changes within the rebel movement

Both state-led violence and the increase in recruitment flows that it triggers may have profound changes in the organizational structure of the rebel movement. Specifically, state violence influences the number of active rebel organizations and their internal structure,

which in turn affects the overall level of insurgent violence. An increase of the pool of insurgent recruits may help small armed groups to grow, particularly in cases where the insurgent movement is comprised of several rebel groups without extensive resources, and where there is no dominant rebel group attracting most recruits. In this situation, state-led violence could have the effect of boosting some small groups that otherwise would not have had the power to fight against the government, thereby increasing the number of active armed groups in the conflict.

Moreover, previous research has shown that state violence against civilians drives insurgent fragmentation. Schubiger (2014) argues that while state-orchestrated violence against civilians will help insurgents to quickly enlarge their ranks, civilian victimization also tends to hinder insurgent coordination as well as mechanisms for screening and indoctrination, thus decreasing ideological cohesion and increasing the probability of insurgent splits. In addition, besides the effect of violence through growth of organizational resources, an increase in the number of rebel organizations itself is likely to further escalate violence against the government, fueled by competition between rebel groups (Cunningham, Bakke, & Seymour 2012; Wucherpfennig 2011).

Beyond its effects through recruitment, state-led violence might also pose a challenge to insurgent groups, particularly when civilian victimization is accompanied by other intense, violent counter-insurgency strategies. Not all organizations are equally prepared to endure wartime pressures, including state-led violence against their constituency (Staniland 2014; Webster 2018), which can constitute a major shock to the support networks of militant organizations (Parkinson 2013). Thus, state violence may have the unintended consequence of not only fostering fragmentation, but of also setting up a Darwinian selection process that filters out the insurgent movement, thus leaving the most resilient and cohesive groups as the dominant organizations in the anti-government struggle. Importantly, fragmentation and selection feed into each other, as armed group competition and rivalry can help insurgent groups innovate and become more robust (Phillips 2015).

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Based on this theoretical framework, we derive our first two hypotheses about the effect of state violence on civil wars, both before the onset of conflict and during an ongoing war:

Hypothesis 1: The use of state-led ethnic targeting increases the risk of civil war onsets.

Hypothesis 2: The use of state-led ethnic targeting during armed conflict increases the probability that the conflict escalates in intensity.

In the next section, we discuss how the discussed mechanisms tend to vary throughout a conflict, and why the effect of state violence should be strongest during the first episode of a conflict.

How the effect of state violence varies between conflict episodes

The previous section developed a basic argument regarding the effect of state-led ethnic targeting on insurgent violence within a conflict episode. This argument, however, suggests a uniform effect of state violence that excludes historical dependencies. Instead, it seems reasonable to expect the dynamics discussed above to be affected by previous conflict episodes.[2]

In the case of the first step, which refers to the attitudinal reaction to state violence, we see no strong reason to expect the impact of victimization to vary across conflict episodes in any particular direction. While some researchers suggest that in situations of constant threat people may begin to suffer from "semi-normalized fear" (Pearlman 2016, 28), others show that state violence and the moral outrage it creates remain a powerful determinant of rebel mobilization throughout time (Wood 2003, 268). Indeed, previous research largely agrees that the short- and long-term effects of repression, particularly of nonviolent campaigns, can be very different (Chenoweth, Perkoski, & Kang 2017).

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[2]Throughout this section we refer to conflict stages or episodes when we talk about what is usually coded as an entire civil conflict, and steps when it comes to logical parts of the causal mechanism, as described in the previous section. During the first episode, rebel movements organize themselves and mobilize their constituencies for the first time. The exact conceptual definition of a conflict episode, however, is always contentious and very sensitive to the specific context. In the empirical section, we follow UCDP definitions of episodes, by distinguishing the first conflict cycle from subsequent ones.

However, turning to the second and third step in our causal chain, we argue that the mobilization-based and organizational mechanisms should indeed be affected differently in later conflict episodes. Here we review of each these two steps and argue that the effect of state-led ethnic targeting, if anything, should be present during the early stages of a conflict.

Step 2: Radicalization, recruitment and support

We argue that the second step in our causal chain, which includes recruitment and insurgent support, should be less affected by state violence in subsequent rounds of conflict. Once cleavages are formed and civilians choose to support or join a given armed group, there are path-dependent consequences for subsequent dynamics of radicalization, group identification, and mobilization that should make the subsequent impact of state violence less pronounced.

First, the pool of potential recruits of opposition organizations is not infinite, but relatively stable or – due to killings and displacement – even in decline. Hence, both civilian support and active recruitment levels should become less elastic as conflicts progress. Conflicts also generate new constraints on action repertoires over time. Particularly in ethnic conflicts, it is rare for individuals to be able to switch sides.

