Ethnonationalist cleavages in civil wars: Allah’s wrath or Babel’s legacy?

Nils-Christian Bormann
Lars-Erik Cederman
Manuel Vogt

Center for Comparative and International Studies (CIS)
ETH Zurich
Haldeneggsteig 4
8092 Zurich, Switzerland

Corresponding author:
Nils-Christian Bormann, bormann@icr.gess.ethz.ch

June 2013
Abstract

Scholars who study the effect of ethnicity on conflict usually refrain from considering different dimensions of ethnicity such as language and religion. In recent years, however, some have argued that conflicts are more likely to occur across religious divisions rather than linguistic ones. Such views are motivated by the presumed stickiness and indivisibility of religious issues on the one hand, and the ease at which economically motivated individuals can acquire new languages on the other hand. Challenging both arguments, we claim that linguistic cleavages are more likely to cause internal conflict than religious distinctions. To account for this difference, we advance a two-step argument. First, as theorists of nationalism tell us, state-building and political legitimacy became highly intertwined with language in the past 200 years. Scripted vernacular languages are the primary medium of modern politics whereas the role of religion remains more contingent. Second, as language has become more politicized in the modern state and a critical marker for access to power and resources, it has become more conflict-prone. We test our hypotheses with a new dataset on ethnic cleavages that records both linguistic and religious sub-group segments of ethnic groups in the Ethnic Power Relations dataset from 1946-2009. Adopting a relational perspective, we measure groups’ ethnic differences in relation to the politically predominant ethnic group in each country, thus explicitly focusing on potential civil war-dyads. We find that intrastate conflict is much more likely between linguistically distinctive groups than between religiously distinctive ones, even when controlling for political exclusion. Whereas the effect of language differs depending on the world region, as would be expected by our theory, support for the view that Islam is generally more associated with conflict than other religions is very feeble.

*We thank Nicholas Sambanis, Nils B. Weidmann, Patrick M. Kuhn, Sofia Vera, Philipp Hunziker, panelists at the 2013 Swiss Political Science Association’s Annual Meeting and seminar participants at the University of Amsterdam and Konstanz for helpful comments. The usual disclaimer applies.
†Center of Comparative and International Studies, ETH Zurich, Switzerland. Corresponding Author: Nils-Christian Bormann, Email: bormann@icr.gess.ethz.ch
The effect of ethnicity on conflict remains controversial in the extant civil war literature. Traditionally, conflict researchers have taken a formal, constructivist approach that ignores the contents of ethnicity such as language or religion. More recently, however, some scholars have argued that conflicts are more likely to be associated with religious identity or differences, and less likely to occur across linguistic boundaries (Huntington, 1996; Laitin, 2000; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Fox, 2004; Hassner, 2009). In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslim identity has been identified as being particularly conflict-prone (Toft, 2007).

We disagree with previous research on both theoretical and methodological grounds. Regarding the former we criticize existing studies for either taking an essentialist or an individualist approach. We argue that neither is sufficient to explain such a dynamic and collective phenomenon as political violence. Methodologically, most studies are plagued by some form of selection bias. Finally, existing analyses are often restricted to a single cleavage which renders a direct comparison between the conflict-proneness of language and religion impossible.

Introducing the new Ethnic Power Relations Cleavages (EPRC) dataset, this study analyzes the relationship between linguistic and religious cleavages, and ethnic civil war onset. Our approach presents several advantages over previous studies. First, we code up to three linguistic and religious identities per group, thus refraining from insisting that each group has either a linguistic or a religious identity. In addition, coding multiple identity segments per group allows us to assess the degree of overlap between groups (cf. Chandra, 2012). Second, we adopt a relational approach that explicitly takes into account the existing ethno-political power configuration over time. In line with the concept of civil war, we identify one ethnic group that currently represents the state, and all potential ethnic challengers. Thus, our unit of analysis is the ethnic-group-dyad. Having ascertained identities and relevant reference groups, we measure inter-group differences along both the religious and linguistic dimensions on a continuous scale for each dyad-year. Finally, since the ethno-political power configuration may change over
In contrast to existing studies, we explicitly stress the political logic of cultural differences in the age of nationalism. Noting that scripted vernacular languages are the primary medium of modern politics, we build on classical theories of nationalism by arguing that the politicization of language makes it more conflict-prone in the political arena, i.e., the state, than other ethnic markers. Hence, we challenge both essentialist and individualist arguments who have pointed at ancient hatreds as a reason for religious conflict (cf. Huntington [1996]), and emphasized individuals’ economic incentives to learn new languages (cf. Laitin [2000]). We test our argument in a global sample of ethno-political dyads between 1946 and 2009. Our results lend support to our theoretical expectations that language is the most conflictual cleavage in the post WW II world of nation-states. In contrast, religious differences in general and Muslim identity in particular are not significant correlates of civil war – even in more recent years. Nevertheless, we are cautious in interpreting our results as a contradiction of the religious-violence link – yet, we believe that previous studies have overstated it.

After revisiting extant explanations of civil war that stress specific dimensions of ethnicity, we introduce our theoretical argument in more detail focusing on the political logic inherent in processes of nationalist state-building. Then, we describe our new EPR-ETH-Cleavages dataset in detail before testing our hypotheses and discussing the implications of our results along with future directions of research.

**Relevant Literature**

Modern anthropology owes much to Barth [1969], who argued that ethnicity should be defined formally in terms of ethnic groups’ boundaries rather than in terms of its specific contents – i.e. language, religion, caste, or race. Several quantitative civil war studies followed Barth in combining different ethnic markers into one index/variable.

---

1While we believe that we are moving into a constructivist direction, our data is not able to capture the individual fluidity of identity or over-time changes within groups. The time-variant character of our data is based on changes in the reference group, i.e., the most powerful group in a state, or on chances in group composition.
Later studies distinguished between language and religion but employed indices insensitive to the relevant political cleavages in a country (see, e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004).

More recently, other scholars have contested such a broad definition of ethnicity. Comparing linguistic and religious differences in Europe, Brubaker (2012) argues that the near linguistic homogeneity of European nation-states and the stronger inter-generational persistence of religious identities have made religion the prime focus of political contestation in the West. Similarly, in the past two decades, some scholars have connected religious identities with political and violent conflict around the world. Recent arguments positing a link between religion and civil war do so for different reasons. While researchers who adopt an instrumentalist perspective, highlight individuals’ ability to transgress linguistic boundaries, those who follow essentialist reasoning stress the intensity and ancient origins of ethnic markers.

