

The Radicalization of Insurgents in Civil Wars: Exploring the Microfoundations of Civilian Targeting

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Abstract: Although the civil war literature is replete with theories purporting to explain why rebel groups target civilians, we still have a limited understanding of the motives, experiences, and trajectories of those who actually enact such violence on the ground – that is, rank-and-file combatants. Responding to this gap, this article aggregates findings from a broad range of literatures and delineates a variety of mechanisms that may motivate individual participation in civilian targeting. It thus highlights how a microfoundational approach focused on the radicalization trajectories of low-ranking rebel combatants can help to recast and enhance our understanding of wartime violence against civilians.

Keywords: civil war, radicalization, civilian targeting, combatants, insurgents, violence

Introduction

One of the most puzzling features of rebel groups waging civil wars is that the combatants that make up their ranks, occasionally reach a point at which they come to kill unarmed civilians. Yet, accumulating evidence indicates that most combatants are not ‘more predisposed to violence than the general population’¹ and that rebel groups are generally ‘comprised of ordinary people, not sociopaths’.² Even more perplexing is the fact that violence in civil wars is often very internecine and proximate, as combatants regularly find themselves ‘face-to-face with their victims, literally getting blood on their hands and registering pleas for mercy

1 Amelia Hoover Green, ‘Armed Group Institutions and Combatant Socialization: Evidence from El Salvador’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.5 (2017), 687–700 (p. 690).

2 Dara Kay Cohen, *Rape During Civil Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 12; see also Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1988); Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society, Revised Edition* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009); Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Rebecca Littman and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, ‘The Cycle of Violence: Understanding Individual Participation in Collective Violence’, *Political Psychology*, 36.S1 (2015), 79–99.



and screams of pain'.³ How, then, do rebel combatants overcome their basic aversion toward violence and end up targeting civilians? How do they reach the point at which they sidestep the cognitive barriers, social norms, and legal standards prohibiting deliberate violence against civilians?

Although the civil war literature is replete with theories purporting to explain why rebel groups target noncombatants, existing research provides surprisingly little in the way of theoretical explanations about how individual combatants come to participate in such violence. To be sure, scholars interested in civil wars have identified a host of determinants to account for the use of violence against civilians by insurgent organizations.⁴ While this literature is vast, some of the key drivers emphasized in these studies include the greed of rebel groups;⁵ the interplay between resource endowments and membership makeup;⁶ the presence of pre-existing political cleavages;⁷ the distribution of territorial control;⁸ the relative capability of belligerents;⁹ the effect of battlefield losses;¹⁰ the influence of armed groups' domestic and international constituencies;¹¹ and the impact of organizational structures¹² and socialization dynamics.¹³

When analyzing patterns of civilian victimization, however, most of these studies use aggregate actors such as "insurgents" or "rebel groups" as their main units-of-analysis and tend to focus primarily

- 3 Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State: Understanding Atrocity in the Sierra Leone Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 74.
- 4 For a review, see Laia Balcells and Jessica A. Stanton, 'Violence Against Civilians During Armed Conflict: Moving Beyond the Macro- and Micro-Level Divide', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24.2 (2021), 1-25.
- 5 Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56.4 (2004), 563-95.
- 6 Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 7 Laia Balcells, *Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence During Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 8 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 9 Reed M. Wood, 'Rebel Capability and Strategic Violence against Civilians', *Journal of Peace Research*, 47.5 (2010), 601-14.
- 10 Lisa Hultman, 'Battle Losses and Rebel Violence: Raising the Costs for Fighting', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19.2 (2007), 205-22.
- 11 Jessica A. Stanton, *Violence and Restraint in Civil War: Civilian Targeting in the Shadow of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 12 Amelia Hoover Green, *The Commander's Dilemma: Violence and Restraint in Wartime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Weinstein.
- 13 Dara Kay Cohen, 'The Ties That Bind: How Armed Groups Use Violence to Socialize Fighters', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.5 (2017), 701-14.

on the higher echelons of these organizations and on the strategic calculations of the leadership.¹⁴ Although rank-and-file combatants are those who bear the practical and psychological brunt of civilian targeting, existing accounts indeed tend to gloss over the distinctive motives and experiences of these individuals and remain, for the most part, inattentive to the micro-level processes through which they overcome the various barriers proscribing civilian targeting.

This is especially puzzling considering that low-ranking combatants are not ‘mere passive conduits of orders from above’ but intentional agents who often retain considerable latitude as to how to behave on the battlefield.¹⁵ By neglecting to analyze the lived experiences of those who actually carry out violence on the ground, the civil war literature has thus yet to satisfactorily theorize the processes and mechanisms through which individual combatants adopt radical wartime behaviors. As Collins notes, this is a problematic omission from a theoretical standpoint:

In the particular area of violence research, perhaps more than any other topic, we have [...] assumed that violence is easy for individuals to carry out, so we skip the micro level as unproblematic and turn to conditions in the meso background or the macro organization or overarching culture. This turns out to be a pragmatic mistake. Violence is not easy, and the key stumbling blocks and turning points are at the micro level.¹⁶

It appears, therefore, that one of the main reasons why civilian targeting sometimes seems so impervious to explanation is ‘because we know so little about the flesh, personhood and character of those who enact [this phenomenon]’.¹⁷

While one might have expected to find answers to these puzzles in the field of radicalization studies, this body of work offers limited guidance to understand how rebel combatants are brought to kill civilians during intrastate conflicts. This is mainly because the scholarship on radicalization has predominantly been focused on terrorism – especially

¹⁴ For a review of strategic explanations of civilian targeting, see Benjamin A. Valentino, ‘Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17.1 (2014), 89–103.

¹⁵ Alec Worsnop, ‘Who Can Keep the Peace? Insurgent Organizational Control of Collective Violence’, *Security Studies*, 26.3 (2017), 482–516 (p. 483); see also Collins, p. 101; Weinstein, pp. 130–32.

¹⁶ Collins, p. 34.

¹⁷ Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘The Departed Militant: A Portrait of Joy, Violence and Political Evil’, *Security Dialogue*, 51.6 (2020), p. 5. See also, Marc-Olivier Cantin, ‘Pathways to Violence in Civil Wars: Combatant Socialization and the Drivers of Participation in Civilian Targeting’, *International Studies Review*, 0.0. (2021) pp.1–29.

‘homegrown’ terrorism – and has largely neglected to investigate other forms of political violence that may also be based on processes of prior radicalization. The dominion that terrorism studies exert over this field of study has thus led scholars to ‘treat the assorted steps towards radicalization as characteristic only of the movement towards extremist violence by terrorists’.¹⁸ Yet, as I argue below, the concept of radicalization should not remain the preserve of terrorism scholars, as it holds important heuristic value that can also be marshaled to make sense of individual participation in wartime civilian targeting. Existing models of radicalization, however, have only limited analytical value to understand wartime violence, as most are designed to explain how individuals belonging to ‘autonomous homegrown groups’ – with only loose connections to ‘established foreign [...] organizations’ – come to carry out attacks against Western countries in times of peace.¹⁹ Accordingly, these models provide limited guidance to elucidate how insurgents belonging to formalized armed organizations come to adopt radical behaviors in the midst of war.

The above suggests, therefore, that the radicalization of insurgent combatants in civil wars remains an area of inquiry that has not been satisfactorily charted. Responding to this gap, this article examines the determinants that can drive insurgents to adopt radical behaviors during intrastate conflicts. Drawing from a broad range of literatures – including the scholarship on mass atrocities, civil wars, and terrorism, as well as works in military sociology and psychology – the article illustrates how a mechanism-centered approach revolving around the radicalization trajectory of rank-and-file combatants can offer important insights on the dynamics of wartime civilian targeting. Specifically, I delineate a variety of ecological (macro), sociological (meso), and psychological (micro) mechanisms that may motivate individual participation in such violence. Although these mechanisms are activated at different analytical levels, I argue that they can exert potent radicalizing effects on individual combatants by shaping their cognitive dispositions and behavioral responses. When feeding into one another, these mechanisms can thus drive combatants to transition

18 Kevin D. Haggerty and Sandra M. Bucerius, ‘Radicalization as Martialization: Towards a Better Appreciation for the Progression to Violence’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32.4 (2020), 768–88 (p. 769). The authors note, for instance, that ‘questions about the comparability between soldiers and terrorists have barely entered into discussions of [...] radicalization processes’.

19 Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, ‘The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23.4 (2011), 602–22 (pp. 603; 613).

from the nonviolent dispositions they displayed in the prewar period to the radical behaviors they come to adopt in the midst of war.