Second, an increase in recruitment flows does not imply that all organizations benefit equally. As argued above, in a context where the state is collectively targeting civilians, more radical opponents may be more competitive in attracting recruits and civilian support. Once radicalized and armed, however, we should not necessarily expect further surges and radicalization as a consequence of state violence.

Third, conflicts often have a deeply polarizing effect on collective identities that may be relatively stable over time. Past studies suggest that the effect of wartime violence on collective identities tends to last long after armed conflicts end (Balcells 2012; Dyrstad 2012), especially in the context of intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal 2013; Kahn, Liberman, Halperin, & Ross 2016). If such lasting polarization occurs, it is less likely that new waves of repression will dramatically shift allegiances and the dynamics of mobilization in later conflict episodes.

This should apply particularly to the case of ethnically salient social divisions, in which historic relations among groups often severely constrain the ability of leaders to mobilize additional followers and reorganize their groups (Petersen 2002). Therefore, we would expect rebel mobilization to be less relevant in terms of new recruitment in later episodes of a conflict.

Finally, violence-induced recruitment also depend on the demand of rebel groups for new recruits. Emerging rebel groups may have a shortage of recruits, and therefore an increase of the supply could have a very important impact on their resources. For more established groups, however, state violence-related recruitment may be less relevant, as they are likely to have developed alternative systems of recruitment or have more strict screening processes in place.

Step 3: Changes within the rebel movement

State-led violence against civilians and the effect it has on recruitment flows have a deep impact on the universe of rebel organizations. We identified above three possible effects of state violence that could increase the intensity of insurgent violence. State violence may provoke emergent groups to grow in size, established rebel groups to fragment (Schubiger 2014), and force the whole rebel movement to go through a selection process in which only the strongest groups survive (Staniland 2014; Webster 2018). Regardless of which process prevails in each context, all of them typically make their strongest imprint during the first stages of a conflict.

The growth of small, emergent groups tends to occur at the beginning of a conflict, when no rebel group has monopolized the anti-government struggle. Once the conflict deepens, it is likely that recruitment will benefit the most-established group. In Sri Lanka, for example, the civil war was mainly triggered by the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, when thousands of civilians were killed in state-sponsored violence. The riots prompted a boost in recruitment for many small armed rebel groups that grew increasingly after that year (Wickremesekera 2016). Yet,

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in later stages of the war, particularly after 1990, the LTTE became the dominant group and monopolized the rebellion against the Sri Lankan government (Gates & Roy 2014; Staniland 2014; Wickremesekera 2016).[3]

Similarly, state-led violence against civilians presents a serious challenge to rebel groups, particularly if paired with other counter-insurgent strategies. This challenge is likely to have an impact on the universe of rebel organizations: some will disappear as a consequence, some will adapt and grow stronger, and some others will be swallowed into larger or more resilient groups. The learning process triggered by state violence, however, should take place during the first stage of a conflict. Once the state starts to use civilian victimization as a wartime strategy, it can be expected to have a lesser impact during subsequent conflict episodes, as surviving rebel organizations are more robust to such shocks. Early on during the Kashmir insurgency in the late 1980s, many armed rebel groups were active in the struggle. This number would shrink dramatically in the course of the conflict, as the Indian counterinsurgency strategies hardened the surviving organizations. Although state-led violence against civilians constitutes just one component of the counterinsurgency, the first years of an insurgency represent a particularly challenging period during which groups are forced to adapt to the pressures of a civil war (Staniland 2014).

Fragmentation follows a similar logic. As a conflict matures, rebel groups engage in a learning process and potentially change their strategies. Thus, we should see rebel groups developing alternative methods of recruitment and better screening strategies, in order to avoid the damaging effects of uncontrolled recruitment (Schubiger 2014). Again, Sri Lanka provides an example of this phenomenon. The recruitment surge of 1983 provided the LTTE with an extensive base of potential new recruits. However, as Staniland (2014, 157) mentions, "accepting a surge of new recruits could be a recipe for disaster, and it badly hurt other Tamil militant groups. The LTTE's military would be effective only if its manpower remained disciplined, and Prabhakaran made a clear decision to limit the influx." This process of

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[3]According to our empirical coding, the Sri Lankan conflict did not have several episodes. Thus, our illustration only highlights the general process.

adaptation by rebel groups is likely to take place at the beginning of a conflict, as a response to the first internal challengers.

All in all, we argue that the effect of state-led violence against civilians should be mainly observed during the first conflict episode, when an opposition movement threatens to rebel for the first time, and in the course of the first conflict episode once it starts.[4]

In light of this discussion, we refine our previously stated hypotheses by taking the historical sequence of conflict episodes into account:

Hypothesis 3: The positive effect of state-led ethnic targeting on civil war onset is more pronounced for groups without a prior conflict epsiode than for those in subsequent episodes.

