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**Ethnic War, Holy War, War O' War:
Does the Adjective Matter in Explaining
Collective Political Violence?**

Edward W. Walker

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This paper takes up three related questions: (1) what is the difference between ethnic and religious conflict; (2) are theories of ethnic conflict equally applicable to religious conflict; and (3) can available theories of collective violence explain why the nature of internal conflict changes over time, either with respect to individual conflicts or globally? The author argues that distinguishing among types of internal conflict is more difficult than is often assumed and that theories of ethnic conflict typically explain not ethnic conflict as distinct category but sustained internal violence in general, including “religious” conflict. Further, while these theories typically attempt to explain why conflict breaks out in some multiethnic regions but not others, they do not attempt to explain why conflict when it occurs is “ethnic” rather than something else, why the nature of individual conflicts changes over time, or why certain kinds of internal conflict are characteristic of particular periods in history and not others. The paper investigates these questions by looking at three cases: Afghanistan since 1978, Tajikistan from 1992-1997, and Chechnya since 1994.

Efforts to explain collective political violence have a long pedigree in the social sciences. The focus of attention, however, has changed along with the most salient forms of violence. For most of the twentieth century, by far the most destructive form of violence was interstate war, which has produced a vast literature on the causes of war. Similarly, the study of revolution – particularly the “great” French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions – has long been the object of scholarly attention. Then in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, attention turned to the “wars of national liberation,” “insurgencies,” “civil conflict,” and “peasant wars” that accompanied decolonization and the Cold War. As the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia began to unravel in the late 1980s, violence between various “nationalities” in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia led to a surge in scholarship on “ethnic conflict.” Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S., there has been an outpouring of literature on terrorism and Islamist-inspired militancy, while the Iraq war is beginning to spark new studies of “insurgency” and “counter-insurgency.”

One obvious reason for these shifting concerns is that academics are understandably drawn to problems with important policy implications. But there are some seemingly sensible methodological reasons as well. Modes of violence, as well as the motivations of participants, the ideologies and the myths that inspire them, and salient lines of cleavage, vary enormously. So, too, do the structural conditions and precipitating factors that help explain them. Indeed, as Andrew Bennett has put it, sustained political violence may constitute a case of “equifinality” in which “one type [of violence] may arise through different causal paths and interactions of variables in which no single cause is necessary or sufficient.”¹ Specifying etiology under these conditions is difficult in the extreme. The solution, the argument goes, is to divide the problem into discrete parts, the sensible assumption being that various forms of violence require different explanations – the causes of interstate wars are presumably different from those of revolutions, which are different from those of ethnic violence, which are different from conflicts inspired by religious ideologies, and so on. Given the diversity of form and great causal complexity, rather than a general theory of political violence we should elaborate “middle range” theories that identify facilitating structural conditions (or “correlates”) and “precipitants” accounting for different types. Accordingly, the “development of contingent typological theories is well-suited to complex social

phenomena like political instability,” in Bennett’s words.² This in turn requires careful typologizing – only a well-designed typology will allow us to place different empirical cases into different classificatory boxes, gather data about those cases, use statistical methods to tease out correlations, and elaborate convincing causal narratives.

I have no objection to this approach on methodological grounds. Rather, my concerns are conceptual and theoretical. To be useful, the prescribed typologies must identify discrete types of political violence with distinct etiologies. The primary purpose of this paper is to raise doubts about whether this is possible. Distinguishing ethnic conflict, for example, from clan, religious, regional, or other kinds of internal conflict is difficult, not only because these terms are hard to operationalize, but also because any single conflict is likely to involve various mobilizing ideologies, lines of cleavage, and political objectives, each of which can change over time. But more importantly, I believe that the adjective – ethnic, national, clan, regional, religious, or what have you – matters rather less for explanatory purposes than is typically assumed. For example, the structural factors typically adduced as causes of ethnic conflict – modernization, state collapse, poverty, unemployment, relative deprivation, declining material well-being, inequality, globalization, demography (too many young men), topography (mountainous terrain), or culture (a propensity to violence) – appear to be equally applicable (or equally inapplicable) to other forms of collective political violence. Why unemployment, for example, is any more likely (or less likely) to produce ethnic conflict than class or religious conflict is not only unclear but, to my knowledge, rarely addressed by theorists of ethnic conflict or any kind of collective violence. Nor is it clear why government policies that supposedly foster ethnic violence – whether they be too little or too much repression, the arbitrary and ham-handed resort to force, or liberalization, democratization, decentralization, or “reform” of any kind – are any more or less likely to cause a rural-based uprising that is mobilized by religion than an urban-based revolution mobilized by Marxism.

Addressing all these questions is well beyond the scope of this essay, although I hope to raise some doubts about what I suspect are some unexamined and dubious assumptions. Instead, I will focus on the more specific question of whether “ethnic conflict” is really different from “religious conflict,” and if so, whether theories of “ethnic conflict” are equally applicable to “religious conflict,” with particular

reference to the question of militancy inspired by “radical Islam.” In arguing that the answer to this question is “less than one might think,” I do not mean to suggest that internal conflicts are all alike or that distinguishing among types of collective political violence is without value. On the contrary, I will argue that theorists of collective political violence should be careful to distinguish the kind of violence they are trying to explain and to consider whether the explanation they offer is really unique to that type of violence. I also contend that theorists of violence should consider whether their theories can explain why individual conflicts change over time and why certain kinds of collective violence are more prevalent at particular moments in world history. The challenge, in other words, is not only to explain a particular type of internal conflict – proletarian revolution, ethnic conflict, religious violence, or what-have-you – as some kind of timeless category. Rather, we should explain why Islamism is such a potent mobilizer of internal violence today, whereas thirty years ago it was Marxism while fifteen years ago it was ethno-nationalism.

Part of the purpose of this paper, then, is to highlight this question of change and to provide a rough conceptual framework for tracking change. However, I will also suggest that the primary reason for change is *ideational dynamics*. What seems to matter most is not structure or relational factors (to borrow a term from Charles Tilly) but the variable appeal and credibility of different ideologies of resistance at different moments. That is, let us assume that the structurally rooted demand for resistance is more-or-less constant (there is always injustice and grounds for grievance across the globe). Let us also assume that relational factors help explain variation in modes of resistance (e.g., why we get suicide terrorism today but not yesterday) and perhaps overall levels of violence (militants learn about how to conduct violence more effectively). If so, I believe we would still see considerable variation in violence over time and space, a variation that is best explained by the changing mobilizational capacity of different ideologies of resistance both locally and globally. Put differently, it is neither the structurally rooted demand for militancy nor capacity for violence that matters most, but the changing supply of ideologies of resistance. Moreover, the explanation for this changing supply is to be found not in the materialist base of social structure or political economy but in the ideological superstructure itself, and particularly by the extent to which particular ideologies have had the most unambiguous, and/or most recent,

opportunity to discredit themselves in practice.

IS ETHNIC CONFLICT DIFFERENT FROM RELIGIOUS CONFLICT?

It has become commonplace to argue that the terms “ethnicity” and “ethnic group” are vague and ambiguous, and that it is accordingly difficult to know what “ethnic conflict” denotes or how to distinguish “ethnic wars” from other kinds of sustained internal violence. For many, an ethnic group (“ethnie,” “ethnos”) is an objective category – all one need do is look, not ask, to determine whether a particular collectivity is an ethnicity, with the distinguishing properties usually understood as language or culture. As Walker Connor put it in a much-cited article on conceptual confusion in the study of nations, nation-states, and ethnic groups: “An ethnic group may be readily discerned by an anthropologist or other outside observer . . . while an ethnic group *may*, therefore, be other-defined, the nation *must* be self-defined.”³ In contrast, virtually all scholars agree that “nation” should be treated as a subjective category – in Benedict Anderson’s famous formulation, a nation is an “imagined political community” (and most would add, an imagined political community that aspires to some form of political self-determination).⁴ Unlike nations, members of an ethnic group, according to Connor, do not have to identify with a distinct cultural community. Thus, ethnic conflict would be where outside observers, using objective criteria such as language, religious practices, clothing, cuisine, architecture, or other kinds of observable behavior that are indicative of cultural difference, determine that the parties to the conflict are somehow “ethnically” different.

There are a great many difficulties with this objective understanding of “ethnic group” and, derivatively, of “ethnic conflict.” To take but one example, determining where dialects end and languages begin, let alone what constitutes a distinct “culture,” is far less an “objective” and scientific undertaking than Connor implies (consider the controversy over whether “Serbian,” “Croatian,” and even “Bosnian” are different languages). Virtually any two groups engaged in violent conflict will differ using objective “cultural” criteria, at least in some measure. The North and South in the American Civil War were culturally different, but the conflict is never characterized as an ethnic one. Even social

classes are culturally different – the Russian proletariat, the Russian peasant, and the Russian aristocracy had different cultures in 1917, but again we do not consider the Russian Revolution, or even the Russian Civil War, to be an ethnic conflict. Employing this definition would also lead us to characterize World War I and World War II – indeed, virtually all interstate wars – as “ethnic conflicts” because the parties involved spoke different languages and were culturally distinct. Violence mobilized by religion would also qualify, since different religions, like different languages, bring cultural differences with them.

The alternative position is that there is necessarily a subjective dimension to ethnicity – those involved somehow have to think of themselves as a distinct cultural community. In another much quoted work, Anthony Smith defines an ethnic group (or *ethnie*) as a collectivity that shares five (presumably necessary) properties: a group name or ethnonym; belief in a common descent; shared historical memories; some element of a shared culture such as language or religion; a sense of association with a particular territory; and a sense of solidarity.⁵ What distinguishes them from nations, according to Smith (like Max Weber before him), is that an ethnic group is a “proto-nation” or “nation-in-embryo” – that is, like a “nation” it is subjectively defined (belief in a common descent, shared historical memories, sense of territorial ownership and solidarity, although he also treats presumably objectively-defined common cultural attributes as defining), but it is not a full-blown nation because it does not demand self-determination, either in the form of a state or a measure of political autonomy.⁶ An ethnic conflict, then, would be where one or more of the parties involved meet Smith’s criteria (and presumably all five criteria) for “ethnic groups.”

One obvious problem here is that violence between groups that lack national consciousness would be relatively rare today. The great majority of so-called “ethnic conflicts” involve struggles between collectivities inspired by nationalism, with one or more parties appealing to the principle of national self-determination and/or anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism – certainly this is true of the vast majority of “ethnic conflicts” in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans since the collapse of communism. If so, then “ethnic conflict” should really be “national conflict” (which of course would be quickly confused with interstate conflict).⁷ A more serious problem is that there are many potential lines of cleavage – region, tribe, tribal confederation, clan, patronage network, class, religion, etc. – that are not

typically treated as “ethnic” but where the groups involved meet Smith’s criteria. For example, in many parts of the world (e.g., Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, or Iraq) so-called “clans” (or lineage or descent groups) have group names, are perceived as kinship networks, and have distinct “cultures” and claims to particular territories.⁸ Moreover, Muslims as a community (the *umma*) would arguably meet these criteria – they too have a group name, share historical memories, have many elements of a common culture, and (at least for many Islamists) territorial claims (the “Dar-al-Islam”). All that is lacking is belief in common lineage (except to the extent that we are all said to be descendants of Adam and Eve). But belief in a common lineage is in any case the least robust of Smith’s criteria, since many groups typically treated as distinct “ethnicities” do not, in fact, have narratives of common origin (many Russian nationalists, for example, accept the “mixed blood” of the “primordial” Slavs and embrace the extent to which Russians have assimilated numerous minority peoples over the centuries).