This article contributes to the literature by allowing us to recast and enhance our understanding of key works on civil war violence, that tend to gloss over the motives and experiences of rank-and-file combatants. In particular, it illustrates the benefits that scholars in this field could reap by mobilizing a microfoundational approach – that is ‘an analytic strategy where one explains outcomes at the aggregate level via dynamics at a lower level.’²⁰ To be sure, I do not contend that recent studies on violence against civilians ‘lack microfoundations’, but rather that they generally ‘fail to specify what they are.’²¹ A microfoundational approach thus forces scholars to be more explicit about the assumptions they hold regarding perpetrators, to specify the causal mechanisms through which low-ranking combatants come to participate in violence, and to delineate more clearly the interactions between macro-level or meso-level conditions and micro-level behaviors.²²

This approach could thus allow us to achieve a more granular understanding of the distinctive ways through which combatants’ behaviors ‘aggregate and generate macro-level dynamics and patterns.’²³ The aim of this paper, therefore, is not to offer an alternative to existing perspectives but to establish them on firmer theoretical grounds by providing a preliminary exploration of the individual experiences, motives, and trajectories that are often left unaddressed in this literature, thereby laying the groundwork for further research.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section specifies scope conditions and defines insurgent radicalization. Reaching across disciplinary boundaries, the second section then describes a host of mechanisms that may motivate individual participation in civilian targeting. Although I leave systematic empirical testing for further research, I illustrate each mechanism with examples gleaned from the civil war literature and insurgent testimonies. In the concluding section, I discuss why investigating the radicalization of insurgents is important, both normatively and substantively, for scholars and policy-makers concerned with alleviating the human costs of civil wars.

20 Joshua D. Kertzer, ‘Microfoundations in International Relations’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 34.1 (2017), 81–97 (p. 83).

21 Kertzer, p. 86.

22 For the seminal work promoting this sort of approach, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, ‘The Ontology of “Political Violence”: Action and Identity in Civil Wars’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 1.3 (2003), 475–94.

23 Balcells, p. 175.

Defining Insurgent Radicalization

Scope Conditions

Although I draw inspiration from the literature on interstate conflicts, I restrict my attention to *civil wars*, defined as armed conflicts waged ‘within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties that are subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities’.²⁴ I focus exclusively on civil wars in order to explore the specific processes through which combatants are brought to engage in the type of internecine and proximate violence that is characteristic of these wars.²⁵ Indeed, the use of violence in civil wars is particularly puzzling because such violence is fundamentally ‘transgressive [and] ‘fratricidal’ [in] nature’,²⁶ as it is carried out ‘within a common political unit’ in ways that ‘at the same time absolutely affirm and absolutely deny this common unit’.²⁷ Evidently, one should exercise caution when treating civil wars as an homogenous analytical category, as such wars display significant variation on a host of conflict-level and national-level dimensions.²⁸ Yet, as detailed below, I argue that a number of key mechanisms are likely to affect combatant behavior across a broad range of contexts.

Moreover, it should be noted that, although it is plausible that certain overlapping mechanisms may drive both governmental soldiers and rebel combatants to kill civilians, I focus strictly on the latter’s trajectory toward violence. This is mainly because the aim of this article is to shed light on the distinctive drivers of violent behavior within the specific organizational context in which these combatants operate – a context that is typically characterized by clandestinity and a lack of state sanction with regard to the use of military force.²⁹ Rebel combatants, furthermore, are often subjected to distinctive socialization experiences, evolve in specific operational environments, and belong to groups with

24 Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, p. 17.

25 Ibid.

26 Stathis N. Kalyvas, ‘The Landscape of Political Violence’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, ed. by Chenoweth Erica and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 11–33 (p. 16).

27 Carl Schmitt, quoted in David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), p. 12.

28 Nicholas Sambanis, ‘What Is Civil War?: Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48.6 (2004), 814–58.

29 See e.g. Klaus Schlichte and Ulrich Schneckener, ‘Armed Groups and the Politics of Legitimacy’, *Civil Wars*, 17.4 (2015), 409–24.

particular types of organizational structures and membership profiles, relative to governmental forces.³⁰ As detailed below, I maintain that all of these factors considerably shape the manner in which rebel combatants come to perpetrate violence against civilians, thereby justifying an investigation focused specifically on this particular category of actors. In the broader field of perpetrator studies, governmental and state-backed actors have received considerably more attention than non-state actors.³¹ I use the terms ‘insurgents’ and ‘rebels’ interchangeably to refer to the combatants of non-state armed groups who directly participate in a military conflict against an internationally recognized government.³² To receive this label, individuals must thus bear arms, have active membership in a rebel group, and direct involvement in war-making. For the sake of parsimony, I exclude other types of actors that are often active in civil war settings – e.g. paramilitaries, warlords, local self-defense forces, mercenaries, etc. – although here as well it is likely that a certain degree of overlap may exist in terms of mechanisms driving violent behaviors.³³

Definition

I define radicalization in civil wars as the *processes through which combatants are brought to engage in direct, lethal violence against civilians*. I employ *processes* in the plural to account for the fact that insurgent radicalization is most likely characterized by equifinality – that is, multiple different pathways leading to the similar radical outcome.³⁴ I use the terms ‘process’ and ‘trajectory’ interchangeably to refer to the overall series of steps that, over time, bring combatants from nonviolence to violence, and ‘mechanisms’ to denote the intervening factors that inch combatants along such trajectory.

30 One should not treat rebel groups as a homogenous category either, insofar as they vary considerably on several dimensions, including their links to civilian population, their propensity to engage in violence, the national context in which they emerge, the type of resources available to them, and so on.

31 Alette Smeulers, ‘Historical Overview of Perpetrator Studies’, in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn, and Barbora Holá (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 11–28.

32 Seth Lazar, ‘Risky Killing and the Ethics of War’, *Ethics*, 126.1 (2015), 91–117 (p. 2).

33 On the differences between rebel and militia violence, for instance, see Ulrich Schneckener, ‘Militias and the Politics of Legitimacy’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28.4–5 (2017), 799–816.

34 Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA, 2005), p. 63.

Importantly, moreover, I follow recent developments in the study of radicalization and frame the definition primarily in terms of *behavioral* outcomes. Indeed, radicalization scholars have long recognized that most people who come to develop radical beliefs never act upon these views, and that those who do engage in violence often display little ideological commitment to radical worldviews.³⁵ As such, I argue that radicalization processes should be defined by the actions that they generate – rather than by cognitive shifts – because this approach allows for the possibility that radical behaviors may be adopted either *with* or *without* underlying radical beliefs. In contrast, depicting cognitive radicalization as a necessary condition for behavioral radicalization, excludes a host of theoretically relevant cases in which perpetrators engage in radical wartime actions without being driven by radical views.³⁶

To be sure, in some cases, the adoption of radical behaviors is indeed accompanied by a process of changing norms, views, and ideas regarding the legitimacy of violence, about when, how, and against whom violence may be used. The empirical record reveals, however, that many combatants come to engage in brutal wartime behaviors without experiencing such cognitive shift. I argue that these cases – that is, combatants killing civilians without developing radicalized attitudes – should be considered as manifestations of radicalization as well, as the action repertoire of these combatants was fundamentally transformed through various processes and mechanisms, which also deserve to be theorized. Defining radicalization in terms of violent outcomes thus offers important theoretical advantages, as it opens up the possibility that violence may be produced through different processes, some of which involve radical beliefs and some of which don't.

In that regard, I conceptualize insurgent radicalization as a continuum of behavioral engagement on which combatants progress. On this continuum, individuals begin at an ideal-typical peacetime

35 See e.g. Peter Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalization', *International Affairs*, 89.4 (2013), 873–93; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model', *American Psychologist*, 72.3 (2017), 205–16; James Khalil, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, 'The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 0.0 (2019), 1–26.

36 It is plausible that the relationship between beliefs and behaviors may be highly endogenous, with complex feedback loops linking them. As McDoom notes, radicalization may indeed be both an antecedent to violence and a consequence of it. In other words, it may be that combatants change their views to cognitively accommodate their behaviors, thereby legitimizing their violence by radicalizing their views. see Omar Shahabudin McDoom, 'Radicalization as Cause and Consequence of Violence in Genocides and Mass Killings', *Violence: An International Journal*, 1.1 (2020), 123–43; Neumann.

period, during which they exhibit an aversion to violence as well as a general awareness regarding the norm of civilian immunity. As previously discussed, this assumption about the nonviolent dispositions of would-be combatants rests on a growing number of studies that have shown that most new recruits display ‘no [...] initial inclination toward violence’.³⁷ As Mitton notes, however, the use of violence in civil wars is ‘often related – in the minds of combatants at least – to prewar inequalities, perceived injustices and humiliations’, or to peacetime ‘socio-political and economic conditions’.³⁸ As such, it appears that insurgent radicalization must be theorized by attending to prewar dynamics in order to fully understand the trajectory of combatants toward wartime violence. Crucially, this also means that we need to analytically separate processes of participation in civil wars (i.e. joining an armed group) from those leading to the perpetration of violence against civilians, as these processes might unfold at very different paces and occur for much different reasons.³⁹

For a number of possible reasons, which have been documented in the literature on participation in civil wars, individuals then join a rebel group.⁴⁰ Upon becoming active combatants, individuals are thus guided by a distinctive set of pre-existing attitudinal dispositions and behavioral tendencies, but these begin to be refashioned by their new role as insurgents, by the military organization to which they now belong, and by the socialization experiences to which they are subjected. As the war unfolds, some combatants will move across the continuum through a number of intervening steps, progressing from one stage to the next under the impulse of various radicalization mechanisms. Over time, the interactions between these mechanisms create a self-reinforcing thrust, which gradually drives some combatants to overcome their

37 Amelia Hoover Green, ‘Armed Group Institutions and Combatant Socialization: Evidence from El Salvador’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.5 (2017), 687–700 (p. 690).