Adhering to the first of these approaches, Laitin (2000) finds that linguistic differences are less conflictual than other ethnic identities. Laitin advances three arguments: first, fearing for their jobs when a government aims at rationalizing languages, civil servants try to obstruct threatening political directives, thus choosing the bureaucratic battlefield rather than the actual one. Second, at the mass level, language groups face a collective action problem. For such groups it is collectively beneficial to continue speaking their own languages but individual economic incentives may make it profitable for the groups’ members to learn a second language, and possibly even abandoning the original languages through assimilation. Such pressures may reduce the number of fighters available for possible rebellions. Finally, at the organizational level, language groups are often not hierarchically organized if they have no state of their own. Using a similar economic logic, Caselli and Coleman (2006) argues that individuals who are racially distinct are not able to shift between groups easily when economic advantages for switching are present. Thus, conflict becomes more likely as high-visibility markers

\footnote{For a critique refer to Posner (2004) and Cederman and Girardin (2007).}

\footnote{See also Laitin (1998).}
prohibit switching and rebellion grows more profitable.

Theorizing along essentialist lines, Huntington (1993) proposes a number of arguments why religious clashes should become more prevalent after the end of the Cold War. Two of these are applicable to inter-group relations within states. “[A]nimosities stretching or thought to stretch back deep into history” (p.26) and religion as an indivisible good should increase the likelihood of intrastate conflict. Toft (2007) insists that religious groups in general, and Muslim groups in particular, are more likely to engage in civil war than other ethnic groups. She cites the absence of a separation of state and church in the Muslim world as well as the presence of the Muslim ideology of jihad as prime reasons for a higher incidence of conflict involving Muslim groups.

Similarly, Hassner (2009) argues that religious conflicts over specific localities are unlikely to be resolved through compromise as the contested ‘good’ is indivisible, thus increasing the risk of violent conflict. Measuring religious polarization and animist diversity, Reynal-Querol (2002) finds that both factors are positively correlated with civil war outbreak. Using data from Minorities at Risk, Fox (2004) finds empirical support for the conflict-fueling role of religion conditional on the presence of nationalist agitation between groups. Furthermore, Svensson (2007) and Capoccia, Sáez and de Rooij (2012) address the intractability of conflict by assessing the duration of civil wars and secessionist demands. Svensson shows that groups that advance religious claims are less likely to enter into negotiated settlements with the government independently of whether there is a religious cleavage or not. Capoccia and his co-authors present evidence that religious organizations in India are less likely to drop secessionist demands compared to secular organizations.

The instrumentalist logic of these scholars is not immune to criticism. While there is no reason to doubt that many individuals may have powerful incentives to learn new languages, it would be a mistake to discount the difficulty of acquiring foreign languages, or for that matter nationalists’ emotional commitment to symbols. In any case, it is far from obvious that individual decisions to learn the dominant language

---

4Svensson argues that the public reference to religion is responsible for creating the indivisibility problem discussed above.
would significantly shrink the pool of fighters available to rebel groups (Laitin, 2000). Indeed, Laitin (2000, p.111) himself admits that full-scale assimilation would take generations (also see Weber, 1976). Moreover, we find it hard to believe that the obstacles to boundary crossing become decisive in explaining civil war onset. Individuals may certainly cross ethnic boundaries and assimilate into the dominant group. Yet, it is hard to see how this is easily achieved by entire groups. Even if few group members are “left behind”, they still may be sufficient to organize a rebellion. Indeed, economic grievances can lead to a political dynamic causing intrastate conflict (Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch, 2011). In contrast to instrumentalists, we believe this to be a group-level process that does not depend on the visibility of specific ethnic markers at the individual level.

With respect to primordial accounts linking identity to conflict, it seems implausible that conflict onsets, which vary over time, can be explained through unchanging identities. Moreover, it is not clear why a specific identity marker, be it religion, language, or race, should be more closely connected to narratives of enmity and hatred than others. Religions in particular have a great potential to bridge cleavages in addition to dividing people. Indeed, historical political entities like the Ottoman Empire show how religious differences can be accommodated with reference to a holy text in a religiously constituted political entity (Hechter, 2000). Arguing that the absence of the separation of church and state in Muslim societies makes conflict more likely implies that conflict in states in which the separation of church and state is present should be less likely. However, some of the most horrific episodes of violence in the 20th century took place in states that define themselves as specifically anti-religious as the Soviet Union or Peoples Republic of China.

In addition to these theoretical problems, many instrumentalist and essentialist studies grapple with empirical difficulties. In particular, those studies that rely on the well-known Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset are vulnerable to selection bias (see, 5 In Latin America, even racial identity can be endogenous to individuals’ social-economic position (Wagley, 1994). 6 Here the Qu’ran.
In sum, neither individualist nor essentialist approaches can explain the possible links between culture and civil conflict convincingly since the arguments are theoretically incomplete and methodologically flawed.

Nationalism and the state: Why linguistic cleavages cause conflict

Our own theoretical argument is anchored in the historical process of nationalist state building. First, referring to classical theories of nationalism, we emphasize the centrality of language to modern politics. Second, we argue that it is precisely this centrality of language that makes linguistic cleavages more conflict-prone than other ethnic markers.

By handing over the power to the “people”, the French Revolution established popular sovereignty – sovereignty of the nation – as the new principle of political legitimacy in modern times. This marks a decisive turning point with respect to political legitimacy. Henceforth, rulers had to justify their rule by seeking the consent of the constituent nation.

In principle, the nation can be defined based on different characteristics. While the “ius sanguinis” principle defines the citizenry as a closed community of descent – and the nation as an organic cultural community –, the “ius soli” regime is based on the view of the nation as a political community where strangers can be turned into citizens by legal and cultural assimilation (Brubaker 1992). Due to the conjunction of nationalism and democracy in the modern world, the demos has often become equated with an ethnically defined community (Mann 2005). Nationalism explicitly links political legitimacy to cultural identity by requiring that “ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones” (Gellner 1983). Hence, nationalism and the principle of the rule of the people created a new, large-scale – and, due to its size, “imagined” – po-
political community (Anderson, 1991): the nation which is categorically defined, usually through a combination of ethnic traits.

The French Revolution also introduced the enlightenment spirit in the realm of political authority. While political power in the pre-modern era rested on the belief in a given, traditionally or divinely determined order, the secularist principle of the enlightenment era privileges the power of rationality and legality, the power of written rules. It opens the door to what Weber (1978) called “rational-legal authority”. At the same time, the centralizing force of these rational-legal bureaucratic state apparatuses and their increasing degree of “social penetration” (Smith, 1985, 130) brought increasingly larger territories under direct rule which had been controlled before by local sovereigns more or less independent from central authority. This centralizing force of the bureaucratic states relied to a large degree on a cultural medium: the official state language. By means of universal education and military mobilization, diverse, polyglot populations were unified to a more or less homogeneous state-people (Weber, 1976).