In practice, language appears to be decisive the great majority of time. If people from different regions with different cultures speak the same language, they are typically not considered different ethnicities, and conflict between them is typically not classified as ethnic conflict. The conflict in Somalia, for example, is almost never described as “ethnic” because virtually all those involved in the fighting speak Somali and call themselves Somalis, even if they come from different clans or regions. Likewise the Tajik case is usually treated as a “civil war” (see below) because most of those involved spoke Tajik. “Ethnic conflict,” then, is where combatants in a violent internal conflict speak different languages. If so, then fighting between Arab-speakers and Kurdish-speakers in Iraq would be “ethnic” conflict, but conflict between Arab-speaking Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq would be something else (presumably “sectarian” conflict).

But in fact language is not determinative either. In Rwanda, for example, “ethnic” bloodletting between Hutus and Tutsis involved two communities that spoke the same language (Kinyarwanda). Nevertheless, the violence in Rwanda is typically treated as ethnic conflict. The same is true of Bosnia, where all parties spoke “Serbo-Croatian” (at least as linguists labeled it at the time). The objective line of cleavage was religion, not language, and each of the main groups had a clear sense of “national” (not merely “ethnic”) consciousness. Nevertheless, it too is typically referred to as an ethnic conflict (indeed

for some it is a paradigmatic case of ethnic conflict).⁹ Much the same could be said of the conflict in Northern Ireland, where the objective line of cleavage is religion (Catholics vs. Protestants) but where the respective parties to the conflict are in effect understood as different “ethnic” groups (a “Catholic” supporter of the IRA may well be an unabashed atheist). Finally, there is Iraq, where conflict between Arabic-speaking Sunnis and Shiites is frequently treated as “ethnic” conflict.

It has been suggested that one way to overcome these semantic problems is to finesse them by replacing “ethnic” with the more general modifier “identity.” Where lines of cleavage are based on language, region, clan, religion, or any other ascriptive characteristic – what Geertz called the “gross actualities of blood, race, language, locality, religion, or tradition” – we would have identity conflict.¹⁰ Where people have a choice – where solidarity is based, for example, on political preference or ideology – we would not have an identity conflict. But “identity” is itself a very vague and ambiguous term. Any individual has countless identities that can be activated by different circumstances. If so, then virtually any form of collective political violence would qualify as an identity conflict. Nor is it clear how to bound ascriptive identities because few, if any, identities preclude at least a measure of choice. Certainly the boundaries of some solidarity groups are more porous than others (it is relatively easy to become a “Russian” but more difficult to become “Chechen”). Even racial categories can allow for a measure of self-identification (notably, for example, in Latin America, where racial categorization is far more nuanced and fluid than in the United States). Nor is religion clearly less a matter of choice than class, citizenship, or party affiliation in most cases. Finally, it is difficult to imagine any conflict – even an interstate one – where the parties involved do not share an “identity.” Simply fighting together would create a common identity of one sort or another. Americans and Japanese certainly had distinct “identities” during World War II (as well as distinct religions), but we do not call World War II an ethnic conflict (or a religious one).¹¹

In practice, it seems that “ethnic conflict” is an “other-defined” but also subjective category, in Connor’s terminology. Connor assumed that other-defined and objective were paired – outside observers would use objective criteria like language and behavior to determine whether a particular group was an ethnic one. But what seems to matter most is whether, by virtue of political/academic fashion or

changing political circumstances, outside observers chose to characterize a particular conflict at a particular moment in history as “ethnic” or something else (and often influenced by normative considerations – “ethnic conflicts” are reactionary while “wars of national liberation” are progressive). The subjectivity, in other words, is in the eye of the external observer, which suggests that there may be less consistency in the way scholars categorize violence than is commonly assumed. As Charles King has put it:

How we label an armed conflict often has very little to do with anything intrinsic to the conflict itself. Think, for example, about how rare it is today to hear anyone talk of ‘insurgencies.’ Yet this term was once the standard way of referring to many civil wars around the world, especially those in which the so-called insurgents were supported by the Soviet Union. The idea of ethnic war may be similarly contingent, the product of a particular time and place ...¹²

Sorting out this semantic conundrum entirely may be not be possible. As I argued in the introduction, however, I believe it is very important that we conceptualize change in the character of internal conflict, which means more careful delineation. A start can be made in this regard by distinguishing among three different classificatory criteria: (1) the *dominant line of cleavage* that distinguishes the parties involved, regardless of whether those cleavages are subjective or objective in character (language, culture, real or imagined kinship, region, class, gender, etc.); (2) the *objectives* of the parties to the conflict, or what it is that is in dispute (control of a particular government, sovereignty or autonomy within a particular territory, group homogeneity in a particular territory, control of scarce resources, preferential policies, etc.);¹³ and (3) the dominant *mobilizing ideology or ideologies* of resistance involved (Marxism, nationalism, liberalism, socialism, Islamism, Catholicism, etc.).¹⁴ In the case of Northern Ireland, then, the dominant line of cleavage would be religion (Catholics vs. Protestants); what is in dispute is sovereignty over Northern Ireland; and the dominant mobilizing ideology is nationalism. In the “civil war” in Georgia of 1991-1994, the dominant line of cleavage was political (Gamsarkhurdia supporters vs. everyone else, although there was a regional element as well, with Mingrelians and western Georgians in general more disposed to support Gamsarkhurdia); what was in dispute was control of the national government; and the dominant mobilizing ideologies were opaque, although

nationalism, liberalism, and democratism played a role.¹⁵ In the Sunni-Shiite conflict in Iraq, the line of cleavage is religion, while the mobilizing ideology is a blend of religion (“they are apostates”) and ethno-nationalism (“the Iraqi state properly belongs to us”).

That said, it should be clear that a sustained conflict in a particular area can undergo change along any of these dimensions.¹⁶ As we will see in three case studies below, who is fighting whom may not be static. So, too, can the objectives of the warring parties change – what begins as a struggle for control of a national government can become a secessionist conflict, or what begins as a secessionist struggle can become a struggle to establish a regional or global caliphate. And mobilizing ideologies can also change – a conflict inspired initially by contesting nationalisms, for example, may morph into a conflict inspired by appeals to religion. Accounting for these changes, or at least accommodating them, should be part of any general theory of internal war.

ETHNIC VS. RELIGIOUS CONFLICT: IS THE ETIOLOGY DIFFERENT?

Let us assume at this point that it is possible to distinguish “ethnic conflicts” from “religious conflicts.”¹⁷

The next question is whether the etiology of the former is different from the latter. Are the roots of Islamist-inspired violence, for example, significantly different from those of ethnic conflicts, or indeed any other kind of conflict?

Consider the following passage from Stuart Kaufman’s *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*:

... the necessary preconditions for ethnic war are ethnic myths and fears and the opportunity to act on them politically. Ethnic war occurs when the politics of ethnic symbolism goes to extremes, provoking hostile actions and leading to a security dilemma. In some cases, the turn toward extremism is mass-led; in other cases, it is elite-led. Either way, war results from a process in which extremist politics and insecurity mutually reinforce each other in an escalatory spiral.¹⁸

While one might agree that symbols and symbolism play an important role in provoking ethnic conflict, what is not clear is why this would not be true for other kinds of collective political violence. For example, would anything be lost from the above passage if the terms “ethnic” and “ethnicity” were

removed, or if “religious” was substituted for “ethnic” as follows?

... the necessary preconditions for [religious] war are myths and fears and the opportunity to act on them politically. [Religious] war occurs when the politics of symbolism goes to extremes, provoking hostile actions and leading to a security dilemma. In some cases, the turn toward extremism is mass-led; in other cases, it is elite-led. Either way, war results from a process in which extremist politics and insecurity mutually reinforce each other in an escalatory spiral.

Kaufman goes on to argue that the roots of ethnic conflict are distinctive in that emotion rather than cognition (or more accurately, rational and dispassionate calculation) plays a particularly important role in precipitating it, and he tries to capture the presumably distinctive role played by emotion by employing “symbolic choice theory.” As he explains: “The core assumption of symbolic choice theory is [that] *people choose by responding to the most emotionally potent symbol evoked.*”¹⁹ He continues, “Ethnicity is a rich resource for politicians engaged in symbolic politics because it is so emotionally laden.”²⁰

This may be, but what he does not tell us is why “ethnicity” is any more emotionally laden than other possible lines of cleavage. Why are ethnic symbols more emotionally potent than symbols that appeal to religion, clan, tribe, class, or political ideology? Do not politicians (or leaders) always employ emotive symbols to mobilize constituents regardless of the nature of the cleavages or the mobilizing ideology involved? Is emotion, and indeed “hatred” (“modern” or otherwise), not present in sustained collective violence wherever it breaks out? Was Hitler any less effective in appealing to myths and symbols in provoking inter-state war than Milosevic or Tudjman was in provoking “ethnic war”? Is it common – or even possible – for people to kill in large numbers dispassionately?²¹

Kaufman also asserts that loyalty to an imagined kinship network and a willingness to sacrifice for one’s “family” is reinforced by the cultural production of a “myth-symbol complex ... that defines not only who is a member of the group but what it means to be a member.”²² This “complex” is socially reproduced, passed from parent to child through legends, fairytales, and historical narratives, and in this sense it is ascriptive (a child does not chose the “myth-symbol complex” in which she is raised). While Kaufman does not claim that a potent myth-complex is not a sufficient cause of violence, he asserts that

it is a resource that can be deployed by political leaders seeking to mobilize violence (hence Kaufman refers to his approach as a “synthesis” that incorporates elements of both “constructivism” and “primordialism”). And the potency of the myths and symbols that evoke memories, real or manufactured, of past abuses by ethnic others is enhanced by the fact that those responsible for those abuses, as well as their descendants, are clearly identifiable members of an out-group. As Kaufman puts it, “an ethnic or nationalist appeal can claim that the ethnic warrior is fighting simultaneously for self-respect (identity), self-interest (material goods), clan survival, clan territory, the propagation of faith, and country, and if the fight is successful the warrior will have achieved immortality (through martyrdom and the defense of progeny) even in death.”²³

This may well be true, but again is there anything distinctive about ethnicity in this regard? Do those who wish to mobilize violence in the name of religion not appeal to self-respect, self-interest, group survival, territorial control, and so on (indeed Kaufman includes “propagation of faith” in his list)?²⁴ Are memories of injustice and a clearly identifiable enemy really unique to ethnic groups? Why are markers of religious cleavages any less visible than ethnic markers? Do Iraqi Shiites have greater difficulty identifying Sunnis as “members of an out-group” than Hutus have identifying Tutsis? Is a “myth-symbol complex” not used by the organizers of any kind of political violence? Are those who try to mobilize violence on the basis of class solidarities reluctant to appeal to emotive imaginary? Lenin was happy to charge the Russian aristocracy and bourgeoisie with a long history of repression and brutality, and he drew on a rich “myth-symbol complex” to mobilize the proletariat and peasantry to take up arms. Why would an ethnic myth-symbol complex be more potent than a religious myth-symbol complex as a mobilizer of violence – is the myth of Karbala any less powerful an emotive symbol for Shiites in Iraq than the myth of the Field of the Blackbirds is for Serbs in the Balkans? In fact, Mark Juergensmeyer seems to imply rather the opposite in his book on contemporary religious extremism. Religious warfare, he asserts, not only involves myths and symbols – the tropes of what he calls “cosmic war” – but indeed does so even more than other kinds of warfare:

... images of divine warfare are persistent features of religious activism. They provide the content and the themes that are played in the grand scenarios that lie behind contemporary

actors of performance violence. In many cases these images are not new but are a part of the heritage of religious traditions that stretch back to antiquity, and abundant examples of warfare may be found in such texts.²⁵

Nor does it seem to me that the narratives and mythologies that promote “ethnic” conflict are clearly different in kind from those that promote religious conflict. Certainly both can be employed to legitimate political authority. Consider the following passage from Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* in his chapter on the increasing scale of political communities since pre-history:

[One] way for Kleptocrats [his term for the leaders of “chiefdoms”] to gain public support is to construct an ideology or religion justifying kleptocracy. Bands and tribes already had supernatural beliefs, just as do modern established religions. But the supernatural beliefs of bands and tribes did not serve to justify central authority, justify transfer of wealth, or maintain peace between unrelated individuals. When supernatural beliefs gained those functions and became institutionalized, they were thereby transformed into what we term a religion

Besides justifying the transfer of wealth to kleptocrats, institutionalized religion brings two other important benefits to centralized societies. First, shared ideology or religion helps solve the problem of how unrelated individuals are to live together without killing each other – by providing them with a bond not based on kinship. Second, it gives people a motive, other than generic self-interest, for sacrificing their lives on behalf of others. At the cost of a few society members who die in battle as soldiers, the whole society becomes much more effective at conquering other societies or resisting attacks.²⁶

If so, then religion has been employed by political elites since the emergence of “chiefdoms” some 6,000 years ago to legitimate their rule and encourage subjects to risk their lives in the service of their community or sovereign. Religion, as often as kinship, has been used to bind together political communities – one of many means by which “imagined political communities” are constructed. And of course religious wars have a millennia-long – and extremely bloody – history. Indeed, historically they have been responsible for far more mayhem than “ethnic wars.”