38 Mitton, p. 120.

39 As such, this article builds on – but seeks to go beyond – the literature on combatant mobilization and recruitment, as the latter focuses mainly on the intrinsic and extrinsic factors leading individuals to join armed groups and to participate in regular military operations, but does little to elucidate how combatants come to perpetrate more radical forms of violence. See e.g. Bruce Newsome, ‘The Myth of Intrinsic Combat Motivation’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 26.4 (2003), 24–46; Rune Henriksen, ‘Warriors in Combat – What Makes People Actively Fight in Combat?’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30.2 (2007), 187–223; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, ‘Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 52.2 (2008), 436–55.

40 See e.g. Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, ‘How “Free” Is Free Riding in Civil Wars?: Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem’, *World Politics*, 59.2 (2007), 177–216; Humphreys and Weinstein.

aversion toward violence and to ultimately kill civilians.⁴¹ As detailed below, I argue that understanding why some combatants cross the whole continuum while others do not, requires a microfoundational assessment of the individual effects that these mechanisms exert on a given combatant.⁴²

Therefore, once they reach the end of the continuum, radicalized combatants display an extremity of behaviors that is expressed through the use of direct, lethal violence against civilians. In other words, I define the end stage of radicalization processes as the face-to-face killing of civilians by an insurgent combatant.⁴³ Although other forms of abusive behaviors such as sexual violence may also be considered as manifestations of radicalization, I restrict the analytical focus of this article to homicidal violence because 'there is a general consensus that homicide crosses a line: it 'is an irreversible, direct, immediate, and unambiguous method of annihilation' (Straus 2000, 7); in this sense, death is 'the absolute violence'.⁴⁴ I consider homicidal violence against civilians, therefore, as a sufficient threshold to speak of radicalization, insofar as it clearly violates the 'normative and legal injunctions against targeting noncombatants⁴⁵ and arguably represents a more transgressive behavior than a 'legitimate, sanctioned combat kill' of a military actor.⁴⁶

Evidently, like all delineations of complex sociopolitical phenomena, this definition fails to capture all the subtleties involved in such a multi-

41 Evidently, insurgent radicalization most likely does not occur as a sudden shift, but as a relatively lengthy process. As Neumann aptly puts it, "individuals [do not] turn into extremists overnight", but radicalize through a "progression which plays out over a period of time". Neumann, p. 874. Although the duration of this process is difficult to assess and is likely to vary significantly across radicalizing individuals, it is clear that most combatants will have to overcome imposing cognitive barriers and social norms before engaging in civilian targeting – a process that can span several weeks, months or even years in some cases.

42 An important caveat here is that this movement across the continuum may not necessarily be linear, as it is plausible that radicalization processes can speed up, slow down, reverse, and so on. It is thus also possible that combatants may deradicalize. Deradicalization processes, however, fall outside the scope of this article.

43 Following Eck and Hultman, I exclude casualties resulting "inadvertently from conflicts, for example, civilians caught in crossfire" – that is, so-called collateral damage – as well as "deaths caused indirectly by an ongoing conflict, mainly due to disease or other health problems", as these events can seldom be traced to specific perpetrators. As such, they fall outside the scope of this article. Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman, 'One-Sided Violence Against Civilians in War: Insights from New Fatality Data', *Journal of Peace Research*, 44.2 (2007), 233–46 (p. 235).

44 In Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, p. 20. Relatedly, scholars of sexual violence have also noted that homicide is a distinct form of violence and that "rape and lethal violence require different theoretical explanations". Cohen 2016, p. 83.

45 Alexander B. Downes, 'Desperate Times, Desperate Measures: The Causes of Civilian Victimization in War', *International Security*, 30.4 (2006), 152–95 (p. 152).

46 Grossman, p. 174.

faceted process. Yet, despite their shortcomings, these definitional guidelines may serve as a useful basis for reflection and as a conceptual foundation upon which to theorize insurgent radicalization – a task to which I now turn.

Mechanisms of Insurgent Radicalization

This section aggregates findings from a broad range of literatures in order to delineate a variety of *ecological*, *sociological*, and *psychological* mechanisms, which may fuel processes of insurgent radicalization. Although these mechanisms are activated at different analytical levels (i.e. macro, meso, and micro), I argue that they can exert potent radicalizing effects on individual combatants by shaping their cognitive dispositions and behavioral responses.

Importantly, I argue that, over time, the interactions between these three sets of mechanisms may create a self-reinforcing thrust that can drive combatants across the radicalization continuum described above and motivate individual participation in civilian targeting. As such, throughout the article, I repeatedly emphasize the multifarious and complex ways in which these mechanisms overlap and interact. Table 1 outlines the seven mechanisms – as well as their respective levels and types – that will be discussed below. I derive these mechanisms on the basis of an inductive reading of micro-level case studies of civil wars and a form of conceptual importation from a broad range of relevant fields of study. In each case, I illustrate how these mechanisms can drive combatants toward extremes by drawing on various examples from recent civil wars and by providing combatant testimonies whenever possible.

1. Macro-Level Mechanisms

As oft-noted in the literature on intrastate conflicts, the environment in which civil wars are waged is characterized by the same security dilemmas and self-help imperatives as those found in the anarchic international system.⁴⁷ In other words, intrastate conflicts generally

⁴⁷ Barry R. Posen, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival*, 35.1 (1993), 27–47; Barbara F. Walter, 'The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement', *International Organization*, 51.3 (1997), 335–64; Rui J. P. De Figueiredo and Barry Weingast, 'The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict', in *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, ed. by Barbara F. Walter and Jack Snyder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 261–302.

Table 1 Mechanisms of Insurgent Radicalization

Level	Type	Mechanism
Macro (civil war setting)	Ecological	i. Pathological Adaptation ii. Uncertainty Management
Meso (armed group)	Sociological	iii. Group Polarization iv. Agency Abdication v. Violence Engineering
Micro (individual)	Psychological	vi. Dissonance Reduction vii. Emotional Escalation

unfold in an ecosystem in which violence, insecurity, and uncertainty are ubiquitous. I argue that these structural conditions create potent ecological pressures that may drive combatants to adopt radical behaviors in order to cope with these perilous wartime circumstances. On the one hand, the chronic insecurity and widespread violence that characterize civil war settings can lead combatants to engage in *pathological adaptation*, a form of acclimation that may generate violent behavioral responses. On the other hand, the pervasive uncertainty to which combatants are confronted creates strong incentives for them to adopt radical strategies of *uncertainty management*. Evidently, civil war settings – or ‘ecologies’ – vary considerably on a number of national-level dimensions.⁴⁸ Yet, I maintain that, when experienced directly and protractedly by combatants, these ecological pressures can exert powerful radicalizing influences.

48 See e.g. Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 321.

1.1 Pathological Adaptation

In this section, I contend that protracted exposure to violence and sustained feelings of insecurity can drive combatants to adopt increasingly radical behaviors as a coping mechanism – a reaction which, following Ng-Mak et al., I refer to as *pathological adaptation*.⁴⁹ A variety of literatures from the fields of criminology and psychology are relevant to understand how these ecological pressures might engage combatants on a radicalizing trajectory. Indeed, a wide range of studies conducted in diverse settings have shown that ‘chronic, environmentally pervasive violence’ and persistent perceptions of feeling unsafe often lead individuals to become desensitized to threats, prone to take risks, and inclined to behave violently.⁵⁰

Schwab-Stone et al., for instance, found that sustained exposure to violence and chronic lack of safety ‘was associated with greater willingness to use physical aggression [and] diminished perception of risk’ among urban youths living in violent neighborhoods.⁵¹ Another line of research found that subjects ‘exposed to high levels of community violence experience an emotional numbing or cognitive desensitization to this violence [...]. However, while apparently adaptive in terms of lowering psychological distress, the numbing and desensitization are, at the same time, behaviorally maladaptive in that they tend to promote violent behavior’.⁵² Wilkinson and Carr similarly suggest that prolonged exposure to violence ‘is a major source of strain or stress on individuals, which is linked to future involvement in violent behavior’.⁵³

The main intervening variables ‘between exposure to violence and its [...] behavioral outcomes’, according to these authors, is moral disengagement and a denial of self-responsibility – two variables which, as I argue below, also constitute central drivers of radicalization at the meso level.⁵⁴ Emotional dispositions seem to be important here as well, as ‘a lack of security is accompanied by frustration, fear,

49 Daisy S. Ng-Mak and others, ‘Pathologic Adaptation to Community Violence Among Inner-City Youth,’ *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 74.2 (2004): 196–208.