In these new large-scale political and economic spaces created by nationalism and state-building, communication between individuals became essential (Deutsch, 1966; Gellner, 1983). The small-scale environments of the feudal era were expanded into wider cultural communities. This required a standardized communication protocol under the roof of a “high culture” sustained by literacy (Gellner, 1983, 48-9). It follows directly from the writings of Deutsch and Gellner that in the modern, nationalist era, language should become the paramount cultural basis of nationhood (Anderson, 1991; Brubaker, 2012).

At the same time, this logic usually entailed the selection of one language as an official state idiom, which was privileged over the countless dialects spoken within a new state’s territory (Gellner, 1983, 2). While some countries have implemented policies of official multilingualism, the vast majority of states use only one official language. Even in countries which have adopted some form of official multilingualism as, for example, India has done, not all spoken languages were elevated to official status.

---

8 Even in countries which have adopted some form of official multilingualism as, for example, India has done, not all spoken languages were elevated to official status.
For one, this situation results from the high costs of multilingualism. Implementing multilingualism means that all official languages can be used in government meetings, parliament sessions etc. The costs of multilingualism increase exponentially with the number of language combinations. All official state documents need to be provided in all official languages. While this works in a wealthy countries with relatively few languages, such as Switzerland, the costs for poorer countries can be prohibitive.\footnote{It could be argued that in many developing countries, especially in Africa, a former colonial language – not associated with any of the indigenous languages – is used as the state language, hence making official multilingualism unnecessary. However, large parts of the population in these countries are usually not fluent in the respective colonial language, and thus still depend on access to state authorities who speak their own mother tongue, particularly at the local level.}

Hence, because modern politics is tightly interwoven with language, and states can almost never be neutral regarding the choice of the national language, linguistic differences within the population of a state are politically highly sensitive. As Brubaker (2012, 6) puts it, “[p]ublic life can in principle be a-religious, but it cannot be a-linguistic”. Elites with a different mother tongue will find it more difficult to get access to the state apparatus or may even be blocked through targeted discrimination. At the same time, ordinary members of the population not fluent in the official language experience tangible disadvantages in their daily dealings with state authorities (Wimmer, 1997; Zolberg and Long, 1999). Indeed, choosing an official national language has often followed an ideological, nationalist project in which state-building elites have used language to exclude other (rival) elites from power. This process – described as “social closure” (Brubaker 1992; Weber 1978) – then leads to a cultural and political hierarchy based on language divisions. The longer this hierarchy is maintained, the more likely linguistic boundaries are to be perceived as what Tilly (1998) has called “durable inequalities”.

Under these circumstances, underprivileged population segments and their elites have only two possible remedies at their disposal, according to Gellner (1983, 65). Either they assimilate into the dominant culture or they launch their own nationalist project, demanding their own political structure that assembles all of the native speakers of the language under a common political roof. The first phenomenon has
in fact been the most common in Western Europe where state-peoples became ethni-
cally consolidated through subtle processes of coercion and assimilation largely before
democratization (Mann 2005; Smith 1985). The second remedy is more problem-
atic since new nationalist projects always challenge the hegemony of an existing state.
Hence, more often than not, such separatist processes are conflict-ridden as existing
states insist on the integrity of their territories (Toft 2003; Walter 2006). Alterna-
tively, underprivileged language groups may also try to reverse official language policies
and challenge the existing political hierarchy that may easily lead to a struggle over
the control of state power (Brass 1985).

In sum, the historical link between language and political authority lends a pro-
nounced conflict-proneness to linguistic cleavages. This tendency becomes even more
pronounced as there are too many languages to be accommodated by the state system
so that almost all states in the world contain linguistic minorities (Gellner 1983; Linz
and Stepan 1996). We thus conclude that linguistic cleavages should be statistically
linked to the occurrence of ethnic conflicts.

$H_1$ Linguistic cleavages are likely to be associated with civil war.

Religion can also be a politically relevant ethnic marker, but this is less often the
case as with language. Again Brubaker (2012, 6) eloquently summarizes the argument:
“The state must privilege a particular language or set of languages, but it need not
privilege a particular religion, at least not in the same way and not to the same de-
gree. (...) [It] can approach neutrality with respect to religion, (...); but it cannot
even approach neutrality with respect to language.” Certainly, where religion becomes
politicized through policies that privilege one religious creed over another, it may very
well lead to violent conflicts. Examples of this mechanism can certainly be found in
the Middle East, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the uneasy cohabitation
in Lebanon, and the Shia-Sunni conflicts in Iraq, Bahrain and other Muslim countries.
Additional examples include Côte d’Ivoire (Bouquet 2011) or the Philippines.

Still, examples of religious preferences are less frequent than biased, discriminatory
state policies in terms of languages. On the one hand, this is because of the historical
connection of the modern, rational-legal form of political authority that intimately links languages to state power. On the other hand, state-neutrality regarding religion is less costly to implement than neutrality regarding languages, as we have argued above.

Recognizing the long-term trend toward the politicization of languages, Brubaker (2012) nonetheless identifies a recent trend towards more religious conflicts. First, the interaction of normative expectations towards religious pluralism in liberal democracies, their institutional frameworks, and individual incentives of linguistic assimilation foster more intense religious cleavages. Second, these religious cleavages consist of more fundamental worldviews than linguistic differences and, therefore, consider more intractable political conflicts. However, when it comes to civil wars, there are good reasons to believe that linguistic cleavages should be more relevant than religious ones. First and foremost, Brubaker’s argument ignores the role of political power and of access to the state. Civil conflicts are primarily about political issues – connected to state power, either at the level of the central government or over some sub-national territory. Even if language was less deeply connected to individual identity than religious belief, language is still more closely linked to political power than religion. As Brubaker notes, whereas religion may be private, language can hardly be. So while religion may lead to conflicts, linguistic cleavages are more likely to do so.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that globally far fewer different religions than languages exist. In turn, the numerical imbalance translates into a considerably lower number of religious than linguistic cleavages within most states. Thus, ethnic groups will be much more likely to share religious identities and be divided along linguistic identities. This simple difference in the frequency of the two types of cleavages should also imply that we would observe more linguistic than religious conflict. In sum, we expect the effect of religious cleavages on the occurrence of intra-state conflict to be significantly weaker than the effect of linguistic cleavages.