This brings us to the relationship between ethnic conflict and modernity. The usually implicit claim here is that nationalism in general and ethno-nationalism in particular are products of modernization, whereas religion, at least as a mode of political thought, is anachronistic.²⁷ The advantages of linguistic homogenization, along with the spread of literacy (or Anderson’s “print capitalism”), create the need and opportunity to “invent the nation,” such that the entire *demos*, regardless of class or status, is

now re-imagined as part of an extended political family. In the words of Ernest Gellner, “[W]hen general social conditions make for standardized, homogenous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit with which men willingly and ardently identify.”²⁸

It may be that nations, and more convincingly nationalism, are indeed modern phenomena, but this is not to say that nationalism is “modernist” in the sense that it accepts reason as a lodestone – on the contrary, nationalism is as much an anti-Enlightenment ideology rooted in 19th-century romanticism as it is a child of reason and enlightened patriotism. Why, then, should we assume that faith-based ideologies are any more anachronistic as mobilizers of violence than romantic ethno-nationalism? Moreover, even if we accept that a common language and culture are conducive to socioeconomic modernization, it is far from clear that religion is any less effective as a basis for nationhood than language, particularly given the nature of the state boundaries left behind by colonialism. Why, for example, should we assume that Arab nationalism, with Arabic as the marker of the boundaries of the political community, is more appealing an ideology to Iraqis than pan-Islamism, particularly given the linguistic diversity of the country? Is the political project of Islamists, who are committed to constructing the global *umma* into an “imagined community,” less credible than the project of the pan-Arabists who wish to construct a nation out of Arabic speakers?

Nor is it clear why rationality and reason are more effective than romanticism and mysticism in mobilizing militant resistance, particularly given the fact that the dominant governing ideology, democratic-liberalism, is secular and reason-based. It is, after all, the disruptions of “modernization” – which most associate with liberal democracy – and its presumed consequences (secularization, social atomization, self-interested individualism, sexual freedom) that many militants find objectionable. Moreover, it seems that faith-based and anti-rationalist ideologies of resistance are as capable as their secular counterparts (e.g., Marxism) of offering persuasive explanations for why things have gone wrong, identifying who is to blame, demonstrating why militancy is required to set things right, and providing a transformative prescription for a Brave New World. They also have the notable advantage over their reason-

based competitors that are very difficult to refute on the basis of contrary evidence: secular and rationalist ideologies may not require positive proof of the validity of their claims, but they can at least be undermined if their prosaic claims are disproved in practice. The claims of faith-based ideologies, in contrast, are at least partly impervious to refutation – one cannot disprove the assertion that Islamic governance makes it easier for Muslims to enter Paradise.

In sum, it is not clear why ethnic conflict is significantly different from other kinds of conflict in terms of etiology, or why theories of “ethnic conflict” explain ethnic conflict rather than any conflict, including those inspired by religion. What we seem to have is a case of selection on the dependent variable – the prevalence of ethnic conflict is taken for granted, the objective being to explain why there is ethnic violence in some cases but not others. Unexplained is why ethnic conflict is more, or less, common than other kinds of conflict, or why it becomes more common at certain moments than others.

To illustrate some of these points, I turn now to the three cases – the conflicts in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Chechnya. As noted earlier, I pick these three cases because (1) on close inspection they are rather more difficult to categorize than is typically assumed, above all because the character of each conflict changed significantly over time; (2) there are striking similarities in terms of structural antecedents between the three cases, despite the fact that they are typically categorized as different types of internal conflicts; and (3) they are suggestive of *why* the nature of internal conflict changes over time.

NATIONAL LIBERATION, HOLY WAR, CIVIL WAR, AND INTERSTATE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

The conflict in Afghanistan lasted, virtually without interruption, for over a quarter century, during which time it underwent dramatic changes. It began in 1978 as a rural-based resistance, led by tribal leaders, village elders, and the traditional clergy, to the heavy-handed modernizing policies of a Marxist government that had seized power in Kabul that April.²⁹ Initially, the rebellion was concentrated in Nuristan in the Hindu Kush near the Pakistan border, the Tajik-dominated areas of the northeast, and the Hazarajat, home of the mostly Shia Hazara, in the central highlands of the country. Pashtuns, who

dominated the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the Marxist ruling party, which was led at the time by Nur Muhamed Taraki and dominated by its more moderate faction, the Parcham, for the most part did not participate. However, as the policies of the PDPA became more intrusive, particularly after Hafizullah Amin, the leader of the PDPA's radical Khalq faction, took over in Kabul, the resistance spread to Pashtun areas.³⁰ By mid-1979, the fighting had spread throughout the country, including to urban areas, notably Herat and Jalalabad.

With the insurgency gaining force, the Soviet government decided to increase its support for its fraternal allies to the south, which led to increasing Soviet casualties. Moscow was also concerned that Amin's "revolution from above" – forced collectivization, efforts to undermine the *ulema* in the countryside, attacks on Islam in general, and the emancipation of women – were ill-considered and premature attempts to bring socialism to a feudal society. Not only had Amin's radicalism sparked a costly insurgency, it risked precipitating the collapse of a self-professed communist government in a country that bordered the USSR. In addition, there were signs that the United States was beginning to assist the insurgency. Worse, Moscow feared that the independent-minded Amin, despite his programmatic radicalism, would seek Western support, breaking with Moscow much as Sadat had in Egypt.

The result was a massive invasion of the country by Soviet troops beginning on December 24, 1979. Within weeks, some 80,000-90,000 Soviet troops were in Afghanistan, their apparent mission being not just the establishment of a pro-Moscow government but the decisive suppression of the insurgency. Amin was killed in the early hours of the invasion, apparently by Soviet special forces, and replaced by Babrak Karmal, leader of the moderate wing of the PDPA.

Predictably, the invasion transformed what had been a defense of tradition into a war of resistance against an imperialist aggressor and its puppet government in Kabul. Even before the

invasion, the insurgents had been referring to the struggle as a jihad and calling themselves mujahideen, but the Soviet invasion ensured that nationalism and Islamism would become even more intertwined in the mobilizing discourse of the resistance – defense of tradition meant opposition to the radically secularist policies of an atheist and alien Communist government.

The Afghan resistance was, however, largely decentralized and divided. Eventually, seven “Peshawar” parties (named after the Pakistani city where their headquarters were based) were recognized by the Pakistani government, which funneled American and Saudi financial aid and weapons to the mujahideen and thereby influenced the organization of resistance. There were also four Shia parties, which were eventually forced by the Iranians, on whom they relied for support as much as the Sunni groups relied on the Pakistanis, to unite into a single group, Hezb-i-Wahdat.³¹ Of the seven Sunni Peshawar parties, four were referred to as “Islamic,” three as “traditionalist.” The distinction, however, was rather arbitrary.³² In practice, each was “Islamic” in that it supported the enforcement of Shari’a (even if there were different understandings of what Shari’a entailed).³³ Each was also fundamentally anti-communist, but none in any obvious sense liberal or democratic, at least as those terms are normally understood in the West. Each viewed the conflict as a defense of tradition, including the traditional syncretic form of Islam practiced in Afghanistan, with the possible exception of the radical wing of Hizb-i-Islami, which under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was, and remains, militantly Islamist and fundamentalist in orientation.³⁴ Finally, each was essentially nationalist – not even Hekmatyar called for the establishment of a Caliphate extending beyond the borders of Afghanistan, identified the global *ummah* as his constituency, or advocated the redrawing Afghanistan’s borders.³⁵

Despite the absence of clear ideological differences, the parties in the resistance had different linguistic, lineage (tribe, clan, etc.), and regional roots. The Shi’a parties naturally drew their support

from the traditionally Shi'a Hazaras and Kizilbash in the west and central highlands. Among the Peshawar parties, support for the Hizb-i-Islami came from the Ghilzai tribal grouping of Pashtuns in east-central and northeastern Afghanistan and from deracinated Pashtun refugees in Pakistan. Support for Burhanuddin Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami party (to which the celebrated commanders Ahmed Shah Massoud and Ismail Khan belonged) came primarily from Persian speakers (Tajiks).³⁶ The three "traditionalist" parties were primarily Pashtun, but one, Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami, was supported mostly by the Pashtun *ulema* in the rural south, which helps explain why it would later contribute to the rise of the Taliban despite its "traditionalist" label. Later, Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former general in the pro-Soviet Afghan army, would dominate Uzbek-majority regions in the north.

The one element of relative consistency in the struggle was military/political objective. The government wanted to defeat the resistance and retain power in Kabul. The resistance (with the exception of its foreigner allies) wanted to drive the Soviets (understood as "Russians") from the country and seize power in Kabul. Neither Hizb-i-Islami nor (later) the Taliban was committed to waging jihad beyond the borders of Afghanistan. And no element within the resistance advocated secession or challenged Afghanistan's territorial integrity.³⁷

Some nine years after the invasion and the death of an estimated 15,000 Soviet soldiers, Moscow announced that it would withdraw within the year. The last Soviet troops crossed the Amu Darya in April 1989, by which time Karmal had been replaced by another pro-Soviet leader, Najibullah, formerly head of the Afghan secret police. To the surprise of many, Najibullah managed to hang onto power until 1992. When Kabul finally fell to the mujahideen that year, the semi-unity of the resistance collapsed and the country degenerated into factional fighting and chaos.

One consequence was a hardening of ethnic identities, as Tajiks under Massoud fought

Pashtuns under Hekmatyar who fought Uzbeks under Dostum. The chaos also laid the foundation for the rise of the Taliban, which, despite its pretensions to being an all-Muslim organization, was essentially Pashtun in make-up and, more importantly, was seen as a Pashtun organization by most of the population. Pashtuns were therefore blamed for the bloodletting that accompanied the Taliban's rise to power, and in particular for the massacre of Uzbeks and Tajiks in and around Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997.³⁸ Anti-Pashtun sentiments, along with the excesses and arbitrariness of Taliban rule, help account for the popular support U.S. and coalition forces would receive in 2001.