50 Raymond P. Lorion and William Saltzman, ‘Children’s Exposure to Community Violence: Following a Path from Concern to Research to Action,’ *Psychiatry*, 56.1 (1993), 55–65 (p. 56).

51 Mary E. Schwab-Stone et al., ‘No Safe Haven: A Study of Violence Exposure in an Urban Community,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 34.10 (1995): 1350.

52 Ng-Mak and others, p. 196.

53 Deanna L. Wilkinson and Patrick J. Carr, ‘Violent Youths’ Responses to High Levels of Exposure to Community Violence: What Violent Events Reveal about Youth Violence,’ *Journal of Community Psychology*, 36.8 (2008): 1029.

54 Ibid.

and dissatisfaction and may lead to the most extreme behaviors'.⁵⁵ In behavioral psychology, these tendencies are referred to as 'pathological adaptation', that is a coping mechanism that 'serve to perpetuate its very cause'.⁵⁶ In other words, people evolving in highly insecure and violent environments often adapt to these conditions by adopting violent behaviors themselves, thereby exacerbating the very insecurity to which they sought to acclimate.

Being rather commonplace in civil war settings, these sorts of ecological pressures might therefore generate important radicalizing effects at the individual level, both cognitively and behaviorally.⁵⁷ Cognitively, these conditions of pervasive insecurity may promote moral disengagement and psychological numbing, thereby lowering combatants' individual thresholds of acceptability for violence. Behaviorally, they may incentivize combatants to adopt the sorts of aggressive behaviors described above as a coping strategy. Importantly, by engaging in this pathological adaptation, combatants may themselves contribute to the surrounding insecurity and increase the appeal of radical behaviors for other combatants, thus fueling self-reinforcing spirals of increasingly violent adaptations.

Jok and Hutchinson, for instance, identified a 'basic need for self-preservation' as one of the central drivers of violent behaviors in the Second Sudanese Civil War.⁵⁸ In the wake of the Rwandan Civil War, many perpetrators of violence similarly explained their involvement by invoking 'situational exigencies'. As Fujii puts it: 'A war was waging. Soldiers were shooting. People were fleeing. Some were getting shot and raped'. She adds that, 'given these circumstances, [those who targeted civilians] did so under powerful external pressures'.⁵⁹ Writing about Rwanda as well, Straus likewise claims that '[t]he aim [of violence] was 'security' in a context of acute insecurity' and that 'self-protection [was]

55 Daniel Bar-Tal, Eran Halperin, and Joseph De Rivera, 'Collective Emotions in Conflict Situations: Societal Implications', *Journal of Social Issues*, 63.2 (2007), 441-60 (pp. 449-50). On the role of emotions in radicalization processes, see also section 3.2.

56 Schwab-Stone and others, p. 1344.

57 These ecological pressures may also be at work in the prewar period, inasmuch as many civil wars occur in the shadow of previous conflicts. As such, it is plausible that the transitional period between two conflicts may be characterized by insecurity and that the effects of past exposure to violence might translate into subsequent conflicts.

58 Jok Madut Jok and Sharon Elaine Hutchinson, 'Sudan's Prolonged Second Civil War and the Militarization of Nuer and Dinka Ethnic Identities', *African Studies Review*, 42.2 (1999), 125-45 (p. 128).

59 Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 156.

a powerful motivator to commit violence'.⁶⁰ It appears, therefore, that the ecological pressures generated by civil war settings may engage combatants on a radicalizing trajectory by promoting violent coping behaviors.

1.2 *Uncertainty Management*

The fact that violence exposure and insecurity can lead to 'pathological adaptation' is also very much in line with the psychological literature on the interplay between uncertainty and extremism. Indeed, a host of recent psychological studies have highlighted the 'relationship between people's feelings of uncertainty about themselves and the world they live in and extremist belief systems and behaviors'.⁶¹ This literature generally focuses on two main sources of uncertainty. First, a number of studies have explored how uncertainty related to self or group identity can motivate people to 'engage in radical, extreme, and sometimes violent intergroup behaviors'.⁶² Hogg and Wagoner, for instance, suggest that people will often want to 'defend their group by taking violent actions against outgroups when experiencing self- and identity-related uncertainty', as these forms of radical behaviors provide them with a form of reassuring clarity about themselves and the groups to which they identify.⁶³ Compensatory control theory, in particular, states that people often cope with such uncertainty by taking assertive, extreme or aggressive actions, as these behaviors attenuate the psychologically-discomforting anxiety generated by threats to personal or collective identities.⁶⁴

A second source of uncertainty identified in this literature pertains to the broader environment in which people evolve. Klein and Kruglanski, for instance, claim that, although uncertainty reduction is a 'fundamental human motivation' in most social contexts, it can become a particularly salient objective and potentially suppress all alternative goals when 'situational pressures' such as crises or intergroup conflicts arise.⁶⁵

60 Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 172; 242.

61 Michael A. Hogg, 'From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23.5 (2014): 338.

62 Hogg, p. 338.

63 Michael A. Hogg and Joseph A. Wagoner, 'Uncertainty-Identity Theory', in *The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*, ed. Kim Young Yun (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), p. 5-6.

64 Aaron C. Kay and Richard P. Eibach, 'Compensatory Control and Its Implications for Ideological Extremism', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69.3 (2013), 564-85.

65 Kristen M. Klein and Arie W. Kruglanski, 'Commitment and Extremism: A Goal Systemic Analysis', *Journal of Social Issues*, 69.3 (2013), 419-35 (pp. 420-21).

Relatedly, recent ethnographic fieldwork in zones of war and political unrest has shown that people evolving in highly volatile and unpredictable environments often employ ‘violence as a technique of uncertainty management’.⁶⁶

From this perspective, it seems plausible that both of these sources of uncertainty might exert a considerable influence on individual combatants in civil war settings. On the one hand, intrastate conflicts are generally organized around some sort of identity cleavage – whether ethnic, religious, ideological, or political – that can generate patterns of mutual uncertainty on both sides of this divide and set off escalating security dilemmas. This is partly because, in times of war, identity lines tend to take on greater salience, as people come to view social categories in zero-sum terms.⁶⁷ Faced with perceived threats to their self and group identities, combatants may thus be confronted with strong incentives to adopt extreme behaviors as a means to assuage this existential uncertainty. These incentives may also be compounded by the fact that combatants are often ‘driven by the uncertainty, stress, and fear of potential betrayal by civilians, and may as a result engage in civilian abuse’ to mitigate this risk.⁶⁸

In Northern Ireland and Bosnia, for instance, combatants reported that endorsing a hardline ‘ethnic identity [offered them] a means of uncertainty reduction in times of chaos’.⁶⁹ Indeed, warfare in both of these settings considerably magnified ‘uncertainty in social interactions, thereby increasing the likelihood that people [would] opt into a hard-line ethnic identity’ and engage in violence against ethnic others in order to reduce this uncertainty.⁷⁰ In Uganda, targeting civilians similarly allowed LRA combatants to ‘reduce their uncertainty about their standing in the social world by increasing their identification with the violent group’.⁷¹ This also appears consistent with McDoom’s

66 Susan Helen Ellison, ‘Ethnography in Uncertain Times’, *Geopolitics*, 0.0 (2019), 1–25 (p. 1).

67 Omar Shahabudin McDoom, ‘The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide’, *International Security*, 37.2 (2012), 119–55; Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

68 Ben Oppenheim and Michael Weintraub, ‘Doctrine and Violence: The Impact of Combatant Training on Civilian Killings’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29.6 (2017), 1126–48 (p. 1129).

69 Benjamin Claeson, ‘Ethnicity as Uncertainty Reducing Behavior: Explaining Acquiescence to Ethnic Violence’, *Politikon: IAPSS Political Science Journal*, 24 (2014), 46–67 (p. 47).