Hypothesis 4: The impact of state-led ethnic targeting on ongoing conflict dynamics is more pronounced during the first conflict episode.

Data

To test our hypotheses, we draw on newly collected data, the *Ethnic One-Sided Violence* dataset (EOSV), which is the first dataset that identifies the ethnic identity of civilians killed by armed actors at a global level (Fjelde et al. 2019). The EOSV dataset links the UCDP One-Sided Violence dataset (Eck & Hultman 2007) with the information on ethnic groups from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Vogt et al. 2015) and identifies the ethnic identity of the victims of campaigns of one-sided violence around the globe, between 1989 and 2013. In addition, EOSV also identifies whether the armed actor engaged in ethnic targeting, i.e., cases in which the killings took place in a context of ethnic profiling of the prospective victims.

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[4]For contrasting argument focusing on conflict recurrence, respectively protest events, see Uzonyi and Hanania (2017) and Bell and Murdie (2018).

We extract our main explanatory variable from this dataset based on a binary variable, *Ethnic Targeting*, which indicates whether members of a certain ethnic group were identified among the victims of government-led one-sided violence in a given year *and* there is evidence of deliberate ethnic targeting. More specifically, given identified members of an ethnic group among the victims, the dataset records whether there is evidence that at least 50% of the victims per ethnic group, perpetrator, and year, were subject to collective, identity-based targeting (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017) along ethnic lines.

Ethnic targeting is coded 1 for a given ethnic group, perpetrator, and year if there is evidence that at least half of the victims belonging to that ethnic group were killed in a context that exhibited such targeting patterns. Direct evidence of ethnic profiling of civilian victims includes for example the explicit announcement of ethnic targeting by leaders of perpetrating groups, or well-documented evidence of ethnic targeting gathered by independent human rights organizations on the ground. Indirect evidence includes, for example, information that only members of particular ethnic groups were subject to one-sided violence, while other groups engaging in similar behavior (e.g., participation in protests) were not. The variable is coded zero otherwise, regardless of the overall number of victims belonging to that particular ethnic group (Fjelde et al. 2019). We track whether there was ethnic targeting during the previous year, and include results in the appendix using a coding that tracks ethnic targeting during the previous two years.

To establish a link between victims of OSV events and rebel groups, we use the ACD2EPR dataset (Wucherpfennig, Metternich, Cederman, & Gleditsch 2012) to link conflict actors in the UCDP *Armed Conflict Dataset* (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand 2002) with EPR ethnic groups (Vogt et al. 2015), and thus code an ethnic group-based measure of yearly conflict intensity. With this setup, we estimate a transition model to account for both onset and conflict escalation, using an ordinal measure of conflict intensity as the dependent variable. This variable takes three different values: 0, when there is no conflict ongoing; 1, if there is a low-intensity conflict ongoing, and 2, if there is a high-intensity

conflict ongoing. The difference between low- and high-intensity conflicts is measured based on the UCDP dataset, and defined in terms of yearly battle deaths: at least 25 for low-intensity conflicts, and 1000 for high-intensity ones. This allows us to also use observations of ongoing conflicts and thus to assess in more detail the conflict dynamics. In the dataset, we include all politically relevant groups included in the EPR dataset during the mentioned time period, excluding groups in 'dominant' and 'monopoly' positions, as those, by definition, cannot rebel against the state.

To test whether prior ethnic civil war alters the effect of ethnic targeting, we code a binary variable that indicates whether a group has previously experienced armed conflict, meaning that it is linked to an armed rebel organization that fought against the government in the past. If it is not, this indicator is set to zero, as it is also for all yearly observations of the first conflict. Thus we assume that in previous episodes of ethnic civil wars state-led violence against civilians has occurred. As this will not always be the case, our estimate of this interaction effect will be more noisy.

In addition, we include a number of control variables. At the ethnic-group level, we include variables that indicate whether the ethnic group was excluded from central executive power, whether it was downgraded during the previous two years, its relative size to the national population, and the number of previous conflicts for the non-interaction models. At the country level, we include lagged measures of population and GDP per capita, as well as a dummy variable indicating whether there was another conflict ongoing in the same country the previous year. We also include in the appendix further results controlling for the liberal democracy index from V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2019).