The Afghan war was thus a protracted and dynamic conflict that could plausibly be characterized as a war of national liberation, a holy war, an ethnic or tribal conflict, a civil war, and (in 2002 at least) an interstate war. It began as a rural-based defense of tradition in the face of an aggressively modernizing Marxist national government. With the Soviet invasion, it became a war of national resistance to imperial occupation driven by civic (Afghanistan) rather than ethnic (Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, etc.) nationalism. Islamism was important from the start, but it became more so after the external backers of the resistance – Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and (indirectly) the United States – marginalized secular nationalists and liberals. The Islamist parties, with the exception of Hezb-i-Islami, were nevertheless nationalist rather than internationalist, and they accepted the traditional forms of Islam that were linked to national and subnational traditions. Only with the rise of the Taliban did Deobandi-type fundamentalism become a dominant ideological force, and even then the Taliban (unlike many of the foreign jihadis) was essentially Islamo-nationalist in orientation. As for lines of cleavage, while Afghanistan has long had an informal ethnic hierarchy, with Pashtuns at the top and Hazaras at the bottom, ethno-linguistic cleavages were initially of marginal importance. Nevertheless, different factions of the resistance recruited variously from different ethnic communities. Ethno-linguistic cleavages also

became considerably more salient as a result of the conflict itself, particularly after the factional fighting that followed the fall of the Najibullah government and then with the rise of the Taliban. In short, it is impossible to place the Afghan conflict into a neat typological box, and any theory that attempted to explain the outbreak of violence in 1978 would be very unlikely to explain, for example, the rise of the Taliban or the gradual ethnicization of the conflict.

CIVIL WAR IN TAJIKISTAN³⁹

The violence in Tajikistan of 1992-1997 is rarely, if ever, characterized as an “ethnic” conflict. Instead it is treated as a “civil war,” presumably because most of those involved spoke Tajik as their first language and/or were categorized as Tajik by Soviet nationality policy, and because it entailed a struggle for control of the national government rather than separatism. By contrast, the conflict in Chechnya is an “ethnic conflict” because most of those on one side of the barricades spoke Chechen (at least at home) while most on the other side spoke Russian, and because the contending political objectives are separatism vs. the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation (as discussed below). Nevertheless, as in Chechnya, the violence in Tajikistan began as a conflict between a conservative Soviet political establishment and an anti-Communist opposition inspired primarily by ethno-nationalism.⁴⁰ It also began at roughly the same time as the Chechen conflict, and more-or-less in the same political ideological context when romantic ethno-nationalism prevailed across much of the former Soviet Union and the Soviet state was in the process of collapsing.

One notable difference, however, was the fact that an Islamist party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), played an important role in the drama from the beginning.⁴¹ In no other union republic or autonomous area was this the case. In part, the IRPT’s role reflected the strength of underground political Islam in Tajikistan dating back to the 1970s – by 1982, three years before Gorbachev’s selection as Soviet leader, there were reportedly some 20 illegal madrasas (Islamic secondary schools) in the republic.⁴² Moreover, not only does Tajikistan border on Afghanistan, but there are more Tajiks in Afghanistan than Tajikistan; and, as we have seen, the Afghan Tajiks played a central

role in the *mujahideen* resistance to Soviet occupation. As a result, anti-Soviet Tajiks in Tajikistan were influenced by the Islamist ideologies of the resistance parties and inspired by the success of their fellow Tajiks in Afghanistan in humiliating the Soviet military, particularly the role played by two legendary commanders, Ahmed Shah Masoud and Ismail Khan, both of whom were Persian speakers.⁴³ And proximity to Afghanistan meant greater access to weapons and financing once the Soviet state began to weaken in the late Gorbachev era.

The political program of the IRPT was, however, moderate. Led by Said Abdullo Nuri, the IRPT advocated the establishment of a democratic and secular state that would respect freedom of religion.⁴⁴ Only after the Islamic consciousness of Tajikistan's Muslims was gradually raised would a peaceful transition to some form of Islamic governance be effected. The IRPT also accepted the "syncretic" form of Islam traditionally practiced by Tajiks, including Sufism, which helps account for the support it received from Tajikistan's grand mufti, Qazi Akbar Turajonzoda. The nationalist orientation of the IRPT, and its general commitment to equality and community-based democracy, likewise helps account for its alliance with democratic and nationalist forces. In 1991, the Islamo-nationalists in IRPT would cooperate with cultural nationalists in a movement called Rastokhez and nationalist democrats in the Democratic Party of Tajikistan to support a single candidate for the presidency, Dovlat Khudanazarov. Once the civil war broke out, they formed the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which became the dominant force opposing the government.

At first blush, then, the Tajik civil war had an essentially ideological cast to it – a neo-Communist nomenklatura faced off against a coalition of moderate Islamists, democrats, and nationalists. This, however, was at best part of the story, and as time passed an increasingly less important part. In the first place, there was an ethnic dimension to the conflict. Uzbeks, who made up 23 percent of the population according to the 1989 census (and who included, under Soviet nationality designations, not only Uzbeks but also Central Asian Arabs, Karluks, and Laqays), were concentrated in the more industrialized and wealthier northern district of Leninabad (now Viloyati Sugd), in Hissar province to the west of Dushanbe, and in Kurgan Tyube oblast' in the south, all of which bordered on Uzbekistan.⁴⁵ Many Tajiks worried that an independent Uzbekistan would aspire to its "rightful" role as hegemon in

the region, use “stranded” Uzbeks to make claims on Tajik territory, or both.⁴⁶ Russians comprised some 11 percent of the population and were concentrated in Dushanbe (where almost half the population was comprised of non-Central Asian nationalities) and in the more industrialized areas of the north and west. Russians were disproportionately represented in the government and tended to have higher paying managerial and blue collar jobs in industry.⁴⁷ Their relatively privileged status in a republic that was not their “own” was predictably resented by many Tajiks.⁴⁸ The initial effort to unseat the nomenklatura was thus in part directed at ensuring that Tajiks, and not Russians or Uzbeks, would control the organs of state power. At the same time, “Pamiris” (a cluster of ethno-linguistic groups who speak various eastern Iranian languages and are mostly Isma’ili Muslims) from the Gorno-Badashkhan Autonomous Oblast’ (today’s Mukhtar viloyati Kukhistani Badashkhan) formed an ethno-religious party, La’li Badakhshon, which would eventually become part of the UTO.

More important, however, were regional cleavages. During collectivization, Tajiks living in the mountainous central district of Garm, particularly those in the high elevation Karategin and Tavildara valleys, had been forcibly relocated to lowland areas to work in newly established collective farms in the south.⁴⁹ Most were settled in the southeastern region of Kurgan Tyube (which after the war ended was united with Kulab Oblast’ to form Viloyati Khalton), where for the most part they remained compactly settled in rural villages and retained their regional accents, practices, and identities, as well as ties to family and clan members still in the highlands. While they were relatively prosperous compared to other Tajiks and Uzbeks in the south, they were underrepresented in Dushanbe, which since the 1930s had been dominated by Tajiks from Leninabad Oblast’ in the north.⁵⁰ The “Garmis” saw themselves as purer “Tajiks,” more “Iranian” than the Turkicized (and later Russified) lowlanders and urban dwellers who had been classified as Tajiks by the Soviets.⁵¹ The Garmis, along with Pamiris, played an important role in the popular mobilization that forced the president of the republic and former Communist Party First Secretary to resign in the summer of 1991 after he appeared to support the leaders of the failed August 1991 coup in Moscow. They therefore expected to be well represented in any new government. They were soon convinced, however, that the post-coup government was controlled by Leninabadis allied with “Kulabis” (Tajiks from Kulab Oblast’ in the south), who had by then formed an

alliance with the traditional nomenklatura and with Uzbeks. When the war broke out in May 1992, the fighters of the opposition (soon the UTO) were mostly ethnic Tajiks from Kurgan Tyube and the central highlands (Garmis), who were supported to some degree by Parimis (classified as Tajiks under Soviet nationality policy but not native Tajik speakers) from Gorno-Badakhshan. Most of the pro-government fighters, in contrast, were Tajiks from Kulab and Uzbeks (the fighting did not spread across the mountains to the north into Leninabad).⁵² With the possible exception of Georgia in late 1991 to early 1992, the Tajik civil war was the only case of sustained political violence accompanying the Soviet collapse in which the line on internal passports indicating the region in which one was born was more important in determining who would kill whom than the line designating nationality.⁵³ At the same time, however, the bloodshed increased the salience of nationality, as Uzbeks killed Tajiks and Tajiks killed Uzbeks.⁵⁴

As the conflict progressed, these already complex and opaque lines of cleavage grew even more ramified and obscure. In September, the opposition briefly took control of Dushanbe, but a pro-government militia called the Popular Front, led by a convicted murderer, counterattacked and, with considerable help from Moscow and Tashkent, retook the capital in December. However, the governing coalition began to fracture almost immediately, to the point that two of its leading military commanders would kill each other at a meeting in 1993. Kulabis within the pro-government alliance feared they would be attacked by Uzbeks from the Hissari and Kurgan Tyube regions with backing from Tashkent, while Leninabadis resented the growing political power of the Kulabis, whose armed militias controlled Dushanbe and much of the south. Imomali Rakhmonov, who became president in November 1992, was also a Kulabi, and Kulabis would eventually prevail in procedurally-suspect parliamentary elections in February 1995. The Leninabadis responded by threatening to secede and rejoin Uzbekistan, although they, too, were hardly united – for example, political elites in Mastchah district in Leninabad had long been at odds with elites in the oblast capital.⁵⁵ Friction between the Kulabis and their erstwhile Uzbek allies also helped precipitate an uprising in 1996, led by Mahmud Khodaberdayev, the commander of a brigade of pro-government troops in Kurgan-Tyube, and Ibod Boimatov, a former mayor of the capital of Hissar.⁵⁶ By then, the government forces were dominated by “[t]hose who held the guns, rather than those who controlled the factories and party personnel.”⁵⁷

The UTO, too, was becoming rather less of a coalition. Many of its secular members had fled to Moscow after being driven from Dushanbe, while its Pamiri supporters had retreated to the highlands of Gorno-Badashkhan, where they declared autonomy and kept the national government at bay. The great bulk of the armed resistance to the Kulabi-controlled government after 1993 was carried out by IRP units who had fled to northern Afghanistan, where they recruited from the large community of Tajik refugees and received support from Afghan Islamist parties, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the international jihadi movement.⁵⁸

With the partial exception of the IRPT's, the ideologies of the contending parties to the conflict became less important as the country degenerated into a state of semi-anarchy, warlordism, and crime fueled by smuggling, hostage taking, and narcotics production. The intensity of violence diminished significantly after 1993, but a formal end to the conflict did not come until June 1997. The Taliban had seized Kabul in 1996, at which point it moved to take control of northern Afghanistan. As a result, Moscow's concerns deepened about the spread of Islamist militancy from Afghanistan into Central Asia and from there on to the North Caucasus and other parts of Russia. Tashkent and Teheran were similarly opposed to a Taliban victory in the north. The only force capable of preventing the Taliban from taking over the entire country, however, was Massoud, who, as noted earlier, was supporting the IRPT. To facilitate greater support for Massoud, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Iran stepped up pressure on Dushanbe to reach an accommodation with the IRPT. The outcome was the peace treaty of 1997, which provided for the legalization of the IRPT, the integration of opposition militias into Tajikistan's armed forces, parliamentary and presidential elections, the legalization of the IRP, and set-asides for the UTO in government. The immediate losers from the agreement were the government's former allies, the Leninabadis (now Khujandis) and the Uzbeks. Soon, however, the IRPT would also fare poorly. It received only 7.5 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections in 2000, well behind Rakhmonov's party, and today is relatively marginalized in Tajik politics.⁵⁹

How, then, to characterize the Tajik conflict? Lines of cleavage and mobilizing ideologies were multiple, obscure, and variable over time. The parties to the conflict were divided to one degree or another by region, language, culture, and kinship, although in general regional ties were most important.