70 Claeson, p. 55.

71 Rebecca Littman, ‘Perpetrating Violence Increases Identification With Violent Groups: Survey Evidence From Former Combatants’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44.7 (2018), 1077–89 (p. 1086).

account of patterns of violence in Rwanda, where ‘wartime threats [served] to activate boundaries between ethnic groups’ and to fuel intergroup violence.⁷²

On the other hand, combatants also evolve in a context of chronic ecological uncertainty, facing the vagaries of a war zone on a daily basis. The uncertainty created by the dangerous and unpredictable conditions in which they operate may thus drive combatants to opt for radical courses of action, as this approach may provide them ‘with a sense of control over otherwise random events’.⁷³ Mitton, for instance, suggests that, in Sierra Leone, committing atrocities against civilians ‘gave perpetrators a feeling of power and control in a war context defined by insecurity’.⁷⁴ Straus similarly notes that people in Rwanda ‘killed because they wanted to protect themselves during a war and during a period of intense uncertainty’.⁷⁵ He adds that ‘violence [was] a response to uncertainty and threat in periods of unsettled authority, imminent change, and war’.⁷⁶ It appears, therefore, that the increased salience of identity lines during wars and the unpredictable nature of conflict environments may fuel insurgent radicalization processes by promoting violent strategies of uncertainty management.

The Civil War Setting and Insurgent Radicalization

In sum, this section has highlighted that the structural conditions in which civil wars are waged create powerful ecological pressures that may drive combatants to adopt radical behaviors in order to acclimate to an unpredictable and threatening wartime landscape. On the one hand, the chronic insecurity and widespread violence to which combatants are exposed may create potent incentives for them to engage in violent coping behaviors. On the other hand, the pervasive identity and ecological uncertainty to which combatants are confronted can drive them to opt for radical courses of action.

These insights may thus help us to recast and enhance our understanding of key works in the literature on wartime civilian targeting, shedding light on some of the key mechanisms through which macro-level factors can motivate micro-level behaviors. They may help us to explain, for

72 McDoom, ‘The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict’, p. 145.

73 Kay and Eibach, p. 564.

74 Mitton, pp. 166–67.

75 Straus, p. 9.

76 Ibid., p. 177.

instance, why a decline in military capabilities,⁷⁷ the experience of battlefield losses,⁷⁸ or the presence of ethnic polarization⁷⁹ can increase the incidence of civilian victimization, as these determinants are likely to produce deep-seated uncertainty at the individual level. Combatants operating in regions afflicted by intense military clashes or sustained territorial contestation, moreover, could be particularly prone to engage in pathological adaptation, as insecurity and violence will tend to be especially pervasive in these areas.⁸⁰ As discussed in the concluding section, however, a key task for further research will be to elucidate why ‘only a small minority of the individuals exposed to the same structural influences eventually’ engage in civilian targeting.⁸¹ In that regard, it is clear that macro-level mechanisms will generally need to interact with other types of factors to generate radical outcomes.

2. Meso-Level Mechanisms

In this section, I argue that three sociological mechanisms endogenous to armed groups can drive combatants to engage in behaviors that are more radical than those that they would have adopted outside of the group context.⁸² First, I delineate two mechanisms deriving from group dynamics – *group polarization* and *agency abdication* – which can direct combatants’ behaviors toward extremes and lower individual thresholds of acceptability for violence. Second, I explore how strategies of *violence engineering* devised by the leadership of armed groups can inure combatants to radical behaviors.

2.1 Group Polarization

It is well established in social psychology that groups can exert considerable influence on individual behavior, leading people to act in ways that could not be easily inferred from their personal dispositions.

77 Reed M. Wood.

78 Hultman.

79 Posen; David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, ‘Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict’, *International Security*, 21.2 (1996), 41–75.

80 Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Relatedly, the individual effects of this mechanism might vary over time – as combatants move and conditions change – but will likely increase as exposure endures.

81 Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, ‘Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33.9 (August 16, 2010), 801.

82 For an excellent overview of theories of violent conflict based on group dynamics, see Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2016).

One of the main mechanisms through which this can occur is via *group polarization*, a form of social influence which, I argue, can exert potent radicalizing effects on insurgent combatants during civil wars.

The notion of group polarization refers to well-documented process that occurs ‘when an initial tendency of individual group members toward a given direction is enhanced’ after group members have interacted with one another.⁸³ Indeed, ‘[g]roup contexts cultivate extreme attitudes: Individual opinions and attitudes tend to become more extreme in a group context. Group opinions and attitudes also tend to be more extreme than those held by its individual members.’⁸⁴ Put otherwise, group exchanges tend to trigger a shift among group members, whose pre-interaction dispositions will often move and converge toward a more radical position.⁸⁵

Within armed groups, this shift can occur, for instance, through pressures for peer conformity and group solidarity, a type of influence that has been abundantly documented by military sociologists and historians.⁸⁶ Another reasons why this shift may happen is that, when group members interact with one another, the influence of each group member is not equal, as more radical individuals tend to enjoy increased status and to hold considerable sway over their peers.⁸⁷ Considering that the membership of armed groups often include hardliners and extremely committed individuals, it is thus plausible that the attitudes and behaviors of combatants may shift in radicalizing directions, as less extreme members are likely to get “contaminated” by their more radical peers.

Mitton notes, for instance, that the ‘most violent [combatants] rose to the positions of influence’ within Revolutionary United Front (RUF) units in Sierra Leone, socializing their peers to radical behaviors.⁸⁸ This also seems to have been the case in Rwanda where group interactions

83 Daniel J. Isenberg, ‘Group Polarization: A Critical Review and Meta-Analysis’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50.6 (1986), 1141.

84 Randy Borum, ‘Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories’, *Journal of Strategic Security*, 4.4 (January 1, 2011): 20.

85 Cass R. Sunstein, ‘The Law of Group Polarization’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10.2 (2002), 178. Over time, these dynamics will therefore not only alter the groups general position, but will also affect the dispositions of individual members who will eventually internalize new, more extreme attitudes.

86 See e.g. Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, ‘Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12.2 (1948), 280–315; Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

87 George Levinger and David J. Schneider, ‘Test of the “Risk Is a Value” Hypothesis’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 11.2 (1969), 165–69; Harold E. Schroeder, ‘The Risky Shift as a General Choice Shift’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27.2 (1973), 297–300.

88 Mitton, p. 142.

helped transform the attitudes and behaviors of individuals reluctant to kill. Indeed, the latter often reported having been swayed by Hutu hardliners, claiming that they simply went ‘along with the group at each step’.⁸⁹

Moreover, it seems that the physical or psychological seclusion in which rebel groups often evolve – in the context of guerrilla warfare, for instance – may act as a multiplier of group polarization effects. Two main reasons explain why isolation magnifies group polarization. First, a group’s seclusion will generally bring about high ingroup cohesion and strong pressures for behavioral and value conformity.⁹⁰ Indeed, ‘when groups are isolated and experiencing conditions of threat, their levels of cohesiveness and perceived interdependence increase, which also enhances member compliance’.⁹¹ In that regard, isolated settings can become powerful sites of violent socialization, in which the incubation of radical behaviors can occur without external influences.⁹²

Second, sociopsychological studies have shown that groups evolving in physical or psychological isolation tend to fall prey to group-serving attributional biases and to overestimate the threat posed by outgroups.⁹³ Crucially, this ‘ingroup-outgroup bias’ can not only prompt further withdrawal and cohesion, but may also lead to the dehumanization of anyone who is not a member of the group.⁹⁴ As the next section highlights, this dehumanization may also be strategically nurtured by the leadership of armed groups, thereby rendering the dynamics outlined above even more conducive to radicalization.

Richards, for instance, describes the RUF as an ‘enclave’ movement whose ‘sectarian tendencies’ largely contributed to the radicalization of its members’ attitudes and behaviors.⁹⁵ Mitton similarly depicts the Ugandan Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) as an ‘insular’ insurgency and

89 Fujii, p. 153. See also Straus.

90 Clark R. McCauley and Mary E. Segal, ‘Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups’, in *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, Review of Personality and Social Psychology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1987), ix, 231–56. On the role of group cohesion and socialization in patterns of wartime rape, see Dara Kay Cohen, ‘Explaining Rape during Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980–2009)’, *American Political Science Review*, 107.3 (2013), 461–77.

91 Borum, p. 22.

92 Cohen, ‘The Ties That Bind: How Armed Groups Use Violence to Socialize Fighters’.

93 Walter G. Stephan, ‘Intergroup Relations’, in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. by Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, 3rd edn (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 599–658 (pp. 613–15).

94 Marisa Reddy Pyncheon and Randy Borum, ‘Assessing Threats of Targeted Group Violence: Contributions from Social Psychology’, *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 17.3 (July 1, 1999), 345.

95 Paul Richards, ‘New Political Violence in Africa’, *GeoJournal*, 47.3 (1999), 433–42 (p. 437).

suggests that combatants' 'exposure to this enclosed world' served as an important catalyst in their transition toward extremism.⁹⁶

In brief, it appears that group polarization might exert a particularly potent radicalizing influence on insurgents in civil wars, as armed units will often comprise polarization-inducing hardliners and evolve in physical or psychological seclusion. In turn, this seclusion will tend to generate high pressures for conformity and increased sensitivity to outside threats. Together, these various group-induced dynamics may thus bring combatants to engage in behaviors that are more radical than the ones they would have adopted outside their armed unit.