Analysis

In this section we test our four hypotheses. We rely on Markov transition models (see Amemiya 1985, 412ff) based on an ordered probit regression,[5] as our dependent variable is an ordinal measure of conflict intensity that can take three values, namely 0 for no conflict, 1 for low intensity conflict and 2 for high intensity conflict. In formal terms the model is the following:

$$y_{t,i}^* = \boldsymbol{x}_{t,i} \times \boldsymbol{y}_{t-1,i}\beta + \epsilon_{t,i} \tag{1}$$

Where $\boldsymbol{x}_i$ is the vectors of covariates listed above, β_i are the regression coefficients, ϵ_i is the error term, and y_i^* is the latent variable assumed to underlie to the observed ordinal outcome $y_{t,i}$. As we wish to assess how our covariates affect the transition from one state to another, we interact these covariates with the lagged observed dependent variable (namely, abusing notation, $y_{t-1,i}$ which enters as a set of dichotomous indicators for each state). $y_{t,i}$ is specified as follows:

$$y_{t,i} = j \iff \alpha_{j-1} < y_{t,i}^* \leq \alpha_j \tag{2}$$

Where $\alpha_0, \ldots, \alpha_J$ define the thresholds. The use of Markov transition models allows us, as specified above, to model how the process changes between these three states, and to gauge the effect of ethnic targeting on the likelihood of any transition in a given moment. Proceeding in this way allows us also to consider ongoing conflicts in their entirety, as we estimate the effects of our independent variables both in peacetime and for the two levels of conflict intensities.[6]

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[5]As we encountered some issues of quasi-complete separation mostly linked to the temporal controls, we employed a Bayesian version of the ordered probit model (see Gelman & Hill 2007). Their proposed estimator assumes weakly informative priors for all parameters that follow a Student t-distribution (see https://cran.mtu.edu/web/packages/arm/arm.pdf, accessed October 4th, 2019).

[6]Commonly used probit and/or logit models of conflict onset are normally estimated while dropping dyad-years of ongoing conflicts, leading to a loss of information.

Table 1 reports the results of this model without any interaction with prior conflict, testing hypotheses 1 and 2, which respectively state that state-orchestrated ethnic targeting makes conflict onset and their intensification once they are ongoing more likely. We find that ethnic targeting by the government has a significantly positive effect during peacetime. In other words, this increases the likelihood of conflict onset, supporting hypothesis 1. When a low-intensity conflict is already ongoing this effect is negative, so that ethnic targeting does not lead to conflict escalation as hypothesized in H2. Quite to the contrary, ethnic targeting during an ongoing low intensity conflict increases the chances for deescalation in partial contradiction to hypothesis 2. For ongoing high-intensity conflicts, however, we again find a positive effect, yet one that is very far from reaching statistical significance.

The control variables exhibit effects consistent with our expectations and previous research. Political exclusion increases the risk of civil war, particularly when the group was downgraded in the previous two years. Group size also shows a positive effect on conflict outbreaks, and so do country-level variables, such as population, GDP per capita, and ongoing conflicts in the same country. For ongoing conflicts, however, some of these effects are reversed.

As the results from non-linear models are generally difficult to interpret we rely on average predictive differences in probabilities to assess the substantive effects. For this we draw 1000 sets of coefficients from the estimated distribution and generate predicted probabilities for each of these 1000 sets under different scenarios (see Gelman & Hill 2007). More specifically, we generate predicted probabilities for six scenarios, namely situations of peace, low and high intensity conflict, and each of these situations either with ethnic targeting or not. All other variables are kept for each observation at their sample values.[7] We then subtracted the average predicted probabilities from respective scenarios to assess the effect of OSV on nine transition probabilities depicted in figure 2.

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[7]The exception to this rule are the peace- and war-years, which were set to values reflective of the presence or absence of a (low/high intensity) conflict.

Table 1: Ethnic targeting and conflict evolution, Bayesian ordered probit

	Peace$_{t-1}$	Δ low$_{t-1}$	Δ high$_{t-1}$
Ethnic targeting$_{t-1}$	0.26**	-0.37**	0.10
	(0.10)	(0.13)	(0.14)
Low intensity conflict$_{t-1}$	0.36**		
	(0.12)		
High intensity conflict$_{t-1}$	1.40***		
	(0.01)		
Status excluded	0.19*	0.16	0.21
	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.24)
Downgraded	0.85***	-0.33	-0.85***
	(0.13)	(0.25)	(0.08)
Previous conflicts	0.20***	-0.31***	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.22)
Log. Population, lag	0.05*	0.06*	0
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.07)
Log. GDPpc, lag	-0.16***	0.14**	0.13
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.10)
Group size	0.56**	0.42*	-0.74***
	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.05)
Ongoing conflict, lag	0.30***	0.63***	1.40***
	(0.08)	(0.14)	(0.01)
AIC		2975.10	
BIC		3741.03	
Log Likelihood		-1386.55	
Deviance		2773.10	
Num. obs.		14522	

Note: $^{+}p < 0.1$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$
Model controls for peaceyears (dummies) and waryears (3 polynomials).