$H_2$ Religious cleavages are less likely to be associated with civil wars than linguistic

---

10 A similar point is made by Seul (1999) who argues that religion more often supplies the fault line for intergroup conflicts because it is more deeply connected to individuals’ sense of belonging, and their construction and preservation of self-identity.
Cultural Cleavages and Civil War

Cederman, Bormann, and Vogt

Cleavages.

Concepts and Data

The data used to test our hypotheses on the culture-conflict link are based on the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR-ETH) dataset [Cederman, Hunziker, and Vogt, 2011]. EPR-ETH includes politically relevant ethnic groups in over 130 states from 1946 to 2009. Ethnicity in EPR-ETH is defined broadly. Any group based on linguistic, religious, racial, or caste identities can be included. However, only groups considered to be politically relevant in the national politics of a state are included. The selection of group also varies over time. Ethnic groups may cease to be or become relevant at different points in time of a state’s existence. Group boundaries may also shift when sub-groups split off or smaller groups convene under an umbrella identity marker. In a second step, the relative group sizes and the power access of each group to the central government is coded in a time-variant ordinal scale encompassing eight categories.

Linguistic and Religious Identities

In the EPR-ETH-Cleavages expansion, we code the explicit linguistic and religious identity of each ethnic group. As noted above each ethnic group listed in EPR-ETH can consist of multiple religious and linguistic segments. A group such as the Muslims in India is principally defined through its religious adherence but its members may speak different languages, e.g., Urdu, Bengali, or Malayalam. Similarly, a linguistically homogeneous group, such as the Yoruba in Nigeria who include both Christians and Muslims, may count religiously diverse adherents among its members. In Guatemala, the indigenous Maya group is even composed of different linguistic and religious sub-

---

11 The original EPR dataset covered the period 1946-2005, see [Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010].
12 A group is considered politically relevant if it is either discriminated by the state or political elites make ethnic claims on behalf of the group.
13 The power-access categories range from “monopoly power” to “junior-partner” for groups represented in government, and from “regional autonomy” to “discriminated” for groups excluded from central government access. For a more detailed description refer to [Cederman, Wimmer and Min, 2010, 100-1].
groups. We refer to these cultural sub-divisions within groups as *cultural segments*. Each ethnic group may feature up to three segments along the linguistic or religious dimensions. On the one hand, language and religion are coded independently of one another. On the other hand, this implies that each group has at least two identity categories. Along with the cultural identities of each ethnic group, the relative sizes of the segments are recorded.

We obtained the data from two principle sources and a host of secondary materials. The language data stem from the well-known Ethnologue database [Lewis, 2009]. The main criterion for coding a language is mutual intelligibility in accordance with ISO norm 639-3. Data on religious segments were extracted from the Joshua Project, a missionary organization dedicated to bringing Christianity to linguistic groups around the world ([Joshua Project: Unreached Peoples of the World, 2011]). The Joshua Project connects the language groups of Ethnologue with government statistics, and a variety of sources on religious adherence, producing a list of “people’s groups and their religious make-up.”

Our cultural segment codings are time-invariant and do not capture multilingual or syncretic practices. Both decisions are mostly a function of data availability. Regarding the former, we believe our choice to be justified for two reasons: first, cultural change takes a long time on the societal level (see, e.g., [Weber, 1976; Laitin, 2000]). Second, macro-shifts like the secularization of Western and Eastern European societies often occur across states and do not differ significantly between ethnic groups. With respect

---

14 In principle, a politically relevant ethnic group in EPR-ETH could consist of more than three linguistic or religious segments but in the vast majority of cases they do not. The rare exceptions that do consist of more than three segments are often very small and remote groups like Indigenous Peoples of the Amazonian in Brazil. In those cases, we only coded the three largest segments.

15 A segment was only recorded if it accounted for at least 10% of group members. In some cases then, the sum of linguistic or religious segments does not add up to 1.

16 There are some exceptions, however, which we address in the appendix. For a more detailed discussion of different practices to define a language and the criterion used under ISO 639-3 refer to [http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/introduction.asp](http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/introduction.asp) and the paragraph “Language and dialect”.

17 We define religions as cultural systems which reference transcendental concerns in their attempt to provide a general order of life. As the explicit negation of the transcendental, we coded the absence of religious belief – atheism – as one sub-segment of the religious dimension. Religious confession is more important than dogmatic practice because the latter is much shaped by local customs. Catholics in Cameroon, for example, differ significantly in their form of worship from Catholics in Switzerland. Given the fact that we are mostly interested in within-country differences such differences within religions are mostly negligible for our purposes.
Cultural Cleavages and Civil War  
Bormann, Cederman & Vogt

to multilingualism and syncretism, our mechanisms do not work on the individual level but rather on the group level where multiple languages and belief systems have been coded.

Figure 1: Language tree example from Ethnologue.

The Ethnologue language trees can include more than 1200 nodes (Austronesian) and up to 16 different levels. The smallest tree is Basque with only one language and one level. The maximum number of levels in religious trees is found in the Muslim tree (4) while the largest number of denominations is found in the Christian tree (33) reflecting the large spread of both religions around the globe.

While the Ethnologue trees are freely available online, equivalent trees for religious splits had to be constructed. Figure 2 displays the subset of the Christian religion tree. Resembling the linguistic trees in most respects, religious trees have considerably fewer
levels. While the root level of the tree captures major world religions, the sub-divisions describe denominations or major traditions within the religious belief-systems.

![Figure 2: Religion tree example.](image)

Figure 3 presents summary statistics about ethnic identities in our sample. It confirms the argument made in the theoretical part that the world is a lot more linguistically than religiously diverse. The left panel of shows that the ethnic groups in EPR speak 309 languages and adhere to 41 different religious creeds. Interestingly though, on average, ethnic groups are more uniform on the linguistic than on the religious dimension. The median group includes one language segment and two religious segments. The mean difference is a bit smaller as the right panel of Figure 3 reveals: an ethnic group includes approximately 1.4 language segments and 1.9 religious segments.

**From Identities to Cleavages**

Having identified the linguistic and religious identities of each ethnic group, we proceeded to code actual ethnic cleavages. Before describing this comparison of groups in more detail, we introduce our general conceptual approach of ethnic-group dyads.