2.2 *Agency Abdication*

The second sociological mechanism that, I argue, can fuel insurgent radicalization is a process which I refer to as *agency abdication*. In a series of seminal studies, Bandura found that collective action tends to promote a 'disavowal of a sense of personal agency' among group members, who will commonly displace their share of responsibility for the group's actions onto the group itself.⁹⁷ For Bandura, this diffusion of responsibility may lead to a process of 'moral disengagement' that can considerably weaken the self-sanction mechanisms which normally inhibit harmful conducts. These self-sanction mechanisms, according to Bandura, can be selectively de-activated to enable behaviors that would normally breach one's own moral codes, thereby allowing 'otherwise considerate people to behave inhumanely'.⁹⁸ As Bandura notes, moreover, these processes of disengagement and diffusion are particularly likely to occur when blame is placed on victims or when the latter are stripped of their human qualities.⁹⁹ As will become apparent in the next section, the agency abdication mechanism may therefore become even more conducive to radicalization when dehumanization and blame-attribution is deliberately orchestrated by the leadership of armed groups.

What matters most for now is that this reduced sense of perceived agency 'may lower individual thresholds of acceptability for violent behavior' and lead people to engage in behaviors 'that are more violent

96 Mitton, p. 282.

97 Albert Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3.3 (1999), 193; Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood, and Michael E Fromson, 'Disinhibition of Aggression Through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims', *Journal of Research in Personality* 9.4 (1975), 253-69.

98 Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities', p. 198.

99 Albert Bandura, 'Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71.2 (1996), 364-74 (p. 366).

than those in which they would engage outside of the group context'.¹⁰⁰ It is thus probable that agency abdication might exert important radicalizing effects on insurgents during civil wars, as combatants may feel that their individual responsibility for their unit's actions is diminished and that they are not personally answerable for these actions.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the collective enactment of violence against civilians may sever the links between action and accountability, leading combatant to minimize the extent of their moral agency when participating in civilian targeting on behalf of their group and alongside their peers.¹⁰²

In Rwanda, for instance, collective action enabled perpetrators 'to place the locus of agency – the responsibility to act – onto the group and away from themselves as individuals'.¹⁰³ Relatedly, combatants in Sierra Leone frequently invoked – alongside other attenuating factors like drug usage and authority pressures – group dynamics to absolve themselves of any responsibility.¹⁰⁴ Agency abdication, therefore, may not only lower the threshold at which combatants view violence as acceptable, but might also act as an important enabler for most of the other mechanisms outlined in this paper by removing important psychological inhibitors.

2.3 Violence Engineering

In recent years, the burgeoning literature on the strategic use of violence against non-combatants in civil wars has offered important insights regarding the tactical value that civilian victimization may have for armed groups.¹⁰⁵ As a number of scholars have emphasized, however, insurgent organizations often have to resort to various strategies to compel reluctant combatants to carry out civilian targeting.¹⁰⁶ In particular, the leadership of rebel groups may rely on a host of discursive and coercive strategies to inure otherwise violence-averse combatants to radical behaviors – a mechanism that I call *violence engineering*.

100 Pynchon and Borum, p. 346. See also Grossman, p. 152.

101 This reduced sense of agency might also be magnified by the fact that many armed groups have somewhat ineffectual systems of organizational control and few devices to monitor behaviors. Weinstein; Krijn Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

102 Littman and Paluck, p. 87.

103 Fujii, pp. 157–58.

104 Susan Shepler, 'The Rites of the Child: Global Discourses of Youth and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone', *Journal of Human Rights*, 4.2 (2005), 197–211; Mitton.

105 Valentino.

106 David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005); Mitton.

The first kind of strategy relates to a variety of discursive devices that the leadership of armed groups commonly utilize to lower the psychological threshold at which targeting civilians becomes acceptable to reluctant combatants. These strategies can take many forms, including the presentation of victims as inhuman, subhuman, or animal-like; the framing of outgroups as fundamentally threatening; the displacement of guilt onto victims; or the portrayal of perpetrators' actions as laudable or virtuous.¹⁰⁷ The central function of these discursive strategies, according to Leader Maynard, 'is the 'moral exclusion' of victims from the 'universe of obligations' perceived by perpetrators'.¹⁰⁸ This helps create an 'an emotional distance' between civilians and combatants, which 'plays a vital part in overcoming the resistance to killing'.¹⁰⁹ In other words, these sorts of justificatory discourses allow armed groups to frame civilians as legitimate targets and, therefore, to present perpetrators as carrying out legitimate actions. This seems to be largely in line with Bandura's work discussed above, which stresses that dehumanizing rhetoric, blame attribution, and 'sanitized language' are key contributing factors in processes of moral disengagement.¹¹⁰ It appears, therefore, that this sort of 'moral exclusion' may exert important radicalizing effects on civil war combatants, as it may remove psychological barriers and lower individual thresholds of acceptability for violence by bestowing legitimacy on perpetrators' actions.¹¹¹

In the Central African Republic, for instance, the framing of anti-balaka militias as 'self-defense' groups allowed perpetrators of violence against civilians to present their actions as legitimate acts of protection against the Séléka threat.¹¹² In Sierra Leone, one of the RUF's central strategies to inure combatants to violence was to frame civilians as disgusting or infectious, and to portray them as 'subhuman or 'sub-rebel''.¹¹³ Stanton similarly notes that commanders often explicitly designate civilians as 'complicit in the activities of the opposing side' or

107 For more detail on these strategies, see Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26.5 (October 20, 2014), 830-33.

108 *Ibid.*, 829.

109 Grossman, p. 158.

110 Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities', p. 196.

111 Susan Opatow, 'Moral Exclusion and Injustice: An Introduction', *Journal of Social Issues*, 46.1 (1990), 1-20.

112 Andrea Ceriana Mayneri, 'La Centrafrique, de la rébellion Séléka aux groupes anti-balaka (2012-2014): Usages de la violence, schème persécutif et traitement médiatique du conflit', *Politique africaine*, N° 134.2 (2014), 179-93.

113 Mitton, p. 185.

as the 'enemy'. In turn, this framing allows commanders to convince combatants that the conflict has 'eliminated any possibility of civilian immunity', making civilians 'legitimate targets for attack'.¹¹⁴

The second kind of strategy pertains to coercive methods which are based on authority relationships and which commanders commonly utilize to compel reluctant combatants to carry out civilian targeting. An extensive literature has indeed highlighted how ordinary people can be led to act in extraordinarily violent ways when subjected to authority pressures.¹¹⁵ This form of obedient violence has been documented in numerous civil war settings, where armed groups have had to coerce unwilling combatants to target civilians. In Sierra Leone, for instance, a combatant noted: 'The commander would pass the order, then whatever the senior commanders said, I would do it. I was involved in most of these killings, because the order was from the senior commander. If we disobeyed the senior commander, it would get reported to him and then I would be in serious trouble'.¹¹⁶ When asked to explain why he and his comrades targeted unarmed civilians, a Renamo rebel in Mozambique similarly remarked the following: 'We knew what we were doing was wrong, but there was nothing we could do. We had to carry out our orders'.¹¹⁷

At first sight, this type of compliant violence might not seem to represent a manifestation of radicalization per se, as its perpetration stems from authority pressures rather than from a genuine cognitive or behavioral transformation on the combatant's part. Yet, a series of recent experimental studies have shown that initially obedient killings may beget further volitional killings, through an escalatory process that transforms compliance into intentionality.¹¹⁸ One of the main hypotheses as to why this mutation occurs is that people who are

114 Stanton, p. 28.

115 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964); Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson; Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Browning.