Figure 2: Average predicted differences in probabilities due to governmental ethnic targeting and 95% confidence intervals

Effect of state−led ethnic targeting during peacetime

Remain in peacetime

Transition to low−intensity conflict

Transition to high−intensity conflict

−0.3   −0.2   −0.1   0.0   0.1   0.2   0.3

Change in transition probabilities

Effect of state−led ethnic targeting during low−intensity conflicts

Transition to peace

Remain as low−intensity conflict

Transition to high−intensity conflict

−0.3   −0.2   −0.1   0.0   0.1   0.2   0.3

Change in transition probabilities

Effect of state−led ethnic targeting during high−intensity conflicts

Transition to peace

Transition to low−intensity conflict

Remain as high−intensity conflict

−0.3   −0.2   −0.1   0.0   0.1   0.2   0.3

Change in transition probabilities

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The figure illustrates our substantive findings. First, in agreement with our first hypothesis, we find that when governments engage in targeted OSV against an ethnic group, the likelihood that peace will last decreases (see the top horizontal bar in the top panel), from around 98.7% to 97.8%. However, the effect is arguably small but still in support of our first hypothesis. Regarding hypothesis 2, the findings indicate that state-led violence is linked to conflict continuation but not an increased probability of escalation. The third panel of figure 2 shows that the average predicted probability that a high-intensity conflict remains in that state or reverts back to a low-intensity form increases as a consequence of ethnic targeting, although the corresponding confidence interval fails, just barely, to exclude the value of zero. Correspondingly, if a government engages in ethnic targeting, the probability that a high-intensity conflict transitions to peace decreases. For instance, the probability of a high-intensity conflict remaining in such state is 14.7% when there is no ethnic targeting, but changes to 20.5% in cases with ethnic targeting.

Turning to the conditioning effect of prior war, we estimate the same models including an interaction between the ethnic targeting variable and the prior-conflict binary variable defined in the previous section. Table 2 shows the results. With regard to the effect of ethnic targeting during peacetime, we find results coherent with hypothesis 3. The effect is larger and statistically significant when there is no prior history of conflict, but is smaller in subsequent conflict cycles. In this case, these differences are also statistically significant and thus offer clear evidence in support of hypothesis 3. During low-intensity conflicts, the effect of state targeting is relatively close to zero and not statistically significant, regardless of whether it is the first conflict or not. During high-intensity conflicts, however, state targeting is related to conflict continuation, particularly during the first conflict. Again, and partially supporting hypothesis 4, it does suggest that state-led violence is related to the continuation of high-intensity conflicts.

We use the same simulation method to show the average predicted probabilities. Figure 3 shows the same nine transition scenarios for groups that are during the first conflict cycle,

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Table 2: Ethnic targeting and prior civil wars, Bayesian ordered probit

	Peace$_{t-1}$	Δ low$_{t-1}$	Δ high$_{t-1}$
Ethnic targeting$_{t-1}$	0.86***	-1.06***	-0.41*
	(0.13)	(0.16)	(0.18)
Prior conflict	0.48***	-0.74***	-0.01
	(0.09)	(0.14)	(0.22)
Targeting $\times$ Prior conflict	-0.93***	1.05***	0.43***
	(0.17)	(0.13)	(0.07)
Low intensity conflict$_{t-1}$	0.39**		
	(0.12)		
High intensity conflict$_{t-1}$	1.45***		
	(0.02)		
Status excluded	0.20*	0.13	0.21
	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.24)
Downgraded	0.85***	-0.32	-0.79***
	(0.13)	(0.25)	(0.08)
Log. Population, lag	0.05*	0.08**	0.02
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.07)
Log. GDPpc, lag	-0.13***	0.12*	0.12
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.10)
Group size	0.53**	0.52**	-0.74***
	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.06)
Ongoing conflict, lag	0.32***	0.60***	1.45***
	(0.08)	(0.14)	(0.02)
AIC		2983.54	
BIC		3772.21	
Log Likelihood		-1387.77	
Deviance		2775.54	
Num. obs.		14522	

Note: $^{+}p < 0.1$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$
Model controls for peaceyears (dummies) and waryears (3 polynomials).