Nationalism, Islamism, unreformed Communism, reform Communism, liberalism, and democratism all contributed to mobilizing the contending parties, particularly initially. Over time, the ideological content of the conflict became less important, the lines of cleavage even more blurry. Only the military objective of the warring groups remained relatively unchanged – control of the national government in Dushanbe. This “de-ideologization” of the conflict is in dramatic contrast to what has taken place in Chechnya.

“ETHNIC CONFLICT” IN CHECHNYA

For the most part, the conflict in Chechnya began as a straightforward secessionist struggle pitting a Chechen “national liberation” movement against an internationally recognized state (the Russian Federation). The dominant line of cleavage was thus linguistic/cultural. On one side were people who shared a common language, culture, historical narrative, and identity as Chechens, and who had been categorized as Chechens under Soviet law. On the other side was the Russian state whose fighters were either Russian by nationality or spoke Russian while in the military, and who were therefore understood by the warring parties to be “Russians” (even if some were Tatars, Ukrainians, or Bashkirs by nationality). With respect to ideology, the Chechens were mobilized by ethno-nationalism; the Russians by what might be called “statism” (in the limited sense of defense of the Russian state’s territorial integrity) as well as by a muted form of ethno-nationalism (“we citizens of Russia must defend both ourselves and our age-old multinational state against bandits, terrorists, and separatists”). As for objectives, the Chechens fought for independence, while the Russians sought to deny them that independence and to preserve Russia’s territorial integrity. In short, it made some sense initially to refer to the Chechen-Russian conflict as an “ethnic” one.

Objectively, of course, the warring parties were also divided by religion – traditionally most Russians were Russian Orthodox while most Chechens were Sunni Muslims and Sufis. But virtually all close observers of the conflict agreed that religion had little, if anything, to do with the conflict at its inception, and Islam played a very limited role in helping to mobilize Chechen nationalism. Islamic

beliefs and practices had survived sovietization, remaining part of everyday life, particularly in rural and highland areas, and Chechens continued to venerate Sufi saints, make shrine pilgrimages, and engage in traditional life cycle rituals such as marriages and funerals that were understood as Islamic in nature. But while being Muslim was part of Chechen self-identity, it was not a particularly salient part of that identity – there is no evidence, for example, that religiosity among Chechens was particularly high.⁶⁰ The center of Islamic learning in the North Caucasus was in Dagestan, to Chechnya’s east.

What certainly characterized the Chechens at the time of the Soviet dissolution was a deep consciousness of being a distinct people (or “nationality,” in Soviet terminology).⁶¹ According to the 1989 census, 98.1 percent of Chechens listed Chechen as their “first language,” and many highlanders spoke Russian poorly, if at all.⁶² Most Chechens familiarized themselves with their family histories, paid homage to their ancestors, were aware of their clan (*teip*) affiliation, and gave preferential treatment to fellow Chechens, clan members, and villagers. And many in rural and highland areas continued to abide by customary law (*adat*). As one Russian specialist wrote about the republic in the late Soviet period:

Everything looked quite normal from the outside: . . . [the] Party secretary [a Russian] would have a seat on every proper panel and even enjoy general respect. According to informal arrangements, however, that was the limit of Soviet rule in the republic. The Chechens were loyal, and Moscow did not intrude. The Soviet Criminal Code was never really in operation there, and neither the [interior ministry police] nor [the] public prosecutor office men insisted on [the application of Soviet criminal law], preferring to let the Chechens deal with their criminals themselves according to standards that, though considered to be religious, were actually a tradition that had nothing to do with religion.⁶³

The Chechens were not any nationality, however. Like most, they took pride in their own traditions and history. But they also possessed a rich narrative of resistance to, and victimization at the hands of, the Tsarist and Soviet states, most recently in the form of mass deportation from their ancestral homeland during World War II.⁶⁴ They were, moreover, first and foremost Chechens – not Avars, Laks, Azeris, nor any of the USSR’s other Muslim peoples. And they mobilized as Chechens – not as Vainakhs in unity with their Ingush cousins, not as highlanders, not as North Caucasians, not as part of the community of peoples of the Caucasus as a whole, and not as de-ethnicized, supranational Muslims of the *umma* (the global Islamic community).⁶⁵

Rather than supranational loyalties to Islam or the Caucasus, it was the strength of sub-national solidarities of the clan, region, village, and tariqat that constituted the greatest threat to Chechen national unity. These internal divisions, along with the arming of the population from the looting of Soviet military arsenals, a thriving black market in arms, and a profound economic downturn, help account for the difficulty the breakaway republic's first president, Dzhokhar Dudayev, had in maintaining order after independence was declared in late 1991.⁶⁶ It was at this point, as the republic drifted into banditry, warlordism, and anarchy and the West refused to help, that Dudayev reached out to the Islamic world for support. At the same time, he attempted, rather implausibly, to reconstruct himself as a Muslim.⁶⁷ Even then, however, he hedged his bets by continuing to appeal to the West for assistance, and he continued to use overwhelming nationalist rather than Islamist discourse. Moreover, Dudayev's calls for greater Islamic solidarity was met with little response from the Chechen people.

When the first war broke out with Moscow in late 1994, then, both academics and journalists were quick to assert that the religious differences between the contending parties were irrelevant. As in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, where traditional Muslims also fought against traditional Christians (for the most part at least – traditionally Christian Armenians in Abkhazia sided with traditionally Muslim Abkhaz against traditionally Christian Georgians), it was ethno-nationalism, not Islamism, that mobilized the Chechen resistance. Nevertheless, appeals to Islam and Islamism were embraced almost immediately by the Chechen resistance. As early as spring 1995, Chechen fighters were wearing green headbands, calling the war a jihad (or the Chechen equivalent, *ghazavat*), referring to themselves as mujahideen, and employing “Allah-u-Akhbar” as a battle cry. In March 1995, Dudayev decreed the establishment of Sharia courts throughout the republic, which were to operate alongside secular courts. While the decree proved ineffectual, some of the Chechen “field commanders” (the more-or-less autonomous leaders of independent armed formations) began to resort to a simplified and harsh version of Sharia to discipline their troops, while some – notably Shamil Basayev – began to employ the discourse of militant internationalist jihadism. Islamism, it seemed, provided an inspirational vision of successful resistance to imperial (and infidel) aggression – the mujahideen resistance in Afghanistan in particular suggested that the Chechens, like the Afghans, could defeat their Russian enemy. Moreover,

sacrificing one's life in defense of Islam meant martyrdom and certain entry into Paradise, a reward that ethno-nationalism could not offer. There were also material benefits, including financing from Islamic charitable organizations and the international jihadi movement, as well as the arrival of non-Chechen jihadis to fight the federal forces.⁶⁸

For the most part, however, Islamist symbols and discourse were incorporated into, and subordinated to, the prevailing themes of Chechen ethno-nationalism and national self-determination during the first war. For most Chechens, the objective was clear – drive the Russian military from their homeland. They were not fighting on behalf of Muslims elsewhere or to establish a global Caliphate. Indeed, most Chechens were wary of the foreign jihadis – known as “Wahhabis” – with their strange clothes, foreign accents, and peculiar ideas about Islam.⁶⁹ The preference for internal order, political secularism, and traditional rather than orthodox or fundamentalist Islam was confirmed after the first war ended. Dudayev had been killed by a Russian missile in April 1996, and his replacement as the resistance's effective leader, Aslan Maskhadov, was a pragmatic nationalist (he had been the critical negotiator of the ceasefire agreement in the summer of 1996). Maskhadov was elected president in January 1997 in what were widely regarded as free and reasonably fair elections, winning handily over Yandarbiyev, Movladi Udugov (the “propagandist” of the resistance), and Basayev, each of whom had by then embraced a more radical Islamist agenda.

Despite the rejection of Islamism by the Chechen electorate, Maskhadov quickly adopted an Islamist agenda. He banned alcohol sales, renamed the state the “Islamic Republic of Ichkeria” (it had been “the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria”), and made a genuine effort (unlike Dudayev) to implement Sharia, allowing a number public executions of people convicted by Islamic courts, at least one of which was televised.⁷⁰ He also began to use Islamist idiom in his public speeches. Chechnya had been physically devastated by the war, the public was heavily armed, and Moscow was in no position to help with nation- or state-building, even assuming it had wanted to. Even more than before the war, there was also a pandemic of kidnappings and murders, to the point that international humanitarian organizations closed down their operations in the republic. And Maskhadov faced powerful opposition from former field commanders such as Basayev, who controlled their own militias, refused to disarm, and

rejected the writ of Maskhadov's fledgling government in areas under their control. Maskhadov thus faced a profound state-building challenge. Straightforward Chechen ethno-nationalism, however, was of little help. The Chechen national narrative romanticized the warrior traditions of the highlanders, reinforced traditional kinship ties and other subnational loyalties, and mythologized the rugged democracy, egalitarianism, and absence of class distinctions that was said to characterize the traditional Chechen way of life. At the same time, it disparaged hierarchy, centralized authority, and the norms of legal rationalism. What was left for state-building was Islamism – anti-Russian and anti-Western, yet reasonably compatible with Chechen traditions. Islamism also allowed Maskhadov to co-opt the platform of his rivals to use Sharia to bring order to the streets. And establishing an Islamic republic meant continuing political and financial assistance from charitable organizations, jihadist networks, and Muslim-majority states abroad.

Maskhadov's Islamism, however, had a Chechen face. Even more than in Afghanistan or Tajikistan, the Islamism of the Chechen resistance, at least until recently, was overlaid by a powerful nationalist hue. Thus, despite calling for the implementation of Sharia, Maskhadov called repeatedly for the establishment of a specifically Chechen state. He was also circumspect about endorsing international jihad, and he argued that "Wahhabi" fundamentalism was alien to Chechen traditions. And he asserted that the Wahhabis were being financed by outsiders (naming Saudi Arabia specifically) who wished to impose an alien and repressive form of governance in Chechnya. As he put it emphatically in an interview in early 1999, "We [Chechens] are [Sufi] Sunnites, and there is no place for any other Islamic sect in Chechnya." To combat the Wahhabis, he called for the establishment of armed groups in each village and exhorted them to "Drive them away from our villages! Restore order!"⁷¹

Maskhadov's effort to use Sharia to maintain discipline and Islamism to build state authority were disappointed. Sharia was implemented only haphazardly and superficially, in part because few Chechens had any knowledge of what it entailed, let alone formal training.⁷² Rather, what reasserted itself was customary law (*adat*), as one Russian observer noted:

Nothing that had been hastily borrowed from the Koran as acts of law took root. What remained was the Adat which in the haste was confused with the Sharia. The vendetta. The

villagers' common gathering instead of a court. Banishment from the village as punishment, without cutting off hands. For a time gaping crowds would flock to watch a public flogging that was more humiliating than painful, but this too soon tapered off. The authorities reconciled themselves to the reality just as the tsars and general secretaries before them had done.⁷³

The interwar period came to an end in the August of 1999 when Basayev and Khattab led two incursions into Dagestan, the intent of which was to establish an Islamic republic in central Dagestan.⁷⁴

There followed a series of terrorist bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow and southern Russia that killed 236. Putin, who had only recently been appointed prime minister by Yeltsin, responded by ordering a second invasion of Chechnya by the Russian military.