116 Mitton, pp. 69-70.

117 Bob Cohen and Amy Cohen, *Mozambique: The Struggle for Survival* (Cinema Guild, 1987), p. 36:22.

118 Andy Martens and others, 'Killing Begets Killing: Evidence From a Bug-Killing Paradigm That Initial Killing Fuels Subsequent Killing', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33.9 (2007), 1251-64; Andy Martens, Spee Kosloff, and Lydia Eckstein Jackson, 'Evidence That Initial Obedient Killing Fuels Subsequent Volitional Killing Beyond Effects of Practice', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1.3 (2010), 268-73; Andy Martens and Spee Kosloff, 'Evidence That Killing Escalates Within Subjects in a Bug Killing Paradigm', *Aggressive Behavior*, 38.2 (2012), 170-74.

ordered to kill may intentionally engage in further killing to ‘avoid dealing with the ethical implications of their act’ and to appease the psychologically discomfoting tension between their positive self-image and their wrongful conduct.¹¹⁹

It appears, therefore, that these dynamics may lead combatants who are initially ordered to kill civilians to eventually engage in such behaviors intentionally, as refusing to do so would entail recognizing that the killing was unjustifiable in the first place. Volitional killing thus becomes a self-justificatory mechanism through which perpetrators make sense of their past obedient behaviors, thereby fueling an inclination toward violence that ultimately sustains itself without the input of authority pressures. As such, perpetrating violence ‘may endogenously change preferences such that combatants come to prefer violence they would earlier have abhorred’.¹²⁰ Accordingly, it seems that, while ‘[r]adicalized individuals may participate in violence’, participation in itself ‘may also radicalize individuals’.¹²¹

Group Dynamics and Insurgent Radicalization

Altogether, this section has highlighted that a variety of mechanisms unfolding within insurgent units can fuel radicalization processes by shaping combatants’ cognitive dispositions and behavioral tendencies. In particular, group dynamics can drive combatants’ attitudes toward extremes, reduce their sense of personal agency, and increase the perceived legitimacy of civilian targeting, thereby promoting radical inclinations that are for the most part ‘dependent on continuing membership in the group’.¹²² Devoting more theoretical and empirical attention to these mechanisms may thus help us to recast and enhance our understanding of key works on wartime civilian targeting. It may lead us, for instance, to better appreciate how socialization processes¹²³

119 Martens and Kosloff, p. 173. As detailed below, this form of cognitive dissonance reduction represents a key mechanism of insurgent radicalization, which interacts with most of the mechanisms outlined in this paper – including this one.

120 Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Rape as a Practice of War: Toward a Typology of Political Violence’, *Politics & Society*, 46.4 (2018), 519. This is largely consistent with a “well-established point in social psychology”, which holds that “not only do attitudes drive behaviors, but behaviors also shape attitudes”. McDoom, ‘Radicalization as Cause and Consequence of Violence in Genocides and Mass Killings’, p. 1.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

122 Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘Socialization and Violence: Introduction and Framework’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.5 (2017), 592–605 (p. 597).

123 Cohen, ‘Explaining Rape during Civil War’; Cohen, ‘The Ties That Bind: How Armed Groups Use Violence to Socialize Fighters’; Elisabeth Jean Wood and Nathaniel Toppelberg, ‘The Persistence of Sexual Assault Within the US Military’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.5 (2017), 620–33.

and organizational dynamics¹²⁴ shape the dispositions, motives, and incentives of individual combatants in relation to use of violence against civilians. Placing emphasis on the ‘dynamic nature of an individual’s relationships with a group’ would thus allow us to further specify how combatants are ‘both personally agentic as well as affected by processes within’ their armed unit.¹²⁵ Crucially, this would serve as an important reminder that, while violence against civilians may be perpetrated in a group context, it has to be committed by intentional agents who must individually come to terms with committing such violence on behalf of their group.

3. Micro-Level Mechanisms

In this section, I explore how two mechanisms related to the psychological and emotional dispositions of combatants may not only fuel radicalization processes in and of themselves but can also serve as important enablers for the other mechanisms discussed above. First, drawing on *cognitive dissonance* theory, I examine how processes of incremental self-persuasion can lead combatants to adopt increasingly radical behaviors to cope with a discomforting psychological tension between their self-image and their behaviors. Second, I survey recent findings in psychology and consider how processes of *emotional escalation* may drive combatants to adopt radical behaviors.

3.1. *Dissonance Reduction*

The notion of ‘cognitive dissonance’, as theorized by Festinger, refers to a psychological tension that arises when an individual simultaneously holds two or more beliefs, attitudes, or emotions (i.e. cognitions) that are incompatible with one another.¹²⁶ Cognitive dissonance can also occur when a person adopts a behavior that contradicts his self-image or his moral code. When people act in a way that is inconsistent with their belief system, Festinger argued, they will typically experience a form of cognitive distress that can become particularly discomforting when this behavior clashes with a cognition that is central to their identity. After experiencing this sort of ‘struggle of opposing action tendencies’, an

124 Weinstein; Oppenheim and Weintraub; Hoover Green, *The Commander’s Dilemma: Violence and Restraint in Wartime*.

125 Laura G. E. Smith, Leda Blackwood, and Emma F. Thomas, ‘The Need to Refocus on the Group as the Site of Radicalization’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15.2 (2020), 334.

126 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957).

individual will typically feel a strong urge to reduce this psychological disarray by adopting different dissonance reduction strategies in order to reinstate coherence between cognitions and conducts.¹²⁷

As social psychologists have emphasized, cognitive dissonance can become an important driver of radicalization at the individual level, insofar as even a small initial behavior in a radicalizing direction may engage a person on a 'slippery slope of increasingly extreme behaviors, with increasingly extreme reasons and justifications icing the slope'.¹²⁸ In these circumstances, this initial behavior can generate a strong urge to restore consistency and lead people to adopt increasingly radical behaviors as a means to make sense of past actions.

Importantly, cognitive dissonance might exert an important amplifying effect on most of the other mechanisms outlined in this paper. If a combatant adopts an initial radical behavior owing to ecological pressures or group dynamics, for instance, this first act in a radicalizing direction might indeed create strong psychological incentives to reduce dissonance and to reinstate coherence. In turn, these incentives may lead combatants to engage in self-justificatory acts that are slightly more radical and that perpetuate themselves independently of the factors that initially led to them.¹²⁹ Once they reach a certain 'critical juncture', combatants thus become increasingly 'unlikely to switch paths', as it is psychologically 'easier to remain on the established trajectory'.¹³⁰ These dynamics can, in large measure, be explained by the fact that the very act of '[k]illing transforms individuals', triggering an '[a]ttitudinal shift' through which '[p]erpetrators [...] espouse radical beliefs in order to justify their actions'.¹³¹

This seems to echo Fujii's finding that Rwandan perpetrators may have 'joined in the violence because of external pressures, but [continued] their participation for reasons that [arose] from their initial actions'.¹³² Evidently, the effects of cognitive dissonance on combatant radicalization are difficult to assess empirically. Yet, the multiple decades of psychological research that have demonstrated how these processes

127 Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence*, p. 82.

128 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskaleiko, 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20.3 (July 2008), 421.

129 Kelman and Hamilton, p. 109.

130 Maiyah Jaskoski, Michael Wilson, and Berny Lazareno, 'Approving of But Not Choosing Violence: Paths of Nonviolent Radicals', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32.2 (2020), 1-18 (p. 270).

131 McDoom, 'Radicalization as Cause and Consequence of Violence in Genocides and Mass Killings', p. 1.

132 Fujii, p. 8.

can influence individual behavior seem to lend support to the claim that cognitive dissonance may represent an important factor underlying individual participation in civilian targeting.

3.2. Emotional Escalation

In recent years, important developments in neuroscience and psychology have highlighted that emotions ‘powerfully, predictably, and pervasively influence decision making’ and represent a central source of motivation for behavior both at the individual and group levels.¹³³ A program of research led by psychologist David Matsumoto, for instance, has shown that ‘intergroup emotions’ like anger, contempt, and disgust could motivate violent actions and trigger processes of behavioral radicalization at the individual level.¹³⁴ In Matsumoto’s model, the effects of these emotions on individual behavior are conceptualized as a series of cumulative and increasingly radical ‘phases’ through which ingroup members first experience anger after having identified injustices or threats to their group’s well-being. In turn, this anger progressively breeds a sentiment of moral superiority and contempt, which then fosters a form of disgust that can lead ingroup members to the conclusion that ‘the outgroup needs to be removed altogether’.¹³⁵ In other words, this form of emotional escalation ‘[functions] through the ability of anger to motivate action, of contempt to motivate devaluation of others, and of disgust to motivate the elimination of others’.¹³⁶ In combination, therefore, anger, contempt, and disgust may bring together the incentive, the desensitization, and the justification necessary to

¹³³ Jennifer S. Lerner and others, ‘Emotion and Decision Making’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 66.1 (2015), 799–823; Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Rivera; Roy F. Baumeister and others, ‘How Emotion Shapes Behavior: Feedback, Anticipation, and Reflection, Rather Than Direct Causation’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11.2(2007), 167–203.

¹³⁴ David Matsumoto, Hyi Sung Hwang, and Mark G. Frank, ‘The Role of Emotion in Predicting Violence’, *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 1(2012), 1–11; David Matsumoto, Mark G. Frank, and Hyisung C. Hwang, ‘The Role of Intergroup Emotions in Political Violence’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24.5 (2015), 369–73.

¹³⁵ Matsumoto, Hwang, and Frank, p. 6.