In an anarchic setting, like the international state system, it makes sense to enumerate all combinations of units (states) that can fight each other. In the hierarchical framework of the state, the all-against-all approach of interstate system makes less sense. Civil wars are defined as conflicts between a government and a rebel group. The relevant ethnic cleavages for civil wars, should thus be assessed with respect to the

\[\text{18} \text{Of course, communal conflicts would be more similar to the international system but our focus lies on civil wars.}\]
central government. One key assumption we make is that the state is not ethnically neutral but usually tightly intertwined with one particular ethnic group. This assumption holds most clearly in nation-states where one ethno-nationalist group dominates. But even in multi-ethnic states like Switzerland, Yugoslavia, or India, one group usually is more closely connected to the state than any other.\footnote{The groups we have in mind are Swiss-Germans, Serbs, and Hindu-speaking Hindis, respectively.}

We identify this \textit{reference group} for each country-year in two stages: first, using the relative power ranking coded in EPR-ETH, we identify the most powerful group(s). If one group alone occupies the top position in the relative ranking it is selected as the reference group. Second, if the first step does not provide an unequivocal answer, the demographically largest of the most powerful groups is selected. Until 1991, for example, Yugoslavia had a power-sharing government in which Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, Macedonians, Slovenes, and Montenegrins ruled together. In this case, Serbs were selected as the reference group, as they constituted the demographically largest group. Overall, the second coding rule was applied only 22 times in 17 different states.
Figure 4 illustrates a dyadic setup in a hypothetical state. The government coalition consists of two groups: the reference group (A) and at least one other group (B₁) that is a potential challenger. These potential challengers can be in a coalition government with the reference group (B₁) or they can be excluded from government power (B₂ & B₃). Except for the identification of the reference group, the relative position within a state’s power hierarchy is independent of the coding of cleavages. Relevant cleavages exist between the reference group (A) and all other groups (Bᵢ). We compute our indicator of cultural cleavages every time a country’s reference group changes. In the previous example this means that if group B₂ took over the central position in the hypothetical state, all other groups (A, B₁, and B₃) would now be compared to B₂ on their linguistic and religious dimension.²⁰

Finally, we compute our cleavage variables. Once the reference group (A) is selected, all other groups (Bᵢ) are compared to it in every country-year. A cultural difference is present whenever a segment of group A does not correspond to a segment of group B.²¹ The two main explanatory variables record cleavages on the linguistic and religious

²⁰Examples include the peaceful transition of power from Afrikaners to the Xhosa in South Africa or the violent replacement of the Amhara by the Tigry in 1993 as Ethiopia’s most powerful ethnic group.
²¹With respect to the tree structure above, this simply means that it is checked whether two groups
dimension. The *mean difference* computes relatively weighted differences between all segments of a group. A difference between segments is present whenever two groups speak different languages. Swiss Germans and French Germans are coded as completely linguistically different because they are largely homogeneous language groups. On the contrary, they are rather similar on the religious dimension consisting both of Catholic, Protestant, and Atheist segments. Since the size of individual religious segments is not equal across groups, we calculate the size of the difference by weighting the different markers according to their relative size in each group.\footnote{22}

Our second main variable computes linguistic and religious distances (cf. Fearon, 2003). The tree structure displayed in Figure 1 now takes on more importance. Again all segments of an ethnic group dyad are compared on either the linguistic or religious dimension. When any two segments come from different linguistic families (Catalan vs. Basque) or main religions (Christians and Muslims) the distance is 1. If the segments are from the same tree, the number of shared branches are first counted, and then divided by the sum of branches it takes to reach the top of the tree from the respective cultural segment. In other words, the measure weighs the number of shared ancestors of two identity markers by the total number of ancestors.\footnote{23} This ratio of similarity is then subtracted from 1 to obtain the distance of any two markers within the same tree.

As for the difference variable, the results for any two markers are aggregated over the two groups in question. Hence, they are weighted by the relative segment sizes and added to the distances between any remaining segments of the ethnic group dyad. In the case of Switzerland, the linguistic distance between Swiss Germans and Swiss do or do not share the same node in a tree.

\footnote{22}More formally, if two groups A and B, have a and b cultural segments each with a relative size $s$, then the mean difference between those two groups is computed as follows:

$$d_{mean,AB_i} = \sum_a \sum_b I_{ab} * s_a * s_b$$

where $I$ is an indicator function that takes the value of 1 if the cultural segments $a$ and $b$ are different and 0 if they are the same. Thus, $d_{mean}$ takes the value 1 if all cultural segments of groups A and B, are different from each other and it takes the value 0 when all cultural segments are the same. It will be somewhere between 0 and 1 when some segments are the same while others are different and tend towards 1 with increasing relative size of the segments that are different.

\footnote{23}Only focusing on the number of shared branches would fail to distinguish between markers that have only recently split, and could thus be quite similar from markers that have existed independently from another for a long time.
French is $\frac{11}{12}$ and the distance between Swiss Germans and Swiss Italians is $\frac{14}{15}$. Both cases reflect the minimum number of shared branches (1). The French differ in that their language is even more differentiated from the original shared tree than is Italian. While differences are supposed to capture the absence of direct mutual intelligibility or shared religious creeds, distances capture another aspect of cultural cleavages. They are a proxy for how long two ethnic groups have lived and developed apart from each other (cf. Fearon and Laitin 2003; Esteban, Mayoral and Ray 2012). It is assumed that the number of shared branches reflects a previously shared cultural heritage. The farther two groups are apart, the more differentiated they should be on a variety of cultural characteristics. Equally, religious distances should be an approximation of how much two groups differ on a variety of behavioral characteristics, and not be an objective measure of, for example, shared religious symbols practices.

Both of our explanatory variables take account of three important concepts: the relational nature of cleavages, their multi-dimensional nature, and fuzziness around the edges of cultural groups. By calculating cleavages with respect to a particular reference group that may change over time, we recognize that cleavages are relevant within the framework of the state, and are specific to ethnic civil war. This is why not all cleavages in a state are relevant but only those that matter in a comparison with the most powerful group in a state. Our explanatory variables also account for the multi-dimensionality of ethnic cleavages by coding both language and religion. We thus recognize that it cannot be determined a priori which of the two markers is more relevant for a particular group. Finally, the two variables account for the fuzziness of cultural differences by recognizing that some cultural segments of usually disparate ethnic groups can share cultural markers.

While going beyond existing constructs towards a constructivist understanding of ethnic cleavages, our measures fall short of a fully constructivist conceptualization on two counts. First, the identification of differences does not say anything about their political meaning at a given point in time. In the presence of both religious and

\footnote{Note that the distance between Italians and French would only be $\frac{9}{11}$ reflecting the shared heritage of Latin.}
linguistic cleavages, our data do not reveal whether either dimension serves as the actual or more important basis of identification. All that can be said is which cleavage is on average more closely associated with civil war. Second, the generally time-invariant within-group identities, of course, do not accurately reflect reality. In line with previous research (Weber, 1976; Laitin, 2000), and argued above, we believe this change to be slow and thus not too damaging to our coding. Moreover, two dynamic elements are included in our analysis: the change of the political structure in states that may alter the reference group and thus the cleavage structure as well as the change of ethnic groups through fusion with other groups or dissolution into multiple sub-groups.