The second war, which continues to this day, has been characterized by the almost universal embrace of Islamism by the resistance. There are, however, important ideological differences among the Islamists.⁷⁵ Maskhadov, for example, remained an Islamo-nationalist, as he made clear in an interview prior to his death at the hands of Russian troops in March 2005:

It has to be understood that what we describe as a military and political conflict is effectively a conflict between incompatible civilizations, a confrontation of differing worlds. . . . It is not Ichkeria which is fighting against Russia today, but Chechen civil society [which] is struggling to preserve Ichkeria as a national institution, whose function is to secure the sovereignty of the Chechen nation for the further revitalization of Chechen civilization. This is still a civilization, which, though destroyed, is ahead of the world's most progressive countries in terms of levels of development and the political consciousness of society. The Chechen people are waging a national liberation war against the intruders, and a Holy Jihad in the path of Allah (praise be upon him), against an effectively godless and atheist country.⁷⁶

As far as Maskhadov was concerned, then, the Chechens were fighting to defend their unique Chechen "civilization," not Islam, even if the Chechens were faithful to "the divine commandments, norms, and values" of the Qu'ran. For others within the resistance, however, the struggle is first and foremost a defense of fellow Muslims, Islamic land, and the Sharia. For them, ethnicity and nationalism are a divisive distraction, which is why Khattab, prior to his death in March 2002, refused to discuss his ethnic or national background – he was simply a Muslim. Unlike the Islamo-nationalists, who limit the

scope of the struggle to the borders of Chechnya while accepting, often reluctantly, help from foreign mujahideen, the internationalists appeal to all Muslims, Chechens and non-Chechens alike, to join in a jihad for the liberation of all traditionally Muslim land (the Dar-al-Islam) from rule by *kufir* (unbelievers). For them, the jihad in Chechnya is but one front in a multi-front war.⁷⁷

There are other differences between Islamo-nationalists and internationalists among the resistance as well. The former generally advocate the establishment of an “Islamic republic” where Islam will be the established religion, but it is a version of Islam that accommodates traditional Chechen culture and practices, is relatively tolerant of non-Muslims, and does not entail a rigid and totalistic interpretation of Sharia. The internationalists, by contrast, adopt a literalist position on scripture, advocate a harsh and expansive interpretation of Sharia that discriminates harshly against non-Muslims and women, and advocate the use of state power to impose their own version of religious fundamentalism on the populace. There are also differences over means – whereas the Islamo-nationalists tend to reject terrorism and limit their armed struggle to attacks on Russian soldiers, Russian officials, and Chechen collaborators, the internationalists tend to adopt the bin Laden view that there is no such thing as an innocent civilian or non-combatant when it comes to Holy War in defense of Islam.⁷⁸

Cleavages within the Chechen community have deepened in other respects as well. What evidence there is suggests that many Chechens – and possibly a significant majority – would be willing to forgo independence in return for a restoration of order in the republic and an end to arbitrary violence and repression. There is also now a relatively large – and brutal – collection of armed groups at least nominally under the command of the pro-Moscow Chechen government in Grozny that is carrying out much of the fighting against the insurgency. The largest and best known of these is commanded by Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the late president of the pro-Moscow Chechen government, Akhmed Kadyrov, who was killed by the resistance in May 2004.⁷⁹

Further complicating the picture is the emergence of an apparently loose network of militant Islamist groups, referred to as *jamaats*, that profess solidarity with Basayev and have become increasingly active in the North Caucasus outside of Chechnya. There have been increasingly frequent clashes between the *jamaats* and federal and regional security forces in Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia,

Kabardino-Balkaria, and elsewhere. Terrorist incidents in the region are also becoming increasingly frequent, particularly in Dagestan. Putin has responded by instructing the Russian security services to step up efforts against “extremists” throughout the North Caucasus even as regional authorities crack down on unaffiliated and unregistered mosques and mullahs.

To sum up, the conflict in and around Chechnya began as a relatively straightforward binary conflict between Chechen separatists mobilized by ethno-nationalism and a Russian state intent on preserving its territorial integrity. Over time, the conflict became increasingly complex, with multiple lines of cleavage, diverse mobilizing ideologies, and a proliferation of objectives. For Moscow, it is no longer simply a war of choice – especially after the Beslan tragedy, it has become an existential struggle against an aggressive, expansionist, and implacable enemy intent on establishing Islamic rule throughout the North Caucasus and perhaps beyond. As for the Chechens, some in the resistance continue to be mobilized primarily by straightforward ethno-nationalism, but far more are Islamo-nationalists. Chechen society, meanwhile, is less united in opposition to a common enemy, and indeed much of the counter-insurgency is now being carried out by Moscow’s Chechen allies. Finally, non-Chechen jihadists from other parts of the North Caucasus or outside of Russia have played an important part in the conflict, and an increasingly important one for non-Chechen militants in the North Caucasus. The insurgency has also spread beyond the borders of Chechnya, all of which suggests that it is no longer really appropriate to refer to the conflict as a specifically “Chechen” one. Again, it can plausibly be characterized today as a civil war among Chechens, a religious war, or (as Moscow would prefer) one front in the “global war on terror.”

SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS AND SPECULATIONS

The first, and most obvious, conclusion is that we should be wary about the notion of “ethnic conflict” as a discrete category of sustained political violence. Not only is the term “ethnic” vague and ambiguous, but it is often difficult to characterize a particular conflict as predominantly “ethnic” or otherwise because ethnicity may be one of many lines of cleavage, or because ethno-nationalism is but one of many mobi-

lizing ideologies. Moreover, lines of cleavage, ideologies, and objectives in any particular conflict can change. At the least, data gathering on types of sustained political violence should accommodate the possibility that a single conflict can be placed in different typological boxes at different times, and possibly even at the same time (or be broken up somehow into discrete individual conflicts).

Second (and rather obviously), we should not assume that the interests and emotions that initiate a conflict are the same as those that sustain it or that affect the possibility of a settlement. Conflicts driven initially by ideology, for example, can degenerate into anarchy and warlordism sustained by a political economy of banditry and smuggling. Key actors may have changing incentives to resist a settlement that have less to do with ideology or the nature of cleavages and more to do with security or material interests, and again this is true regardless of how a particular conflict is categorized. As a result, it seems unlikely that theories of conflict resolution will be variously applicable to ethnic, religious, clan, regional, or other kinds of internal war.

Third, it is by no means obvious that the factors that account for “ethnic” conflict are meaningfully different from those that account for other kinds of internal conflict. Each of the three cases is conventionally categorized differently – the Chechen war as an ethnic conflict, the Tajik violence as a civil war, and the Afghan war as a national liberation struggle or holy war. However, the factors that are typically adduced as facilitating the outbreak of sustained violence in each case are similar. Each was located in a remote and mountainous region (“rough terrain”);⁸⁰ each took place in an area marked by great linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity; each had a tradition of “strong societies-weak states,” with powerful subnational loyalties to family, village, region, clan, tribe, and so on; in each case a significant portion of the population was comprised of highlanders with traditional highlander cultures of village-based individualism, egalitarianism, respect for elders, informal rules for dispute resolution and enforcement, and proficiency in violence; and each was relatively impoverished with high birth rates, rural overpopulation, and high unemployment. To be sure, a sample of three is inadequate for drawing firm conclusions, but the implication is that common structural factors facilitated not any particular form of violence but violence in general.

A fourth, more tentative, conclusion (or perhaps speculation) relates to modes of resistance. In

principle, different modes of violence can be associated with any form of internal conflict regardless of the nature of cleavages, ideologies, or objective. The putatively Marxist Tamil Tigers have carried out a great many suicide bombings and have been as proficient in terrorism as any Islamist group. In practice, however, different modes of resistance are embraced variously by different mobilizing ideologies. Maoists do not imagine armed struggle the way Leninists do, and they fight differently as a result. Likewise Leninists do not fight like liberals, liberals do not fight like Islamists, and so on. In part, these changes flow from the substance of the ideologies themselves (“proletarians to the barricades”). But in part they reflect each ideology’s historically accidental narratives, mythologies, and tropes of armed struggle. As a result, explaining why particular ideologies of resistance are embraced in particular struggles, or why they change over time (e.g., from nationalism to Islamism for many Palestinians), helps explain why modes of resistance change as well – why, for example, suicide terrorism was employed by the Chechen resistance beginning around 2000 despite longstanding claims within the resistance that terrorism and suicide were antithetical to Chechen traditions.

The fifth and final conclusion is that structural and relational factors seem, at best, to be marginally helpful in explaining change in internal conflicts over time, either with respect to single cases such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, or Chechnya, or globally. To be sure, there must be “ethnic” diversity before there is “ethnic” conflict, and it is doubtless true, as common sense suggests, that factors such as ethnic hierarchies, institutionalized discrimination, and inequality help foster the enmity, fear, or envy needed to organize and sustain collective political violence between ethnic groups. Likewise, for there to be “religious” conflict there must be religion as well as religious differences (Islamism is hardly likely to mobilize atheists or Christians), while class warfare is doubtless more likely where living conditions decline for peasants, workers, or what-have-you. But as Lenin well understood, objective conditions are hardly sufficient in the mobilization of violence. Objective grievances must be transformed into subjective ones, and potential militants have to be convinced that the risks and costs of engaging in violence are justified by the benefits, whether spiritual or material.

Today, the most potent mobilizer of militant resistance is Islamism, but Islamism’s appeal seems to have little to do with structurally rooted grievances or relational factors. It has been as potent a

mobilizer of violence in rich and unequal Saudi Arabia as in poor and comparatively egalitarian Chechnya or Afghanistan. Islamist militants are recruited from poor Palestinian and Lebanese families as well as from relatively wealthy and well-educated Muslims in Western Europe. Nor do relational factors help explain why we get militants inspired by Islamism rather than Marxism, nationalism, or liberalism. What seems to matter most is Islamism's competitive success in the marketplace of revolutionary ideas. In part, this is tied to Islamism's militant achievements – defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan, the campaign of terror against the West in the 1990s, its humbling of the United States through the “spectacular martyrdom acts” of September 11, 2001, and now the deadly anti-American insurgency in Iraq (even if much of the insurgency is being carried out by more-or-less secular nationalists). And in part it is explained by the relative weakness of Islamism's ideological competitors. Marxism-Leninism has been enfeebled by its failure to deliver on its prosaic promises in the USSR and Eastern Europe (certainly its weakness cannot be explained by structural change in the class system – China alone has far more poor and exploited workers than Russia in 1917). Maoism, while still a mobilizer of violence in remote parts of the Asian subcontinent and South America, has been weakened by the embrace of capitalism by the Chinese regime founded by Mao (and again, irrespective of the fact that there are as many peasants today in absolute poverty with ample cause for grievance in Mao's time). Ethno-nationalism, meanwhile, has been undermined by the failure of national self-determination to deliver the goods in the Soviet successor states, Eastern Europe, and much of the developing world, despite the fact that there is no reason to believe that there are fewer “nations” with objective grievances than was the case ten or fifteen years ago. And liberal democracy is viewed as the ideology of established power, not an ideology of resistance.

Islamism, in contrast, retains its revolutionary appeal in large part because it has yet to have sufficient opportunity to discredit itself in practice, notwithstanding the claims by scholars such as Olivier Roy and Gilles Keppe about its “failure.”⁸¹ Like any good revolutionary ideology, Islamism still offers a credible explanation of what has gone wrong (straying from the correct path of Islam), identifies who is to blame (infidels, secularists, liberals, the West), demonstrates why militancy is required to set things right, and offers a vision for a new and better order. For these claims to be undermined, they will have

to be shown to be wanting, which is to say, Islamism will have to succeed before it can fail.