¹³⁶ Matsumoto, Frank, and Hwang, p. 369. The model thus stresses that it is mainly the accumulation of these three emotions that may foster violence. In that regard, the authors propose a useful gunpowder metaphor: “gunpowder’s components charcoal, sulfur, and potassium nitrate by themselves have their own caustic properties— like anger, contempt, and disgust do—but are not explosive. However, when compressed together, they become a dangerous, combustible mix”. Matsumoto, Frank, and Hwang, ‘The Role of Intergroup Emotions in Political Violence’, 372. The violent culmination of this process is thus attributable to the fact that disgust generally breeds strong urges to eliminate the repulsive stimuli.

drive even nonviolent people to engage in violence.¹³⁷ These dynamics are ubiquitous in Mitton's account of atrocity perpetration during the Sierra Leone Civil War, where anger, contempt, and especially disgust, were central factors leading RUF combatants to target civilians.¹³⁸

Relatedly, another line of research has shown how revenge can motivate individuals to adopt radical behaviors. Social psychologists have emphasized that revenge may escalate into processes of mutual radicalization – especially when revenge is exacted in the absence of institutional arbitrators, as it is often the case in civil war settings.¹³⁹ This is mainly because conflicting perceptions of equity between 'revenge-seekers' and 'revenge-recipients' can lead to an 'escalating cycle of revenge, stemming from ongoing and spiraling attempts to restore equity'.¹⁴⁰ These insights appear relevant to the study of insurgent radicalization since, as many scholars have pointed out, personal score-settling is a widespread practice during civil wars.¹⁴¹ Often faced with a lack of third party capable of arbitrating between these irreconcilable claims, combatants may thus become entangled in protracted patterns of action-reaction. As this vignette from the Lebanese Civil War illustrates: '[The war] reached a paroxysm because revenge became the reason to live for an entire nation. If one Christian died, then two Moslems were killed, and so on [...]. When we acted, moved by revenge, we generated the spirit of retaliation'.¹⁴² In Mozambique, a Renamo combatant pointed to similar dynamics: 'We preferred to attack civilians and cause havoc because we could see we could not defeat the army. Anytime the army would attack our base, we would suffer. Men would lose an arm or a leg. But we preferred to cause havoc in the countryside. When they attacked us, we took revenge against civilians'.¹⁴³ As Bramsen notes, emotions like fear, anger, and revenge have likewise been key drivers of radicalization among Syrian insurgents.¹⁴⁴

137 On the effects of these emotions on radical behaviors, see also Nicole Tausch et al., 'Explaining Radical Group Behavior: Developing Emotion and Efficacy Routes to Normative and Nonnormative Collective Action', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101.1 (2011), 129–48.

138 Mitton, pp. 181–226.

139 Arlene M. Stillwell, Roy F. Baumeister, and Regan E. Del Priore, 'We're All Victims Here: Toward a Psychology of Revenge', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 30.3 (2008), 253–63.

140 Stillwell, Baumeister, and Del Priore, p. 253.

141 See, for instance, Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*; *Laja Balcells, Rivalry and Revenge*.

142 Tracy Chamoun, *Au Nom Du Père* (Paris: Poche, 1993), pp. 10–23.

143 Cohen and Cohen, p. 36:58.

144 Isabel Bramsen, 'From Civil Resistance to Civil War: Nonstrategic Mechanisms of Militarization in the Syrian Uprising', *Peace & Change*, 45.2 (2020), 256–86.

In these cases, there is a clear overlap between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ violence.¹⁴⁵

Like cognitive dissonance, emotions may also act as a potent catalyst for most of the other mechanisms described above. Fear, for instance, is a central component of the *pathological adaptation* mechanism, whereas disgust is often deliberately cultivated by commanders as part of their *violence engineering* strategies. Accordingly, it appears that, when combatants experience such potent emotions while simultaneously subjected to ecological pressures or sociological dynamics, a plausible response may be to turn to radical courses of action. In that regard, Balcells rightfully notes that ‘the rationalist literature’ – which dominates the study of wartime civilian targeting – has unduly ‘overlooked the experiences of people living through the war, the emotional effects of these experiences, and, in turn, the effects of the emotions on war-related decisions.’¹⁴⁶

Cognitions, Emotions, and Insurgent Radicalization

In all, this section has highlighted that psychological and emotional mechanisms unfolding at the micro level can fuel radicalization processes in civil wars, especially when they interact with the other mechanisms outlined in this paper. Paying closer attention to the manner in which these mechanisms drive wartime behaviors may thus help us to recast and enhance our understanding of key works on civil war violence. It may allow us, for instance, to better understand the distinctive cognitive and emotive processes through which factors like ethnic security dilemmas, authority pressures, or indoctrination can motivate radical behaviors at the individual level. In that regard, a growing number of studies have begun to highlight how emotions like hatred, jealousy, shame, fear, and disgust can shape patterns of civil war violence.¹⁴⁷ This represents an important advance in the study of wartime civilian targeting, which should inform further research into processes of insurgent radicalization.

¹⁴⁵ Kalyvas, ‘The Ontology of “Political Violence”: Action and Identity in Civil Wars’; see also Siniša Malešević, ‘The Act of Killing: Understanding the Emotional Dynamics of Violence on the Battlefield’, *Critical Military Studies*, 0.0 (2019), 1–22.

¹⁴⁶ Balcells.

¹⁴⁷ On hatred, see Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On jealousy, see Fujii, pp. 97–99. On shame, see David Keen, *Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars Is More Important Than Winning Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 195–234. On fear, see McDoom, ‘The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict’. On disgust, see Mitton. For a more encompassing framework, see Wendy Pearlman, ‘Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 11.2 (2013), 387–409.

Conclusion

While this article merely represents a starting point for a more ambitious research agenda, it has allowed me to challenge basic – and often unstated – assumptions about civilian targeting and to highlight the importance of theorizing the wartime trajectories of those who actually enact such violence on the ground. To this end, I aggregated findings from a broad range of literatures and described a host of mechanisms which may motivate individual involvement in violence against civilians during civil wars. Far from being mutually exclusive, these mechanisms often operate in concert and reinforce one another to drive insurgents toward extremes. By casting the focus upon the individual motives, processes, and experiences that are often left unaddressed in the civil war literature, I argued that devoting more attention to the radicalization of rank-and-file perpetrators can allow us to recast our understanding of wartime civilian victimization. In particular, this more granular approach provides scholars with the opportunity to address the *microfoundations* of such violence by specifying how individual radicalization trajectories aggregate and generate macro-level dynamics and outcomes. What emerges from this theoretical ground-clearing effort, therefore, is not a grand theory of insurgent radicalization as much as an orienting framework which calls attention to some of the key mechanisms through which individual combatants come to victimize civilians. Evidently, the generalizability of this framework is limited, insofar as it cannot explain the involvement in violence of all rebel combatants across all types of civil wars. Yet, it does offer a preliminary survey of important drivers of violence, which will hopefully stimulate further research into this topic.

Several research agendas emerge from this study. First, more research is needed on the agency of rank-and-file combatants in the perpetration of wartime violence against civilians. In that regard, further research will certainly have to be based on highly-granular data, which scholars may only be able to collect through rigorous fieldwork and extensive interviews with former combatants. Life histories may prove rewarding here, as these methods could help researchers trace the trajectories of combatants and assess how violence against civilians is motivated and experienced at the individual level.

Second, it seems unlikely that any single model can capture all the influences that may bring a combatant to target civilians and, accordingly, I do not assume that the mechanisms identified above are the only

meaningful ones. Yet, it would be worthwhile to theorize how other mechanisms – related, for instance, to the ideology of armed groups, to the influence of operational conditions, or to the role of outbidding dynamics among rival rebel groups – may influence combatants' behaviors and to sort out under what conditions and to what extent each type of mechanism exerts radicalizing effects on individual combatants. This would allow us to better understand why, under similar conditions, certain combatants radicalize while others do not. Going forward, it would thus prove useful to rely on micro-level evidence on combatants' wartime trajectories in order to determine how those who killed differed from those who did not and to parse out how these different outcomes were generated by the presence or absence of key radicalization mechanisms.

Third, scholars should further investigate the differences and similarities between radicalization processes in civil wars and those underlying other forms of political violence, such as terrorism, interstate wars, and mass atrocities. In that regard, more cross-fertilization would be warranted across different sub-literatures on civilian targeting. Finally, another avenue for further research would be to assess how the recurrence of civil wars bears on processes of insurgent radicalization. Given that many civil wars occur in the shadow of previous conflicts, it is plausible that past cycles of violence may fuel subsequent radicalization.

In sum, it is clear that this novel domain of inquiry entails both promises and challenges. Yet, what is also clear is that understanding insurgent radicalization is important, both normatively and substantively, for scholars and policy-makers concerned with alleviating the human costs of civil wars. Indeed, while civilian targeting remains an all too ubiquitous practice in intrastate conflicts, we still know relatively little about the perpetrators of such violence. Devoting more attention to individual radicalization processes in civil wars could thus allow us to better appreciate how the aggregation of individual radicalizing trajectories affect broader patterns of civil war violence. With a finer understanding of the micro-level factors influencing variations in civilian targeting across cases – as well as the prevalence of such violence in specific cases – we could thus improve our ability to devise policies and interventions aimed at minimizing the heavy brunt that civilians all too often bear during these wars.

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