Our dependent variable, ethnic civil war onset is based on the 25-battle deaths civil war coding by the UCDP Armed Conflict Database (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Harbom and Wallensteen, 2010). Civil wars are connected to particular ethnic groups through the rebel groups in the Non-State Actors (NSA) dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, 2009; Wucherpfennig, 2011). A civil war is defined as ethnic if a rebel organization fighting in it claims to do so on behalf of and recruits from a particular ethnic group.

We use a number of standard control variables from the literature (Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug, 2013). Grievances are expected to increase the likelihood of civil war onset. They are measured by two variables capturing exclusion of political actors who represent an ethnic group from executive power and a recent loss of relative power within the previous two years. The former reflects structural disadvantages an ethnic group faces in the political arena while the latter reflects more dynamic shocks to its political status. Bargaining power of a group is captured by a group size variable that computes a group’s relative share of the politically relevant population. Larger groups are more likely to fight than smaller groups as their bargaining power increases. Moving to the state-level, low GDP/capita and large population size are expected to increase the likelihood of civil war (Hegre and Sambanis, 2006). Finally, we control

\footnote{We use the updated version available at \url{http://www.icr.ethz.ch/data/group/acd2epr}.}

\footnote{The data are taken from a new data correction effort at ETH Zurich (Hunziker and Bormann, 2013).}
for temporal effects by including the number of previous civil wars fought by a group, a linear term for peace-years, and three cubic splines (Beck, Katz and Tucker 1998).

**Analysis**

In this section, we will put our hypotheses to a number of tests. Before showing a variety of logit regression models, we present a simple cross-tabulation of civil war onset and the two cultural cleavages. Table 1 shows two two-by-two tables that include all ethnic group-years in our sample that starts in 1946 and ends 2009 covering all states in which ethnicity is politically relevant. Civil wars are almost six times as likely to occur between ethnic groups of which the majority of each population speak different languages than between groups with no or only minor linguistic differences. While it is also more likely to see civil wars between religiously different groups, the ratio to conflicts between groups with no religious differences is as low as one and a half. Table 1 displays the rate of conflict for groups that are linguistically distinct in the upper half of the table and the same measure for groups differing in terms of religion in the lower half. This presentation of the data is supportive of hypothesis 1 that linguistic differences are indeed strongly correlated with conflict and provides substantively weaker, but statistically significant, evidence for hypothesis 2. We need to interpret these results with caution though, because linguistic groups may also differ on religious grounds and vice versa. Furthermore, other factors may weaken the association. In order to gauge their individual effects we include both dimensions in a number of multivariate logit regressions with robust-clustered standard errors to account for spatial correlation.

Table 2 presents two regression models. Model 1 shows the mean difference for both languages and religions in addition to a range of standard controls as described in the previous section. The effect of linguistic differences remains robust. This type of cleavage is strongly and significantly correlated with ethnic civil war onset. While religious differences are still positively associated with civil war onset, the conflict-inducing impact is much weaker than its linguistic counterpart. Furthermore, it falls short of conventional levels of statistical significance by a wide margin. As expected, all
Table 1: Civil war onset for linguistically and religiously different groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Onset</th>
<th>Onset</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Different</td>
<td>12,268</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12,299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>20,004</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>20,178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25%)</td>
<td>(37.87%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.86%)</td>
<td>(62.13%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Different</td>
<td>16,749</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>16,831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>15,524</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>15,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.49%)</td>
<td>(51.82%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.79%)</td>
<td>(48.18%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson $\chi^2$ test statistic equals 45.37*** for linguistic differences and 11.55*** for religious differences. $\chi^2$ with 1 DoF conducted on null hypothesis that rows and columns are independent.

control variables are in accordance with previous findings (Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch, 2011). Political grievances like the exclusion from executive power or a recent expulsion from central government (downgrading) substantively and significantly increase the likelihood of conflict onset. Additionally, larger groups and a history of prior conflicts also increase the probability of civil war. Finally, with increasing economic development civil war onsets become less likely. A Wald test of equality between linguistic and religious differences returned insignificant, implying that linguistic differences are more conflict-prone than religious differences.\footnote{The $\chi^2$ statistic with one degree of freedom is 2.31 which retains the null hypothesis of no difference at a p-value of .128.} We thus conclude that the data reject the prevailing wisdom of the conflict-proneness of religion but rather speak in support of our historically-led explanation of nationalism.

Model 2 in Table 2 tests an alternative specification of cultural cleavages. Instead of only considering mere differences in language or religion, it includes the time since two groups split in the past as an indicator of how much groups developed in isolation from each other. Compared to linguistic differences, the effect of linguistic distances on conflict onset remains virtually the same – substantively and statistically. In contrast, the effect of religious distances turns negative. Statistically, the estimate becomes even more imprecise and its confidence intervals continue to include zero. One possible explanation may be that cultural distance is an inadequate measure for religions, which are much less differentiated than languages. However, these nuances do not alter the
Table 2: Cultural Differences/Distances and Civil War Onset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV: Ethnic Civil War Onset</th>
<th>(1) (Differences)</th>
<th>(2) (Distances)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Linguistic Difference</td>
<td>1.085**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Religious Difference</td>
<td>0.259</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Linguistic Distance</td>
<td>1.020**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Religious Distance</td>
<td>-0.146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>0.914***</td>
<td>0.925***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downgraded</td>
<td>1.471***</td>
<td>1.508***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groupsize</td>
<td>2.019***</td>
<td>1.674***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War History</td>
<td>0.696***</td>
<td>0.728***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log(GDP/capita) lagged</td>
<td>-0.276**</td>
<td>-0.257*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log(Population) lagged</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Years</td>
<td>-0.085</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spline</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spline^2</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spline^3</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-5.006**</td>
<td>-4.558*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N) 28388 28388
ℓ  -1083.436 -1086.506
\(\chi^2\) 628.836 737.259

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses.

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
conclusion that linguistic differences are more strongly associated with conflict than religious cleavages.