while figure 4 does so for groups that are in second or subsequent conflict cycles. In line with hypothesis 3, we can see that the effect of ethnic targeting before a war breaks out is positive and significant for first-conflict groups, but it disappears once the first conflict has broken out. Similarly, partly supporting hypothesis 4, the conflict-perpetuating effect of ethnic targeting is larger and reaches statistical significance for groups that have not yet experienced repeated conflicts, but fails to do so for the remaining observations. Conversely, the probability that a high-intensity conflict transitions to peace in these cases is smaller if there was recent ethnic targeting. In terms of actual probabilities, we observe, for instance, that in the case of groups with a previous conflict history the probability of a transition from peace to low-intensity conflict changes from 2.3% to 2.1% when there is ethnic targeting. In the case of groups without such history, the probability rises from 0.9% to 4.6%. In terms of causal interpretation, however, this result could indicate either that state violence is indeed increasing the likelihood of conflict continuation, or that state violence is more likely to take place in protracted conflicts that have already become more difficult to resolve. We cannot provide clear evidence in favor of either of these options.

In this study we prioritize external validity, assessing correlations between state violence against ethnic groups and subsequent conflict intensity in a broad sample. Because of this, our capacity to identify causal effects and to perform more specific analyses testing each mechanism is limited. For instance, it is difficult to assess to what extent the use of ethnic violence by the state is aimed at those groups that already had a higher probability of fighting against the government. Similarly, further research could expand these analyses and account for other forms of low-scale violence or alternative strategies that precede or happen simultaneously to conflict. Regarding mechanism testing, it is also difficult to get comparable data with such a broad coverage. Although we leave this for further research or more specific analyses, we include in the appendix preliminary evidence that supports our argument. In particular, we show in table A7 and figures A1 and A2 that the conflict-intensifying effect of state violence is mainly relevant for larger ethnic groups. Presumably, these have a better

Figure 3: Average predicted differences in probabilities due to governmental ethnic targeting and 95% confidence intervals, during the first conflict cycle

Effect of state–led ethnic targeting during peacetime (first conflict cycle)

Remain in peacetime

Transition to low–intensity conflict

Transition to high–intensity conflict

−0.3   −0.2   −0.1   0.0   0.1   0.2   0.3

Change in transition probabilities

Effect of state–led ethnic targeting during low–intensity conflicts (first conflict cycle)

Transition to peace

Remain as low–intensity conflict

Transition to high–intensity conflict

−0.3   −0.2   −0.1   0.0   0.1   0.2   0.3

Change in transition probabilities

Effect of state–led ethnic targeting during high–intensity conflicts (first conflict cycle)