In sum, the changing character of internal conflict, either with respect to particular cases or globally, is not adequately explained by changes in structurally rooted grievances or relational factors. Rather, what appears most important is change in the capacity of ideologies of resistance to inspire militancy. Were we able to hold structural or relational factors constant over time, we would still see significant variation in the nature of violent resistance as well as variation in where conflict occurs due to the changing supply of revolutionary ideas. If so, then it is impossible to theorize about ethnic, religious, or indeed any other kind of conflict as if they were timeless categories.

NOTES

¹ See Andrew Bennett, “Case Studies and Typological Theories on Political Violence and Instability,” paper presented to the Conference on Alternative Approaches to Assessing and Anticipating Political Instability, Vienna, VA, March 23-24, 1999, p. 1. See also Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, eds., *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, M.I.T. Press, 2005.

² Bennett, “Case Studies,” p. 1.

³ Walker Connor, “A Nation is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group, Is a...,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1 (October 1978), reprinted in Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 103.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, Verso, 1991, pp. 3-4.

⁵ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 21-30. Note that the requirement that there be an attachment to a particular territory or homeland is at odds with the use of the “ethnicity” in American popular discourse and indeed in the field of “ethnic studies.”

⁶ The boundary between an “ethnic group” and a “nation” using Smith’s definitions is thus rather fuzzy, since he never makes clear how a collective preference for self-determination would be expressed or what degree of social support would be required to qualify as a “stateless nation.”

⁷ It is worth noting that treating a claim to territory as defining is inconsistent with the way the term is used in “ethnic studies” in the United States – there is no assumption, for example, that “Whites,” “African-Americans,” or “Hispanic Americans,” for example, have specific territorial claims (unlike Native Americans).

⁸ On clans and clan politics, see Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*, Princeton University Press, 2004; Kathleen Collins, “The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories,” *World Politics* 56 (January 2004), pp. 224-261, and Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of “Blood” in Kazakhstan and Beyond*, University of Washington Press, 2004.

⁹ This is particularly true of those who emphasize “security dilemmas” as key explanatory factors in ethnic conflict. See, for example, Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma in Ethnic Conflict,” in Brown, *Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 103-124.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in Clifford Geertz, ed., *Old Societies and New States*, Free Press, 1963, reprinted in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 30.

¹¹ It is worth noting that those engaged in “ethnic conflict” usually reject the label on the grounds that it belittles the motivations of the parties involved by implying that they are senseless and irrational. Much preferred are more ennobling descriptors such as “war of independence,” “national liberation struggle,” “anti-terrorism campaign,” or “defense of sovereignty and territorial integrity” (depending on where one sits, of course). For most Chechens, their struggle is no more “ethnic” than was the Algerian war against the French or the American “War of Independence” against the British. For Russian officials, the war is a struggle against “bandits,” an “anti-terrorism” operation, or a defense of Russian sovereignty. It is outsiders who typically characterize it as an “ethnic conflict.”

¹² Charles King, “The Myth of Ethnic War,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2001, p. 167. The current conflict in Iraq has brought the term “insurgency” back into fashion.

¹³ This seems to be the essence of Chaim Kaufmann’s distinction between “ethnic” and “ideological” conflicts. As he explains it: “Opposing communities in ethnic civil conflicts hold irreconcilable visions of the identity, borders, and citizenship of the state. They do not seek to control a state whose identity all sides accept, but rather to redefine or divide the state itself. By contrast, ideological conflicts may be defined as those in which all sides share a common vision of community membership, a common preference for political organization of the community as a single state, and a common sense of the legitimate boundaries of that state. The opposing sides seek control of the state, not its division or destruction. It follows that some religious conflicts – those between confessions which see themselves as separate communities, as between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland – are best categorized with ethnic conflicts, while others – over interpretation of a shared religion, e.g., disputes over the social role of Islam in Iran, Algeria, and Egypt – should be considered ideological disputes” (“Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20:4 (Spring 1996), p. 218, fn. 7). This is not a very helpful distinction when it comes to Islamist militancy, since many Islamists would qualify as both

“ethnic” and “ideological” in these terms – most reject, at least in principle, the territorial division of the community into states, and at the same time they insist that the polity should be Islamicized.

¹⁴ A fourth system of classification distinguishes among modes of collective violence (e.g., the low level resistance described by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* [Yale University Press, 1985], rural insurgencies, urban insurgency, conflict between uniformed militaries in pitched battle, terrorism, suicide bombing, etc.). Explaining why those committed to political violence engage in, say, suicide terrorism rather than insurgency does not, however, explain why we get collective political violence in the first place, or why we get a particular kind of conflict (ethnic or otherwise).

¹⁵ While these three dimensions vary independently, we can expect considerable clustering – for example, in conflicts where the objective is secession, it is more likely, although hardly necessary (as in the U.S. Civil War), that the parties to the conflict will be differentiated by language, than in cases where the conflict is over control of the national government.

¹⁶ Yet another problem is that any single “conflict” placed in a particular typological box can be disaggregated into separate clashes, skirmishes, battles, campaigns, acts of terrorism, etc. In gathering data on “conflicts,” then, the question becomes how far to proceed with disaggregation, particularly where lines of cleavage, objectives, and mobilizing ideologies change. For example, should the violence in Chechnya in 1994-1996 and from 1999 to date be treated as one, two, or many conflicts? And how many separate “conflicts” or “wars” have there been in Afghanistan since 1978?

¹⁷ On the meaning of “religious war,” see Konrad Repen, “What is a ‘Religious War?’,” in *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe*, E. I. Kouri and Tom Scott, eds., Macmillan Press, 1987, pp. 311-328; and Wayne te Brake, “Understanding Religious War,” workshop paper, November 2003, available at http://www.iserp.columbia.edu/news/calendars/2004_spring.html.

¹⁸ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 34.

¹⁹ Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 28. Another objection I have to Kaufman’s argument is the equation of rationality with cognition and irrationality with emotion. Cognition hardly guarantees rationality, while emotion can promote it. For example, a fire can inspire fear (an emotion) that causes one to flee a burning building, and touching a hot frying pan can evoke pain and anger and cause one to instinctively pull one’s hand away. Neither the emotion nor the response is irrational. What would be irrational would be if one were aware of (cognition), and afraid of (emotion), the fire, but then ran into it. See Rui DeFiguerido and Barry Weingast, “The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict,” in *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, Barbara Walter and Jack Snyder, eds., Columbia University Press, 1999.

²⁰ Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 29.

²¹ On emotions and ethnic conflict, see Roger Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2002; and Ronald Suny, “Why We Hate You,” working paper, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, 2004.

²² Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 25.

²³ Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 25.

²⁴ Again, what difference would it make if we replaced “ethnic” with “religious” from the following passage: “[A religious] appeal can claim that the ... warrior is fighting simultaneously for self-respect (identity), self-interest (material goods), [group] survival, territory, the propagation of faith, and country, and if the fight is successful the warrior will have achieved immortality even in death”?

²⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, University of California Press, 2000 (2003), p. 149.

²⁶ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Norton, 1999, pp. 277-278. Diamond goes on to assert: “Fanaticism in war, of the type that drove record Christian and Islamic conquests, was probably unknown on Earth until chiefdoms and especially states emerged within the last 6,000 years” (p. 282).

²⁷ On nationalism as a product of modernization, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *The Invention of Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 1983; and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1983. For contrary arguments about the early development of national consciousness, see Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins*; Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, Harvard University Press, 1960; John Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, UNC Press, 1982; and Anthony W. Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

²⁸ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 55.

²⁹ See Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press, second edition, 1990 (1986), pp. 99-100; and Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, Yale University Press, second edition, 2002 (1995), pp. 111-121.

³⁰ See Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban*, University of Washington Press, 2001, p. 56. According to Rubin, "The Khalqis' monopoly of power also symbolized an ethnic shift. The core of the old regime was a coalition of Muhammadzais: Persian-speaking bureaucrats and professionals mostly from Kabul, and educated sons of the leading Pashtun tribal families. The Khalqi regime was dominated by Ghilzai and Paktia Pashtuns of tribal origin. It was the most-Pashtun and the least-Durrani government Afghanistan had ever had" (Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, p. 115).

³¹ Initially, then, there was a left-right dimension to the conflict. After Najibullah replaced Karmal at Soviet insistence in May 1986, however, the regime began to temper its Marxist rhetoric, positioning itself instead as moderate-left nationalist and with appeals to traditionalism.

³² A summary of the positions and social bases of the various parties in the Afghan conflict can be found in Goodson, *Endless War*, pp.189-191.

³³ Similarly, the "traditionalist" party Jebha-i-Milli Nejat was led by Sibgatullah Mojaddidi, who had been educated at Al-Azhar University, became a professor of theology, and was affiliated with a group of Islamists at Kabul University in the early 1970s, many of whom would later become leaders of the mujahideen resistance (Roy, *Islam and Resistance*, p. 70).

³⁴ Hekmatyar's fundamentalism helps explain why he was favored by both the Saudis and the Pakistanis. The former supported him due to ideological affinity, the latter because Islamabad feared that the Pashtuns would press for an independent Pashtunistan, which, given that there are more Pashtuns in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, would have threatened Pakistan's territorial integrity. The Pakistan government, and particularly its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), decided to support the Islamists as a way to undermine Pashtun nationalism, a strategic choice that went back to the 1970s (Roy, *Fragmentation of Islam*, pp. 75-76).

³⁵ Indeed, there was an all-Afghan and multiethnic quality to the resistance until the Soviet withdrawal – the principal exception being the division between Sunni and Shiite parties. The relative unity of the resistance helps account for the formation, under Pakistani pressure, of a more-or-less united group of Sunni parties in May 1985 known as the Tanzemat.

³⁶ According to Roy, "The personal prestige of Rabbani was very great in the government *madrassa*, the Sufi brotherhoods in the west, in literary circles and amongst the Persian-speaking Islamist intellectuals" (Roy, *Fragmentation of Islam*, p. 77).

³⁷ See Thomas Barfield, "Afghanistan in Not the Balkans: Ethnicity and its Political Consequences from a Central Asian Perspective," *Central Asian Studies Review* 4:1 (Winter 2005), pp. 2-8.

³⁸ See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 54-66.

³⁹ Parts of this section are derived from an earlier paper by the author ("Islam, Islamism, and Political Order in Central Asia," *Columbia Journal of International Affairs* 56:2 [Spring 2003], pp. 21-41).

⁴⁰ As in the rest of Central Asia, ethno-nationalist mobilization in Tajikistan was more muted than in most of the non-Central Asian union republics, but it was not absent. There were also several episodes of "ethnic" violence in the republic during the Gorbachev period, notably fighting between Tajiks and Kyrgyz over water and land use rights in the north, as well as rioting in Dushanbe in February 1990 after (false) rumors that Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan were being resettled and given scarce housing in Dushanbe. The rioting prompted a state of emergency and the deployment of some 5,000 Soviet troops (see Muriel Atkin, "Tajikistan: Ancient Heritage, New Politics," in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 361-383).

⁴¹ The IRPT, which held its founding congress in October 1990, was an off-shoot of a USSR-wide group, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which held its founding congress in Astrakhan in June 1990. The organization soon came under the same pressures that fragmented the Soviet system of Islamic Spiritual Boards (muftiates) and dissolved (see Roy, "Foreign Policy," pp. 1-2).