Table 3 presents the first differences and factor increases for both linguistic and religious differences as well as the political variables of exclusion from government power and a recent downgrading of group status. Substantively, moving from a group with no linguistic differences to the government up to a group that is completely different from it increases the likelihood of civil war by a factor of almost 3.\textsuperscript{28} The shift for religious differences is only half of the shift for linguistic differences and statistically not distinguishable from zero. Our model predicts that the presence of linguistic differences increases the likelihood of an ethnic civil war more than either being excluded from government power or having recently been downgraded from it. Although the impacts of the three variables in our model are not statistically distinguishable from one another, we want to underline the strong effect of linguistic differences on civil war risk.\textsuperscript{29}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>95% CI low</th>
<th>First Difference</th>
<th>95% CI high</th>
<th>Factor Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic Diff</td>
<td>0.00147</td>
<td>0.00433</td>
<td>0.00820</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Diff.</td>
<td>-0.00062</td>
<td>0.00065</td>
<td>0.00302</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>0.00049</td>
<td>0.00134</td>
<td>0.00319</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downgraded</td>
<td>0.00049</td>
<td>0.00136</td>
<td>0.00320</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: First differences for cultural differences and key control variables. All variables moved from minimum to maximum. All other variables held at mean, median, or mode.

**Alternative Explanations**

Our main results indicate that language is the more important ethnic cleavage when it comes to explaining civil war. Before conducting further sensitivity analysis, however, it is premature to rule out alternative explanations. For one, the findings could exhibit considerable regional and temporal variation. Moreover, it is necessary to test alternative operationalizations of cultural cleavages. In the following, we will demonstrate

\textsuperscript{28}It should be kept in mind that probabilities of civil war onset are generally very low. Thus, the increase means that the likelihood of observing an onset in any given group-year is still below 1%.

\textsuperscript{29}The probabilities were calculated by way of simulation with 5000 draws from the multivariate normal distribution characterized by the estimated parameters of model 1 with the control variables held at their means, medians, or modes respectively.
that such considerations do not undermine our general findings.

Figure 5: Variable effects of cultural differences for different regions (grey lines represent 95% confidence intervals).

As noted by several scholars, nationalism is extremely versatile and has taken many forms throughout the world (Breuilly 1985; Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1991). According to Gellner (1983), linguistic nationalism is especially strong in societies that are thoroughly industrialized and where literacy has made major advances. Eastern Europe and Asia are thus likely to be more likely to host ethnonationalist conflict along linguistic cleavages than is Sub-Saharan Africa. Religious differences can be expected to be more controversial in the Middle East than in other parts of the world. Because of the dominant position of Arabic, linguistic differences are less politically relevant.

Figure 5 shows the estimated coefficient size and accuracy of coefficients in five different world regions. While more conflict prone in Eastern Europe and Asia, linguistic differences are almost as strong as a covariate of conflict as religious cleavages in the Middle East. This is illustrated by linguistically distinct ethnic groups, such as

---

30 We did not include Latin America, the Caribbean or Oceania for a lack of ethnic civil war in these regions. Moreover, the important ethnic difference, at least in the Americas, is neither religion nor language, but race. The underlying regression models are the same as model 1 in Table 2 for the respective sub-sample.
the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, or the Baloch and Arabs in Iran, that have engaged in multiple civil wars with their respective governments. The only region where religious differences are positively related to conflict as opposed to linguistic differences is interestingly enough Sub-Saharan Africa – a region that is usually not featured strongly in analyses on religious violence. In sum, with the exception of this part of the world, linguistic differences seem to explain most, or an equal amount, of the variation in the likelihood of ethnic civil war onset in all regions. We believe that the strength of the association between linguistic differences and conflict corroborates our emphasis on the strength of linguistic nationalism as the dominant ethnic correlate of violence.

After having considered spatial differences, we turn to temporal variation. While stressing linguistic nationalism constituted by a scripted high culture, Gellner (1983) maintained that some ethnic traits, especially those based on traditional religion, may be “entropy-resistant”. More recently, Huntington (1996), argued that civilizational, i.e. religious, differences to become the focal point of conflict after the Cold War. In model 3 and 4 of Table 4, we therefore divide our sample into the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Yet, we observe the opposite of Huntington’s and Brubaker’s (2012) expectations. Religious differences are much more strongly related to civil wars during the Cold War than after. Nevertheless, they remain statistically insignificant in both periods. The coefficient for linguistic differences changes only slightly over the two models. If at all, it becomes slightly stronger after 1989. However, it has to be admitted that our operationalization of religious differences does not completely match Huntington’s idea of civilizations, which are based on the highest level of aggregation pitting world religions against each other. Thus, religious differences should only matter for conflicts between Christians and Muslims, Hindu and Sikh, or Buddhists and Animists, but not for disputes within major religions. Thus, Model 5 replaces our main variable of religious differences with an indicator that only marks civilizational differences, i.e. major world religions. Again, this expectation of Huntington is not borne out by our data as the coefficient for civilizational differences turns negative for
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV: Ethnic Civil War Onset</th>
<th>(3) (Cold War)</th>
<th>(4) (Post CW)</th>
<th>(5) (Civilizations)</th>
<th>(6) (Muslims)</th>
<th>(7) (Muslims &amp; Oil)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Linguistic Difference</td>
<td>0.915*</td>
<td>1.200*</td>
<td>1.169*</td>
<td>0.985**</td>
<td>1.033**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Religious Difference</td>
<td>0.608</td>
<td>-0.164</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilizational Difference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.198</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim (Group A)</td>
<td>0.543*</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>(0.273)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim (Group B)</td>
<td>0.554</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>(0.396)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim (Both)</td>
<td>0.477*</td>
<td>0.388</td>
<td>(0.238)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log(Oil Prod./capita)</td>
<td>0.375</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>1.087***</td>
<td>0.890**</td>
<td>0.893**</td>
<td>0.964***</td>
<td>0.988***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downgraded</td>
<td>1.549***</td>
<td>1.504***</td>
<td>1.495***</td>
<td>1.454***</td>
<td>1.419***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groupsize</td>
<td>1.958***</td>
<td>2.173**</td>
<td>2.120**</td>
<td>1.953***</td>
<td>2.076***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War History</td>
<td>0.736***</td>
<td>0.319**</td>
<td>0.323**</td>
<td>0.703***</td>
<td>0.632***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log(GDP/capita)</td>
<td>-0.480*</td>
<td>-0.282**</td>
<td>-0.296**</td>
<td>-0.280*</td>
<td>-0.409*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Years</td>
<td>-0.091</td>
<td>-0.028</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spline</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spline²</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spline³</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.177</td>
<td>-7.164***</td>
<td>-7.181***</td>
<td>-5.142**</td>
<td>-4.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>17197</td>
<td>11186</td>
<td>11186</td>
<td>28383</td>
<td>26927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \ell )</td>
<td>-514.273</td>
<td>-538.506</td>
<td>-538.234</td>
<td>-1074.371</td>
<td>-1047.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>223.555</td>
<td>167.105</td>
<td>164.126</td>
<td>571.342</td>
<td>534.233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses
* \( p < 0.05 \), ** \( p < 0.01 \), *** \( p < 0.001 \)
the period after 1989.