Transition to peace

Transition to low–intensity conflict

Remain as high–intensity conflict

−0.3   −0.2   −0.1   0.0   0.1   0.2   0.3

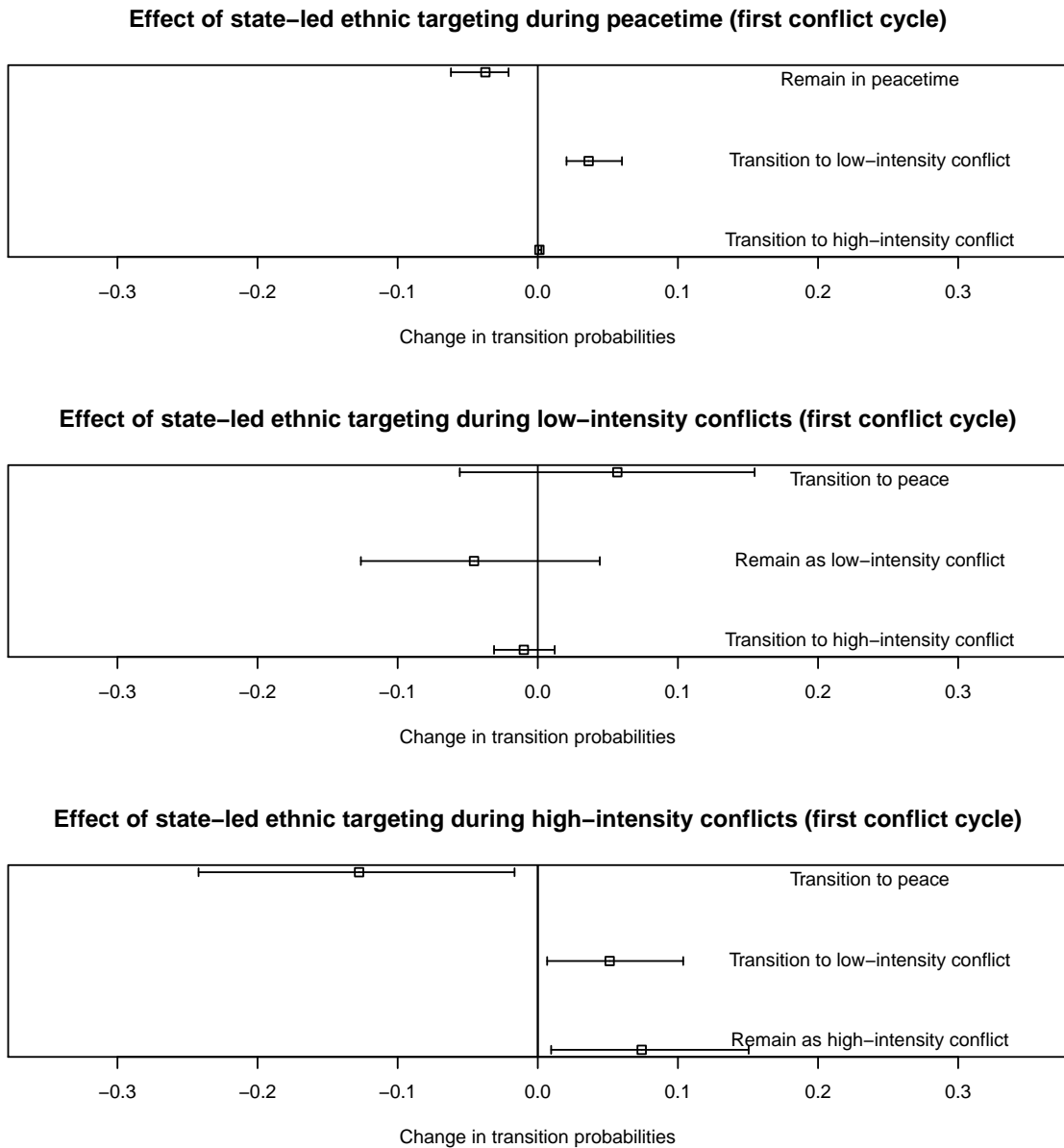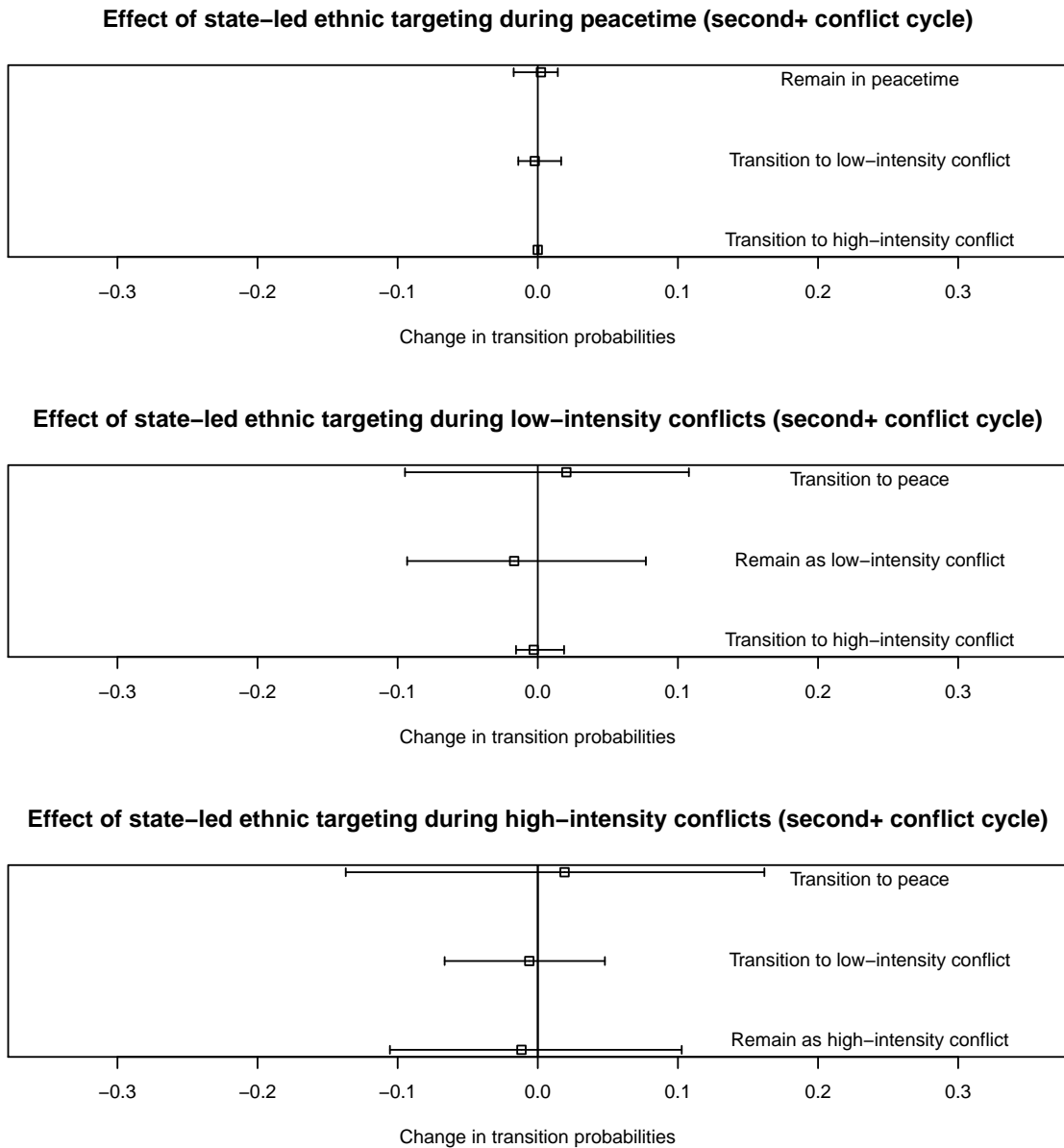Change in transition probabilities