⁴² The most influential underground Islamist in the late Soviet period, Muhammad Rustanov Hindustani, received his Islamic education in Deoband, India, where he came under the influence the Deobandi form of Islamic Puritanism that would later prove an important influence on the ideology of the Taliban. Hindustani was arrested by

Soviet authorities and died in prison in 1989 (see Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, pp. 43-51; Rashid, *Jihad*, pp. 97-98); and Roy, "Foreign Policy," p. 4).

⁴³ Initially the IRPT also received modest support from Iran. Once fighting broke out, however, its linguistic/cultural ties to Shi'a Iran proved less important than support from Sunni Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia (Roy, "Foreign Policy," p. 14).

⁴⁴ Nuri, who had been a student of Hindustani, formed an underground organization, Nahzar-i-Islami, in 1974, which organized the first demonstrations against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1987. Another Hindustani student, Muhammad Sharif Himmatzoda, would become the first chairman of the IRP and later its military leader (Rashid, *Jihad*, pp. 97-98).

⁴⁵ See Rubin, "Russian Hegemony," p. 134 and p. 137.

⁴⁶ Pursuant to the "national delimitation" of Central Asia in 1924, Tajikistan was established as an autonomous republic within the union republic of Uzbekistan. It was separated from Uzbekistan, becoming a distinct union republic, in 1929, at which time Leninabad Oblast' (see below) was detached from Uzbekistan and "given" to Tajikistan. This history, along with the fact that the borders defined by the national delimitation had contested historical foundations, the boundaries between ethnic groups in Central Asia in general and between Uzbeks and Tajiks in particular were fuzzy and fluid, and the groups that were afforded the status of "nationalities" (e.g., Uzbeks and Tajiks) did not live in compactly settled territories, help account for the extent of the concern in Tajikistan about possible Uzbek irredentism.

⁴⁷ Barnett R. Rubin, "The Fragmentation of Tajikistan," *Survival* 35:4 (Winter 1993-94), p. 75.

⁴⁸ According to one observer, the "historic explanation" for why Tajiks from the Garmis were underrepresented in official positions was that the regions where they came from had put up the stiffest resistance to Soviet rule (Saodat Olimova, "Islam and the Tajik Conflict," in Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower, eds., *Islam and Central Asia*, Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000, p. 62).

⁴⁹ The regions in the central highlands included Karategin, Wakhiha, and Darwaz district.

⁵⁰ The alliance between the Leninabadis and Kulabis is explained by Rubin as follows: "Perhaps in response to the rise of potential local competitors, the Leninabadis developed a patronage relationship with Kulabis starting in the 1970s.... The Kulabi elites took advantage of this position to engage in a variety of underground activities. Their 'mafia' was particularly active and included violent enforcers.... Kulabis thus fit the prototype of a conservative impoverished group attached to an old regime by the small share of power it gave them and resistant to a new order that might displace them.... Garmis, on the other hand, especially those resettled in Kurgan Tiube, turned into an energetic diaspora group. Excluded from official position, they seized new opportunities in education and the market: they can be compared with the Tamils of Sri Lanka or Caucasians in Russia, or Jewish and Asian immigrant groups in the US" (Rubin, "Russian Hegemony," p. 151).

⁵¹ Rubin, "Russian Hegemony," p. 144.

⁵² Rubin, "Russian Hegemony," p. 143-144.

⁵³ John Schoeberlein-Engel, "Conflict in Tajikistan and Central Asia: The Myth of Ethnic Animosity," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 1:2 (1994), p. 39. The social roots of these regional groups appear to have been patronage networks tied to territorially-organized institutions of the Soviet party-state system, particularly regional party organizations and state (*sovkhos*) and collective (*kolkhoz*) farms. These patronage networks were often reinforced by lineage affiliations, but in the main they were not kinship groups, despite the widespread use of the term "clan" (see Rubin, "Russian Hegemony," pp. 143-152).

⁵⁴ According to Rubin: "Signs of the ethnic character of the war were visible in June 1993; for example, several houses in Kolkhoz Turkmenistan (renamed *Haqiqat* or 'truth') in the Vakhsh Raion of Qurghan Teppa ... bore inscriptions such as, 'this is an Uzbek house; do not touch'.... As a result of [the expulsions of Tajiks], areas already largely Uzbek lost a large portion of their Tajik population, aggravating Tajik nationalist fears of 'pan-Turkic' aggression sponsored by Uzbekistan" (Rubin, "Fragmentation," pp. 80-81).

⁵⁵ Rubin, "Fragmentation," pp. 81-82, and Roy, "Foreign Policy," p. 141-142. According to Roy, "rioting broke out [in 1996] in the north against Kulabi excesses. The ex-prime ministers of the north (Abdullajanov, Samadov, and Karimov), who had been pushed from power one after the other in less than three years, eventually joined forces and created a National Renaissance Party in August 1996 to defend the interests of the province of Leninabad ..." (Roy, "Foreign Policy," 142).

⁵⁶ Roy, "Foreign Policy," p. 142. The uprising failed, however, allegedly because of the intervention of the Russian intelligence service (FSB). In November 1998, Khuboyberdiev would lead another armed revolt, this time in

Khujand and once again with apparent support from Tashkent. It, too, would be put down by pro-government forces.

⁵⁷ Rubin, "Fragmentation," p. 129.

⁵⁸ Rubin, "Fragmentation," pp. 82-86.

⁵⁹ Although the settlement remains more-or-less in force, the Rakhmonov government has reneged on some of its commitments, and the country remains generally unstable and the state very weak.

⁶⁰ In the words of Valery Tishkov, the "postfactual representation of ... Chechens as ardent followers of Islam is a romantic simplification" (Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-torn Society*, University of California Press, 2004, p. 167). Tishkov also refers to a poll from mid-1980s indicating that only twelve percent of residents of the Chechen-Ingush autonomous republic described themselves as "believers" (Tishkov, *Chechnya*, pp. 170-171). Given the official atheism and repressive practices of the Soviet state, however, the poll may not be particularly reliable.

⁶¹ See Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," *Slavic Review* 53:2 (1994), pp. 414-52; and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford University Press, 1993.

⁶² Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 266.

⁶³ Vladimir Dubnov, "Shadow Boxing: Are Warriors of Islam Terrorizing Russia?," *New Times* (February 2003), (distributed on the AltChechnya Listserv, March 1, 2003).

⁶⁴ On February 23, 1944, the Chechens and Ingush, who then numbered around 500,000, were deported *en masse* to Central Asia, mainly to Kazakhstan, and the Chechen-Ingush autonomous republic was eliminated shortly thereafter (see Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe*, Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 85-107).

⁶⁵ To be sure, some prominent figures in the national movement such as the future vice president and then acting president of the republic, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, embraced some form of Islamism by 1991, but they were of marginal influence.

⁶⁶ An indicator of the extent of the disorder in the region at the time is that fact that Dudayev attempted to suppress the growing political opposition to his administration by dissolving parliament in mid-1993. In the course of the operation, some seventeen people were killed.

⁶⁷ Dudayev was a thoroughly sovietized former Soviet air force general who had a Russian wife, drank alcohol, and never claimed to be a believer, let alone an Islamist, until he decided he needed support from Muslims abroad. His Chechen critics told a possibly apocryphal story that he had urged Chechens to abide by the Qu'ranic instruction to pray three, rather than five, times a day (see Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York University Press, 1998, p. 34).

⁶⁸ With the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, and the signing of the Dayton Accords in Bosnia, the jihadis needed a new front for jihad, and they found it in Chechnya. Among those who arrived in the republic in the early days of the war were the "Black Arab," Omar Ibn al Khattab, and Aukai Collins, an American from Southern California who made it to Chechnya in the summer of 1995 and whose extraordinary story is recounted in his book, *My Jihad*, Simon and Schuster, 2002. On Khattab, see Paul Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and Faces of Chechen Terrorism*, Brassey's, Inc., 2004.

⁶⁹ The foreign Islamists in Chechnya appear to have had a difficult time recruiting Chechens to fight elsewhere, as suggested by the fact that very few Chechens would go abroad to take up arms in Afghanistan (notably, to date not a single Chechen has turned up in Guantanamo Bay). Some, however, went to Afghanistan for training, rest and recovery from wounds, or material support.

⁷⁰ By then many field commanders had joined political figures such as Yandarbiyev, Vice President Vakha Arsanov, and Udugov in embracing radical Islamism, at least rhetorically. As acting president in late 1996, Yandarbiev would decree the implementation of Sharia throughout the republic along with the dissolution of secular courts.

⁷¹ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (March 26, 1999).

⁷² See Walter Comins-Richmond, "Legal Pluralism in the Northwest Caucasus: The Role of Sharia Courts," *Religion, State & Society* 32:1 (2004), pp. 59-73.

⁷³ Dubnov, "Shadow Boxing."

⁷⁴ The new imamate in central Dagestan was to serve as the core of a future Caliphate for all the North Caucasus and possibly beyond. After several weeks of fighting, federal and Dagestani forces drove the insurgents back into Chechnya. This was followed on September 3, 1999 by a statement by Khattab in which he announced, “The mujahideen of Dagestan are going to carry out reprisals in various places across Russia” (“Chechen Guerrilla Khattab, Veteran of Anti- Struggle,” *Agence France Press*, September 14, 1999, distributed on the Chechnya listserv September 14, 1999). The next day, a bomb destroyed an apartment building in Buinaksk, Dagestan, killing 64 inhabitants. Apartment buildings in Moscow were bombed on September 9 and 13, and another apartment bomb was detonated on September 16 in Volgodonsk.

⁷⁵ The principal exceptions are its civilian representatives abroad, Akhmed Zakayev in London and Ilyas Akhmadov in the United States.

⁷⁶ *Chechenpress*, Tbilisi, WWW-Text in Russian (0640, GMT 24 January 2002), distributed on the AltChechnya listserv.

⁷⁷ Ironically, the internationalists are in agreement with Moscow in construing the conflict as international in scope (during the first round of the war Moscow characterized the rebels primarily as “bandits” and “criminals”; today it characterizes them primarily as international terrorists and extremists). An important moment in this regard came shortly after Sadulaev became the leader of the resistance in the wake of Maskhadov’s death when the former called for the establishment of a new “Caucasus Front” in four republics west of Chechnya (Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) and in Krasnodar and Stavropol krais (*Kavkazcenter*, May 16, 2005). See also *Chechnya Weekly*, The Jamestown Foundation (May 11, 2005).

⁷⁸ For example, at one point Maskhadov appealed to the insurgents as follows: “Only self-restraint and nobility would help us achieve the triumph of justice. The Kremlin is using every opportunity to link Chechens to international terrorism that is their own creation. Our goal is not to be led by it.”

⁷⁹ Prior to his death, Maskhadov was frank about the division between Chechen “collaborators” and “rebels.” The second war, he asserted, had split the Chechen people into two camps, which he called the “idealists” and “materialists.” The former were “true” Chechens who were “supporters of independence and the revival of Chechen civilization on the basis of the political and legal doctrine of Islam and national culture,” while the latter were “renegades” for whom “material welfare [is] the criteria of morality and ethics.” They included “federalists, renegades of all colors, pacifists, Eurasians, peace-makers, etc.” He went on to attack the “so-called Chechen intelligentsia” who “always betrayed the people” and had failed “to prepare a theoretical basis for building a sovereign Chechen state, but persistently worked on unnecessary options for returning Ichkeria to Russia . . . ” (*Chechenpress*, Tbilisi, WWW-Text in Russian [0640, GMT 24 January 2002], distributed on the AltChechnya listserv.)

⁸⁰ See James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Weak States, Rough Terrain, and Large-scale Ethnic Violence Since 1945,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, GA, September 2-5, 1999.

⁸¹ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Harvard University Press, 1994; and Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Belknap, 2003.