In addition to postulating religious cleavages in general as a source of violent backlashes, Huntington (1996) singled out cleavages associated with Islam as particularly inert and violence-prone. In recent years, other scholars have followed up these theoretical ideas by presenting evidence pointing to a link between Muslims and civil conflict (Toft, 2007; Hassner, 2009). Toft (2007), for example, shows that Muslim involvement in civil wars is disproportionally frequent. However, she only considers identity – not cleavages – and does not compare her findings to a particular baseline. In Figure 6, we have attempted to replicate her findings with respect to identities. Instead of religious cleavages, we included dummies major religion dummies whenever any member (A or B) of our ethnic group dyads included at least one of the main religions. As our baseline we chose dyads including Christian groups since most of them are situated in the West, and hence in economically more prosperous states where conflict would be less likely. With respect to the baseline, we find that dyads including a Muslim group are indeed more prone to experience civil war. Yet, with respect to any other major religious dyad except for groups that are predominantly atheist, the difference is not statistically significant as can be gauged from the overlapping confidence bounds. In view of these findings, the special role ostensibly played by Muslims seems to be questionable. Furthermore, as mentioned above Toft’s analysis lacks a relational character and a clear exploration of what role Muslim identity plays in civil war. Do they appear as rebels, governmental elites, or both?

To fill this gap, we disaggregate the participants of civil wars according to our dyadic approach (see models 6 and 7 of Table 4). A non-Muslim group can rebel against a Muslim-dominated state (A), a Muslim ethnic group can rise up against a non-Muslim state (B), or both, the state and the rebels, could be Muslims. The base category

---

31 Furthermore, we interacted both language and religious differences with a linear counter of time. While both are increasing over time, the increase in religious conflicts is about equal to the more general increase in conflicts. We detail both models in our appendix.

32 It should be noted that there are only three majority Jewish groups – the different ethnic groups in Israel – and one majority Sikh group – the Punjabi Sikh in India – included in the sample.

33 Thus, this is an easy test for Toft’s conjecture.

34 We also conducted t-tests between the coefficients that led us to the same conclusion.

35 Cf. our sketch in Figure 4.
in models 6 and 7 are dyads with no Muslim involvement. Muslim identity is coded when the majority of members of a group is Muslim. According to Huntington’s “Clash of Civilization” thesis, rebellions between Muslims and non-Muslims should be more prevalent. Following Toft (2007), all civil wars involving Muslim groups should be more likely than civil wars without them. Model 6 lends some initial credibility to Toft’s claims. With respect to non-Muslim dyads, all possible Muslim combinations show an increased risk of civil war onset. However, only if the most powerful group in a state (group A) is Muslim is there a significant difference in civil war likelihood compared to non-Muslim dyads. Yet, Ross (2012) argues that the correlation between Islam and conflict is spurious as it is a simple proxy for the war-proneness of oil rich countries. To test this possibility, Model 7 introduces a variable that measures per-capita production of oil at the country level. The oil variable itself is positively related to conflict but remains insignificant. Upon its introduction, the effect Muslim involvement on civil war becomes weaker for all three combinations rendering them statistically insignificant.

This encompasses all Muslim dyads.
Neither religious cleavages nor any specific subset of religious identity seems to be particularly conflict-prone.

Conclusion

In this paper we have revisited the relationship between types of ethnic identity and political violence. We find that linguistic cleavages are overrepresented as potential sources of civil war compared to group-government relations characterized by religious differences. These findings cast doubt on instrumentalist-individualist interpretations that downplay the conflict-inducing impact of language by highlighting the fluidity of linguistic repertoires. Furthermore, despite the emotional depth of personally held religious beliefs, our results lead us to be skeptical about essentialist claims stressing the role of religious cleavages as triggers of civil wars. In particular, our findings shed doubt on recent studies that attribute destabilizing potential to cleavages involving Muslim groups and/or governments. When taking into account the high frequency of grievances in the Middle East and its oil riches, the relation between Muslim involvement in an ethnic dyad and the onset of civil war seizes to be robust. In this study we have stressed the political logic of nationalism and grievances and found that they are stronger and more robust than apolitical cultural arguments. More than two centuries after the French Revolution, we believe that nationalism continues to have geopolitically destabilizing consequences as it often justifies inequality and domination.

This is not to say that there is no role for religion in explaining political violence. Our study does not cover global terrorism or communal violence. Neither can we completely rule out that the political activation of religious cleavages does not lead to more civil war. When both linguistic and religious differences are present, our data cannot capture which cleavage is relevant in a conflict. For example, it is well known that Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation has shifted from having been expressed in mostly secular and linguistic terms to being increasingly religiously motivated. We are also unable to trace the importance of religious extremists that target members of their own religious identity to bring about a more fundamentalist form of governance such
as the Taliban in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Other recent intrastate conflicts in Iraq, Mali or Yemen have also pitted Muslim radicals against Muslim moderates. Moreover, rebels affiliated with al-Qaeda or other Islamic fundamentalist organizations often fight outside their home states to establish Sharia law [Hegghammer 2013]. Future studies of identity and violence should focus more closely on well-defined alternative forms of violence as well as transformation of identities through violence.

While we do not want to overstate our conclusions, we nonetheless maintain that the one-sided focus on religious violence has been premature. It remains to be seen whether rebels in the Caucasus will be able to unite Chechens, Dagestanis, Ingush, Ossetians, and other linguistic minorities under a shared religious identity. In Pakistan, the religiously fundamentalist Taliban rebellion in the northwestern Pashtun areas has rightfully received a lot of international attention. At the same time, the Balochi, a group that differs linguistically but not religiously from the predominant Punjabi Pakistanis, are once more challenging the Pakistani government on ethno-nationalist grounds. We are convinced that our study advances our knowledge about the differential impact of specific cleavage types by considering the structural preconditions around the world without limiting the sample to conflict cases, as is often done in the literature. We could not find any evidence for a Clash of Civilizations in intrastate conflicts or the particular conflict-proneness of Islam. The burden of proof is clearly on those who make sweeping and dramatic claims about the destabilizing role of religion without backing them up with systematic data that offer a neutral baseline for comparison.

References


**URL**: http://www.joshuaproject.net/