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Figure 4: Average predicted differences in probabilities due to governmental ethnic targeting and 95% confidence intervals, during the second or subsequent conflict cycles

Effect of state−led ethnic targeting during peacetime (second+ conflict cycle)

Change in transition probabilities

Effect of state−led ethnic targeting during low−intensity conflicts (second+ conflict cycle)

Change in transition probabilities

Effect of state−led ethnic targeting during high−intensity conflicts (second+ conflict cycle)

Change in transition probabilities

capacity to organize against state violence and for which the recruitment-based mechanism is more likely to take place.

Conclusion and outlook

What effect does state violence against civilians have on the onset and conflict intensity of ethnic civil war? Despite a large body of literature dedicated to the causes and effects of civilian victimization, this question has so far remained relatively understudied. In this paper we have argued that state-led targeting of particular ethnic groups increases the risk of armed conflict onset and that it blocks conflict deescalation. We have also proposed that these effects should be particularly strong for groups that are fighting their first conflict against the government.

We have tested our hypotheses based on a novel dataset that captures the ethnic identity of victims of one-sided state violence, as well as targeting patterns, around the globe. Our findings suggest that state violence against the members of particular ethnic groups indeed increases the risk of ethnic civil war between the perpetrating governments and the targeted groups, particularly when armed conflict has not yet taken place between that group and the government. In cases of repeated civil wars, however, the relationship between ethnic targeting and conflict outbreak becomes much weaker.

While we find no evidence for a positive of state violence on the probability that ongoing conflicts escalate in intensity, we find that ethnic targeting during high-intensity conflicts is related to a higher probability that the conflict remains in such a state, thus making any transition to peace less likely. Again, this effect is particularly strong during first-time conflicts, and is reduced in the case of repeated conflicts. In contrast, during low-intensity conflicts, we do not find clear effects of state targeting, regardless of prior war history.

While our study offers novel insights, our findings leave numerous questions for future research. In particular, the broad empirical scope current of our study limits the possibilities

of confronting inferential threats. Prioritizing external validity, our analysis does not allow us to conclusively identify causal effects, as several endogeneity concerns remain unaddressed. While the comprehensiveness of our data coverage allows us to study patterns of violence and conflict escalation on a global scale, it may be possible to improve internal validity by analyzing a more selective sample of cases in more detail.

Furthermore, while we postulated a sequence of causal mechanisms, the aggregate analysis does not allow us to evaluate the effects of potentially competing mechanisms or the potential heterogeneity of these effects. For example, previous research has shown that state-orchestrated collective targeting of particular groups can also lead to the very counterintuitive effect of civilian mobilization *against* insurgent groups (Schubiger 2013b), an effect that is not necessarily at odds with the mechanisms that we propose above. Importantly, such micro-level dynamics might be limited to very particular conditions, and interact with the mechanisms outlined in this paper in complex ways, which makes it difficult to detect their operation in a global sample. Similarly, state violence is likely to be effective in preventing conflict and in suppressing and defeating insurgencies under particular circumstances as well (Downes 2007; Merom 2003). Indeed, cases such as Sri Lanka suggest that extreme levels of state violence against civilians can yield conflict-dampening, or even conflict-terminating, effects. Finally, our analysis so far excludes insurgent violence, which likely interacts with state violence in consequential ways.

While future research will have to explore these heterogeneous effects of state violence, our new data and analysis offer stronger and more systematic evidence in favor of a link between state repression and civil conflict than previous research has been able to produce. The alignment of data on one-sided violence and conflict helps us analyze crucial interactions between two of the most important types of political violence that are typically studied separately. Based on our current findings, and in addition to obvious ethical concerns, governments around the world will have to think twice before they resort to repressive tactics that target civilians.

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